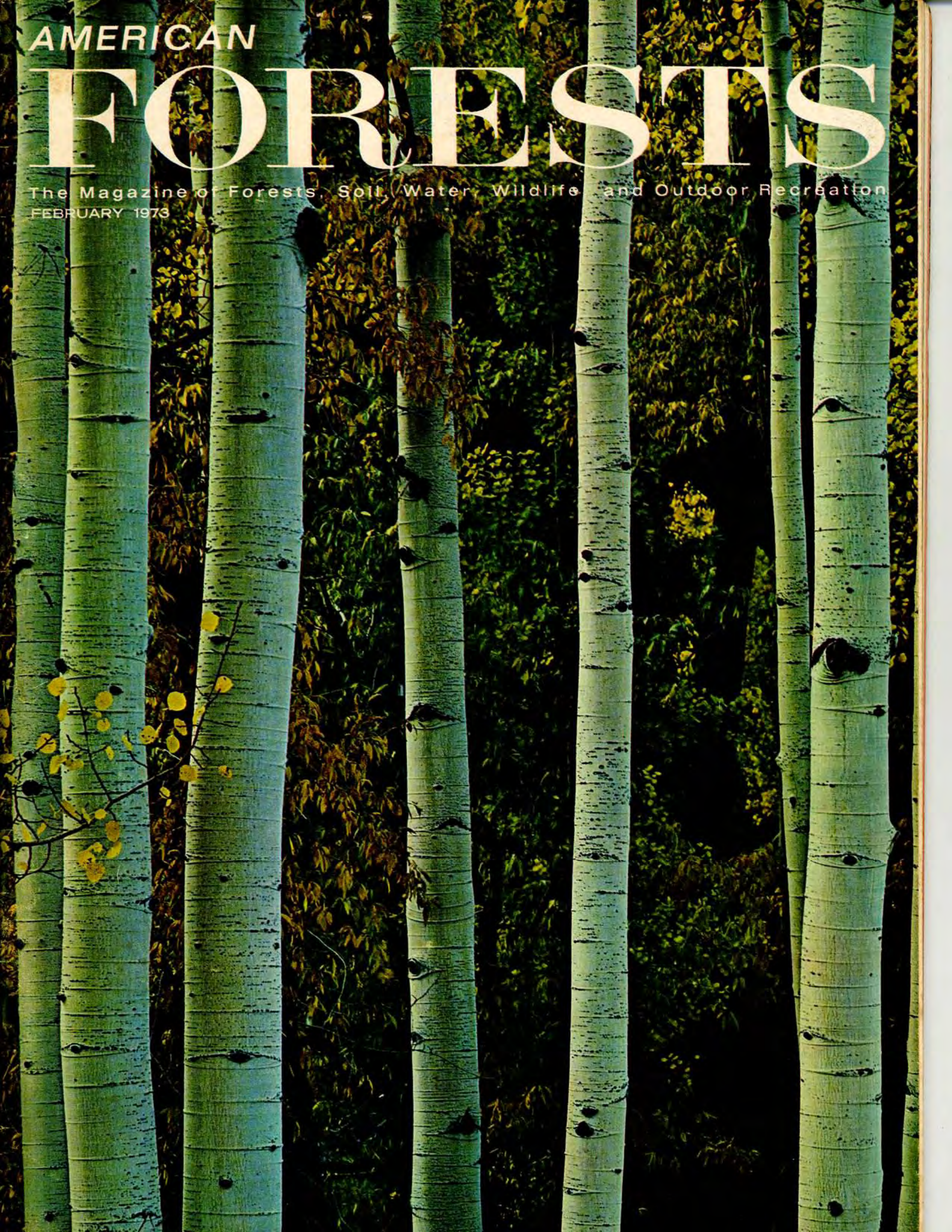
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Author

The Bandys with their Indian guide, Big Corral, on the bank of the Big Horn River in August 1912

In 1912, when I was 27 years old, I was employed by the U.S. General Land Office to assist in surveying the remaining unsurveyed public lands in the outlying areas of the mountainous West. Such a survey was necessary to enable the homesteaders to locate the boundary lines of their claims and to obtain title to them. That was a free service furnished the citizens by the federal government to promote the settlement of the Western States.

The job was a somewhat nomadic one, requiring much moving from one district to another to meet the needs of new settlers coming to look for homestead land. My party consisted of five survey aids, a teamster, and a camp cook.

My wife Inez and I had not been married very long when I got that survey job. We saw it would take me away from home for months at a time, camping throughout the mountains. Inez wanted to go along, stay in camp where she could be helpful to me, and incidentally see a lot of new country. Regulations prevented anyone from living in a government maintained camp unless they were employees of the Government, so she volunteered to give the cooking job a try.

I was glad to find her willing and desirous of sharing in the camp life, which meant living in a tent with a dirt floor, sleeping on the ground, with the wind flapping the canvas and kicking up dust all day long, together with many other inconveniences foreign to a Missouri girl fresh from home.

She was a little dubious as to whether she could please the men with her cooking, because she had never cooked before except to help her mother. I encouraged her by saying the boys would be easy to cook for because they were always hungry. The field men took sandwiches every work day for lunch, and they put up their own lunches while at the breakfast table, which made it easier for the cook.

So I bought her a White House Cook Book and she was in business. It worked out fine. She stayed with it for three summers, while we had no children.

Because she was raised in Missouri, camp life in a tent on the western frontier presented many problems she had never heard of,

Breakfast in the Bighorns

by William Roy Bandy

This scene is based on a photo taken by Roy Bandy in 1912 of their camp on the summit of the Big Horn Mountains. Inez Bandy is preparing breakfast. Artist Shorty Shope did an oil painting of the photo in 1947 and substituted Roy Bandy (shown left) in place of the teamster

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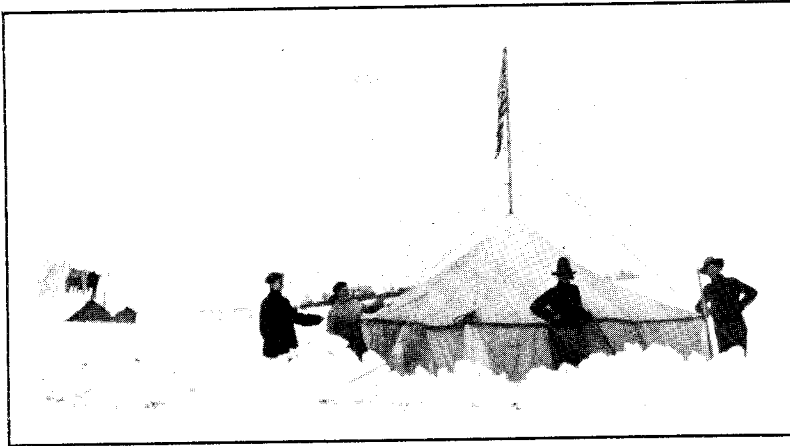


A month after the breakfast scene shown on the preceding page, the surveying party was camped at the Broderick homestead in four feet of snow

As a souvenir of their surveying expedition, Inez Bandy brought home one of the many rattlesnakes killed on the trip. This one has thirteen rattles

Public land surveyors pursued their quest over almost trackless wastes

most of which arose when she was alone in camp and had to cope as best she could. A windstorm might swoop in and flatten the tents, or the wind some times worked the stovepipe loose from the stove with a fire going. At such times she would have to grab a gunny sack and fit the pipe back on the stove before the canvas caught fire—soot flying all over and settling on the table and dishes. There was seldom a dull moment, it seemed.

Her most vivid recollection was her first encounter with a pack rat, an animal she had never seen before. One morning while washing dishes at the stove, she looked back at the cupboard and spied an animal watching her over the edge of the gingersnap keg. She said its big ears, bug eyes, and long whiskers looked pretty savage to her. We were all in the field at the time, leaving her alone in the wild and unknown land. She remembered the old revolver that I kept under my pillow. Although she had never shot a gun, she hurried to get the pistol.

Taking rest on the table, she fired at the beast. When the smoke from the black powder shell cleared away, up popped the head again, its eyes glittering and its tail slapping the side of the carton. She shot the remaining shells with no result except to riddle the messbox. Not to be outdone, she courageously wrapped a gunny sack around the gingersnap box and nailed the package tight in an empty egg crate.

When we returned to camp, she proudly pointed to the egg crate and asked us to take a look at what was inside and name it. She enjoyed telling that story later to her wide-eyed grandchildren. When a rattlesnake coiled up between the stove and the sugar sack one day, she knew how to deal with it. On the plus side, it was not long before she acquired a pet magpie that learned to squawk a few words. Later on she picked up a "bum" lamb that would stand at the oven door wagging its long tail for biscuits.

Now we were on a long move overland to the W. T. Broderick homestead and the Hilton Lodge in Wyoming, east of the Little Big Horn River and south of Wyola, Montana.

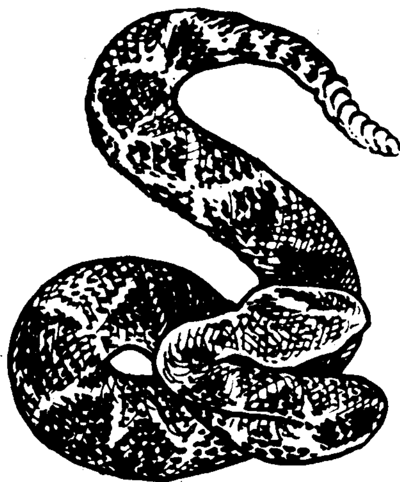
Although the distance from Cooke City, Montana, our starting point, to our destination the summit of the Big Horn Mountains was only about 120 miles, we had to go as far south as Cody, Wyoming, and loop back across the border once to get through the almost trackless mountains with our wagon and crew. This made the journey 150 miles long.

As was the practice in those days, we carried with us food supplies, horse feed, tents, bedrolls, dishes—everything we needed to live off the country for weeks at a time. There were no swank motels or garish hamburger stands dotting the landscape as there are now. It was the custom throughout the West then for travellers to stop overnight whenever darkness overtook them. They thought nothing of pitching camp on the edge of a town rather than go to a hotel or rooming house.

Bad mudholes and steep hills sometimes made the trail almost impassable. Once we got stuck with the bedwagon and had to carry a part of the load by hand ahead to dry ground. In Sunlight we met Forest Supervisor R. W. Allen, now President of the Shoshone National Bank of Cody, who gave us helpful advice about roads.

We passed over Dead Indian Hill, the famous landmark where one going west must drag a good sized tree with the limbs still on it to keep the wagon from getting ahead of the horses. The first night out we camped on the head of Pat O'Hara Creek at the foot of Hart Mountain. There the wolves kept us awake with their blood-curdling howls.

The second night out we were at the Cody bridge. There we replenished our supplies and also soaked ourselves in DeMaris Hot Springs, the outdoor bathing pool of bubbling sulphur water located on the bank of the Shoshone River west of the bridge.



We did not expect to see much of interest on our trip east from Cody across the Dry Creek basin, a wind-whipped desert of salt-sage and greasewood. Several native inhabitants of the basin greeted us, however. One was a happy yellow-breasted meadow lark with a black spot on his chest. He was singing from his perch on a greasewood. Another was a bob-o-link, a black bird with a white spot on his wings. He did his usual "thing" by flying straight up 30 or 40 feet high, then gracefully floating down as he sang his standard song, which the poet quotes as "bob-o-link, bob-o-link, spink-spank-spink." We saw lots of prairie dogs barking from the side of their holes, their short tails bobbing with each effort.

We crossed the Big Horn River at Kane, Wyoming, and camped at the foot of the mountain. The next day Inez and I took a shortcut and walked ahead while the men doubled up the teams and pulled each wagon up one at a time. It turned out more of a climb than we had anticipated.

About noon we got hungry and discovered that we had inadvertently left our lunches in the wagons. Seeing a sheep wagon over by a spring, we swung over to it. There was no one home, but we saw a part of a mutton hung in a tree wrapped in a flour sack. It looked like "manna from heaven" to us. Inez fried some mutton chops, opened a can of tomatoes and of corn, and we had a feast. We left a thank-you note for the nice sheepherder. It was late afternoon before we caught up with the wagons again and climbed aboard joyously. It was a great relief to settle ourselves in a spring seat again. We could enjoy nature's interesting scenes much better from that comfortable vantage point.

Our caravan was then travelling northward along the summit of the Big Horn Mountains, following a deeply-worn trail which was probably pounded out first in ancient times by the hooves of those early road engineers the American bison.

Those animals, which we commonly call buffalo, are renowned for their uncanny ability to choose the most practical route when travelling

between grazing grounds. I've read that the buffalo inhabited the Eastern States and that buffalo jumps found there contain bison bones dating back 10,000 years. Trails, or traces, pounded out by those animals are said to have led early settlers to the discovery of famous Cumberland Gap.

My brother, Willis, spotted a covey of grouse after we rejoined the caravan and bagged a few of the young birds for our breakfast with his .22 caliber revolver.

It was getting near sundown before we found water for an overnight camp. We had begun to wonder if we would find water before darkness closed in on us in the vast solitary wilderness. We were at an elevation of 9,500 feet above sea level. Then we saw a big snow drift ahead, which looked promising.

Karl Suhr, our teamster, pulled down and parked the wagon on a level spot below the snow drift by a small trickle of water seeping from beneath it. Everyone was tired and hungry, so we lost no time in getting supper started. We dug the groceries out of the wagon in a hurry. Some of the party got the stove out and set it up while others got wood. Inez peeled potatoes and cut ham.

It was not long before the fragrant smell of frying ham filled the mountain air. We wiped road dust off of the granite dishes and supper was ready, with plenty of gravy and hot biscuits. My wife's tent was put up, Karl had fed the horses their oats, and after supper the horses were hobbled, a cowbell put on one, and all of the animals were turned loose to graze during the night. The men slept out beneath the star-studded dome.

Waking up during the night and hearing the gentle tinkle of the cowbell, I turned over and went back to sleep with the comfortable feeling that everything was well. At least we still had a saddle-horse. The next morning the stream had quit running, the pools were frozen over, and there was ice on the water pails I had thoughtfully filled the night before.

It was a little breezy, so Karl put a piece of striped canvas under the edge of the wagon box to protect Inez from the cold north wind, "the fierce kabbabinokka" of Hiawatha fame, while getting breakfast.

After breakfast we all went up on the snow to frolic so the boys could write home about snowballing in August. The snow was too hard to make snowballs—it was even hard to stand up on.

Although we were well above timberline and ice formed every night, many alpine flowers and shrubs were growing along the edge of the snow bank, struggling to live out their life cycle in spite of the many handicaps. As soon as the snow edge moved slowly upward, uncovering the dormant plants, the impatient buttercups, clustering rock asters, snowdrops, and other alpine flowers lost no time in doing their best to brighten their part of the world.

Even with an inch or more of snow yet to go, the sun's life-giving rays penetrated the icy pane, causing the struggling bulb to push up through the ice and unfold in all its glory. We stuck some of the flowers on our hats. How else could those little flowers get up in the world? That was their only chance to add their bit. Had it not been for our visit those beauties might have lived in vain. They probably would have had a long, long wait before other visitors came.

The idea to take a picture of the breakfast scene shown on page 39 came to me on the spur of the moment as I glanced at the busy camp there at the foot of the huge bank of last winter's snow. As I stood there downwind from the outdoors kitchen, waiting for breakfast and enjoying the aromas of frying mountain grouse and the coffee pot, the rising sun at my back cast its warming glow over the colorful scene ahead.

I then snapped the picture, catching a perfect view of my wife Inez as she stood, rosy-cheeked that frosty morning. Standing between the cook stove and the red and green painted wagon, she dominated the scene as the center of attraction, a scene so aptly emphasized by the skillful artist. With the stove loaded with frying pans and skillets, she deftly speared herself a choice piece of grouse with that ever busy left hand of hers. So intent was she that my picture taking went unnoticed. It was an unforgettable scene that I wished to record for the future.

It was 58 years later, in 1970, that my daughter Zoe and I requested artist Shope to execute an oil painting of that memorable scene in nature's unspoiled wilderness. We have dedicated the painting to the memory of her mother, that Missouri girl who cheerfully braved the rigors of camp life on the wild frontier to go with her husband and his nomadic survey party, assisting him and sharing their exciting experiences and fun. ■

The genuine warmth of Roy Bandy came through to all who knew him as strongly in person as it did in the delightful reminiscence he wrote titled "Breakfast in the Big Horn's." Both my life and my knowledge of my work were enriched by my dealings with him.

I first met Mr. Bandy in 1948 when I was a BLM trainee stationed in Billings, Montana. He was already a veteran employee and had for the past year been Regional Cadastral Engineer, with jurisdiction over public land surveys in ten states. His friendly help for a freshman employee made me an instant Bandy fan.

Then I met him again in 1951, when his expertise was needed in connection with the boundaries of a homestead inside the Bridger National Forest. By this time I was District Manager of the Bureau's Pinedale, Wyoming, District Office. Mr. Bandy and his wife joined my family on a picnic at Green River Lakes, some 55 miles north of Pinedale on a dirt road.

Although he had not seen the area again in 37 years of wide travelling, with his keen memory of places it took him no time at all to locate the bearing trees and the section corner. He had surveyed the area in 1913, a year after the time he wrote about in "Breakfast in the Big Horns."

Through the years we kept in touch as families through sending and receiving Christmas cards. In the summer of 1969, he toured with his grandson in Alaska where I was State Director, and we had a wonderful visit again.

Throughout the Bureau, where he was well remembered, our greatest regret is that he fell ill and died only a few days before a published copy of *OUR PUBLIC LANDS* magazine containing his article could reach him.

—Burton W. Silcock,
Director Bureau of Land Management