



Before arriving in Montana, we had no idea how profoundly Big Sky Country lived up to its nickname. (Pamela Lannom photo)

A sweet introduction to Hinsdale, Mont.

Local ice cream shop, Milk River Days rodeo whet our appetites to learn more about town

Hello Hinsdale, Mont.

Population: 217

Named for: possibly Hinsdale, Ill. (see next week's story for details)

Location: Valley County in the north-eastern part of the state

Area: 6.7 square miles

Home to: Hinsdale Public Schools (Home of the Raiders), Hinsdale Lutheran Church, Hinsdale United Methodist Church, St. Alberts Catholic Church, Kyle Masonic Lodge

Notable landmark: Milk River

Of note: Hinsdale is located off U.S. Route 2, the northernmost east-west route in the country, which extends 2,571 miles from St. Ignace, Mich., to Everett, Wash. Since most of the western route parallels the Great Northern Railway, it adopted the nickname of the railway route, "The Highline" or "Hi-Line."

By Pamela Lannom

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After driving almost 1,200 miles to get to Montana, you'd think we would head straight to our destination.

But after 8 1/2 hours in the car, we're ready to check into a hotel. And Hinsdale doesn't have one.

(At least it doesn't any more. The town was home to a handful of hotels a century ago, including, coincidentally, The Lannom Hotel in the early 1900s.)

The businesses that now line Montana Street, Hinsdale's main thoroughfare, are few in number. There's a bar and grill, a gas station, a gun shop and a bank.

And then there's Sweet Memories, where I've arranged to meet owner Leona Knutson

around dinnertime July 3.

A native of Kalispell, a town of about 15,000 in western Montana, Leona moved to Hinsdale with her husband, Lonnie (known as Swede), shortly after their daughter, Kristine Bowman, got a teaching job at Hinsdale School.

"We came and helped her move in and help her get settled and I knew right away he was wanting to move to a small town," she said of Lonnie, a product of a rural community.

At one point, both of her daughters and their families lived in town. She enjoyed being near them all, but admits getting used to living in a town of 217 was an adjustment.

"It took me a while, it really did," she says. "I really enjoy it now. I enjoy the slow pace

■ HINSDALE, MONT. 59241

This is the second in a four-part series on our visit to Hinsdale, Mont.

and the people."

Her seven grandchildren were the inspiration for her to open her ice cream shop in 2011.

"Really there wasn't a gathering place other than the bar," she explains. "We thought it was going to be for kids. It turns out it's really not for kids. Most of our clients are seniors and retired people who come in and visit and have coffee."

Leona's menu expanded to include deli sandwiches and baked goods after bicyclists traveling along Route 2 requested an alternative to the burgers and sim-

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ilar fare offered across the street at Stoughie's Bar and Grill.

"I always liked to cook — bake more than cook — and still the baking is what I enjoy more than the cooking," she says.

Leona knows nine out of 10 customers who walk in her door. She's happy to welcome the folks she doesn't recognize.

"We enjoy travelers that come here," she says, noting that she received a postcard a day or two earlier from a couple who visited the previous week.

"That's nice, just knowing that people enjoy coming here and sitting and visiting," she says.

Only a few customers come in while Dan, Ainsley and I are there, enjoying chicken wraps and fruit cups and a few scoops of Montana-made Wilcoxson's ice cream before the interview. Everybody's at the rodeo a few blocks away, and we head over shortly after dinner.

The 38th annual Milk River Days Rodeo is underway when we arrive about 6:30 p.m. The sun is still high in the big Montana sky and the temperature hovers

around 100 degrees. We stand out in our shorts and flip flops. A crowd of men are dressed in long-sleeved plaid shirts, jeans, boots and cowboy hats. Several women are in shorts, too, but they're often paired with cowboy boots.

We find a spot about halfway up the bleachers. The premium seats, we observe, are in the beds of the pick-up tracks backed up to the fence. The dust is blowing and country music is blaring whenever announcer Myron Malnaa of Glasgow isn't calling up the next participant, cracking a joke or promoting another part of the Milk River Days celebration.

We meet his fellow announcer, Chris Christensen, the next day at the Fourth of July parade.

He's standing in the middle of Montana Street when I walk up and introduce myself. His roots here are deep.

"My family homesteaded right on top of the hill in 1909," he says, pointing across Route 2.

Conversation turns to the previous night's rodeo, and Chris shares a story about its origins. Apparently, the town hosted a

rodeo long ago, and his father, Donnie, wanted to bring it back.

Unfortunately, Donnie died of cancer in 1977 before he had a chance to see his dream come true. Friends passed a hat at his funeral and raised enough money to buy the bucking chutes.

"Kind of the big ticket item when you start a rodeo," Chris explains when I inquire about the chutes.

Chris was 14 when the first rodeo was held the following.

"I was the first one out of the first chute," he said.

This year his son, Chisholm, 27, is the winner of the saddle bronc riding competition — one of about a dozen at the three-hour rodeo.

Of course, we had yet to meet Chris then, as we listened to him address the spectators.

At one point he asks anyone in the crowd who has attended all 38 rodeos to stand up, and a handful of people do. He knows them all by name.

We leave before the big event — bull riding. But our first tastes of Hinsdale have left us wanting more.



Leona Knutson opened Sweet Memories in Hinsdale, Mont., on July 1, 2011, right before the annual Milk River Days festivities and in the year of an all-class reunion for Hinsdale School. "We had a line of people out the door," she said.



Milk River Days

begins with a three-hour rodeo the evening of July 3.

A few of the riders are local and most are from Montana, but some travel from as far as Nebraska and South Dakota to compete.

(Pamela Lannom photos)

