

# Small town celebrates Fourth in big way

*Milk River Days celebration offers glimpse into close-knit community of Hinsdale, Mont.*

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Most parade-goers have found spots along Montana Street by the time we arrive at 10:50 a.m. We're lucky to find a bit of curb in the shade, and I grab a seat while Dan and Ainsley pick up some rhubarb slushies at an outdoor booth Leona Knutson's grandsons are running next to her Sweet Memories cafe.

"Mom, there's a gun shop," Ainsley points out to me, eyebrows raised. It's one of just a handful of businesses on the street, Hinsdale's main thoroughfare. From our spot near the corner, we can also see Stoughie's Bar and Grill across the street. The First Community Bank is down the block, closer to Route 2, which brought

us here from our hotel in Glasgow.

The crowd certainly doesn't approach the throng that gathers for the Independence Day parade in Hinsdale, Ill., but its size is noted by local denizen Chris Christensen, who's on the front porch of Stoughie's offering commentary on the day's events.

"There's a lot more people here than live in Hinsdale," he says, thanking folks for coming out.

The candy is plentiful as the parade entries pass by. Classic cars outnumber the floats by a wide margin. And we get a good look at each one of them, as the parade goes down one side of Montana Street, turns around and comes back up the other. We're near Leona Knutson's daughter,



Chris Christensen and Chris Pippin stepped into the middle of Montana Street to get a better look at the ping pong drop July 4 in Hinsdale, Mont. The two served as announcers for the parade and the events that followed during the Milk River Days celebration. (photo by Dan Litster)



The Hinsdale Volunteer Fire Department joined floats from local businesses in the Fourth of July parade, which traveled down one side of Montana Street and then back up the other. (photos by Pamela Lannom)

Kristine, whom we met the day before, and her children. I pray Ainsley isn't too aggressive in retrieving candy. After years of practice here on First Street, she does well — and she makes me proud by sharing with the younger kids.

After the parade, kids gather at the veterans memorial in the park next door to Sweet Memories for the ping pong drop. There I meet Matt Remmich, his sister-in-law, Jamie Remmich, and her son, Rory.

Matt, who grew up in town, is chief deputy of the sheriff's office. Jamie teaches a combined class of 10 first- and second-graders at Hinsdale School.

The school's enrollment in Matt's day was pretty high — about 100 students in grades K-12.

"We had the largest class in the history of our school with 13," says Matt, a 2007 graduate who now lives in Fort Peck.

He hopes to see some of his classmates at the Milk River Days celebration, as it's their 10-year reunion.

"We've known each other since we were babies, in some cases," he says.

Jamie, married to Matt's brother Nate, tells me she enjoys teaching small classes and having her students for two years at a time. But like

Leona Knutson, she moved here from a much bigger town, relatively speaking.

"It was a change for me here because I came from a town of 2,000, so I'm adjusting," she says.

At some point Matt tells me I really should meet his mom, Chris Canen Remmich.

"How can I reach her?" I ask.

"She's right over here," he says, and walks with me back over to Montana Street.

I ask her the same question I've posed to just about everyone I've met: What do you enjoy most about living here?

She thinks for a moment and looks down the block.

"It's just wonderful that I went to school in that school," she says, adding that she graduated with nine others.

"They're all still here. All our kids went to school together."

She and her husband are ranchers, as are about 70 percent of the area's residents.

"I went to college for four years in Bozeman and met my husband there," she says. "I always knew I wanted to come back and ranch, just knew this is what I wanted to do."

"There's just good people here and that's our valuable

## ■ HINSDALE, MONT. 59241

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

resource, our people."

I'm finishing up my chat with Chris when Dan zips by to tell me I need to talk to the announcers, who have moved off of Stoughie's porch out into the middle of the street to get a better view of the adult ping pong drop. The balls used to be dropped on the crowd from an airplane, I learn, but for safety reasons are now shot from the top of a building.

I introduce myself to Chris Christensen (whom I introduced in last week's article) and his sound man, Chris Pippin, and share my mission. They ask me about the name origin of Hinsdale, Ill. It's not certain, I tell them.

They're quick to offer the story behind their town's moniker, which dates back to the days when the Great Northern Railroad came through. Railroad employees named the towns in the area, using a glove and a fingertip to make their selections.

"They would spin the globe and it hit on Hinsdale," Christensen says, adding later that he presumes the Hinsdale they hit

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on is our Hinsdale.

The two Chrises chat a minute more and then ask if they can let the crowd know who I am and what I'm doing. Leona and her family are sweet enough to offer a smattering of applause, which makes me smile. Soon a gentleman approaches me and immediately launches into a story about clearing out some legal files at the First National Bank, predecessor to the First Community Bank. I'm not sure at first where's he's going with the narrative.

"There's a card in there from Hinsdale, Illinois, First National Bank," he tells me. "How it ended up here I have know idea."

We talk a little more and I learn he's Lawrence Boucher, who, with wife Connie, orchestrates the Milk River Days celebration every Fourth of July. (Leona, for whom Connie works at Sweet Memories, told me all about them the previous day.)

Lawrence has been in Hinsdale since he moved in 1969 from Baker, Mont., to serve as the bank's vice president. Like many folks in town, he and his wife have had their kids and grandkids attend Hinsdale School.

They first organized a barbecue, which is about to begin, out of necessity, he says.

"We've got to do something to raise money and to have fireworks," he explains, noting that the cost has risen from \$250 in 1976 to about \$4,000 this year.

In addition to being hungry, we're happy to buy some tickets and help support the evening's festivities. Soon after we find a table in the shade and sit down, we're joined by a large group.

I'm an expert by now at explaining who I am and why I'm there. I learn that Hinsdale residents Bill Thayer, his wife, Phyllis, and her son, James Hardman, are enjoying a visit by Bill's three out-of-town siblings.

I push my plate the side, get out my notebook and ask if they're willing to answer a few questions. They seem amused at my assignment, and Bill tells me the front part of his shed used to be the office of the now-defunct Hinsdale Tribune. He asks if I'd like to see the old copies. I offer an enthusiastic yes, but the time passes too quickly and I never make it over there.

Bill used to hunt in Hinsdale and decided it was the perfect place to spend his retirement. He keeps busy serving as commander of the Hinsdale chapter of the American Legion and a member of the Seco Shooters Society.



**Bill Thayer** (top right) enjoyed a Fourth of July visit from his siblings, Walt, Carrie Bell (left) and JoAnn Thayer. Dennis Boucher said he likes only two kinds of pie. The sour cream and raisin and apple crumb varieties he purchased for \$425 each in the auction? Nope. "Hot and cold," he said.

Sister Carrie Bell and husband Bill, like me, are visiting Hinsdale for the first time.

"I've always liked small towns," Carrie says. "My brother has been here so long, he knows everybody."

We are still chatting as the

pie auction, which raises money to support the ambulance service, begins.

The first pie — raspberry — goes for \$125.

Auctioneer Luke Strommen has a friendly crowd. He shares stories from his days in kindergar-

ten as his former teacher makes a purchase and later encourages his former babysitter to up her bid on one of the home-made pies.

Dennis Boucher pays \$425 for a sour cream and raisin pie in a special "pick your pie" bid and takes an apple crumb for another \$425. He's lived on a ranch three miles out of town for all of his 80 years and tells me he once passed through Hinsdale, Ill., on his way to Chicago.

Those running the auction are hesitant to say how much they will raise, almost embarrassed by the generosity that is becoming more and more evident.

Leona Knutson, who made peach, blueberry and lemon meringue pies this year, has told me the event typically raises \$5,000 or \$6,000.

"It's very giving," she said of her Hinsdale. "Since we've been here, I think that is the thing that impresses me most. It's nice to be part of that."

Coming from a Hinsdale that shares that spirit of generosity, I can't help but agree.



**A barbecue** lunch that helps pay for the evening's fireworks display is part of the Milk River Days celebration.



**Matt Remmich**, holding 15-month-old nephew Rory, is the chief deputy sheriff for Valley County. He said the two most common incidents in the 5,200-square-mile county are DUI and assault arrests. "Meth and prescription drug abuse are our two biggest culprits," he said. (photos by Pamela Lannom)