

Flathead Basin – A Journalists' Muse

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A writer and photographer cannot ask for much more than the Flathead Valley. It's home to colorful subjects, triggers drama and frames it in a stunning backdrop, all bathed in ever changing light.



The Nichols-Long Family

My wife, Karen Nichols, and I practiced journalism here for 20 years – from the days Karen dipped strips of black-and-white film in darkroom chemicals to the digital era, where she instantly edits images on the back of the camera and posts them for the world to see on the Internet. We helped tell stories in newspapers, magazines, books and around campfires.

Daily journalism emphasizes production deadlines over artistic expression. We were

responsible for 4-5 publishable images and articles a day, seven days a week. That's a lot of photos and copy and most are far from masterpieces. Some days you're lucky to grab a photo that's in focus or tap out a story with proper grammar. Still, it's hard to complain about a job that pays for your gas as you cruise the Flathead Valley, chasing what we call "wild art."

Stories seem to burst out of the Flathead soil like well-watered alfalfa. Locals are often colorful and opinionated. On top of that, mix a couple million citified visitors in a landscape full of predators, avalanches and waterfalls and dramatic occurrences are bound to ensue.

One of the most gratifying parts of journalism is that it opens doors that are closed to most people. We are grateful for the opportunities to see things most people

do not – or see things from angles most people do not. It's exciting to see a wall of flame roar up the McDonald Creek Valley, wade alongside rescuers through spring floodwaters or fly in a helicopter rounding up bighorn sheep on Wild Horse Island. Most of all, journalism affords the opportunity to meet many fascinating people and help tell their stories.

Most beats in newspapers across America include courts and cops, fires, traffic accidents, high school sports, grip-and-grins

and goings-on around town. But the Flathead is different. Special.

Part of the reason we have chosen to stay in the Flathead is we are drawn to the land, wildlife and water. It is gratifying to capture images of otters frolicking on the backwaters of Lawrence Park, snow-white tundra swans staging in the wetlands of the Lower Flathead, a grizzly bear prowling an old homestead at Polebridge, or fireflies flitting over a fen near Creston.

Even after decades of calling the Flathead home, the sheer beauty of the place can still be breathtaking. The clean water running over river rocks, crashing in a cascade or reflecting the sky at one of our countless lakes, is naturally soothing. The people who live and visit the Flathead Valley appreciate that beauty and want to celebrate it.

Over time, one also feels a sense of loss. We witnessed, with aching hearts, many tragedies and shattered lives, alongside the parades and fairs. Of course, part of journalism is telling the whole story of a place, good and bad.

Many changes have happened on the land itself. Many idyllic images Karen captured in the past are changed forever. Many old timers we interviewed have passed on. Old farms, fields and woods that Karen once photographed have been paved or subdivided.

Journalists believe words and images matter. We can only hope that some of our work helped our neighbors enjoy and appreciate the wonderful and rare place they call home. In a democracy, the free press has a duty to inform the electorate, and images are often the most powerful way to tell a story. And the Flathead Valley has a powerful story to tell.