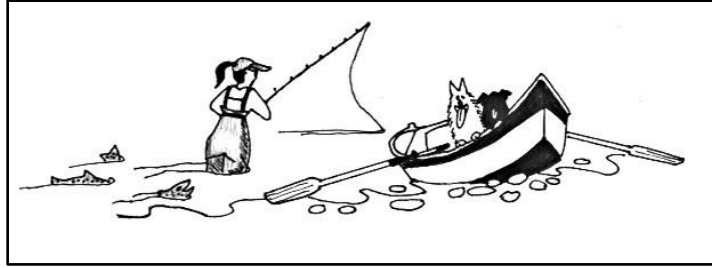


## 1. Joe's Bar in Craig, Montana (by Michele Murray)

*"A train story on the Missouri River, whether or not you expected one."*

Who thinks Dwight Yoakam is a whiner? The folk at Joe's Bar in Craig, Montana do. Joe, the owner, is a distinguished older gentleman of the same caliber charm as Bob Hope: gentle, witty, talented, but with red hair – a Bob Hope with red hair type of guy. The local patrons are charming, too, (though I wouldn't recommend getting on the wrong side with them). We first met these friendly people as the result of our prehistoric motor home (with shag-carpeted ceiling like a space ship in a B-rated movie) suffering yet another mechanical breakdown in a saga of ongoing mechanical failures on the road. On this leg of our journey, we ended up sitting at a bar having the best Bloody Mary's in the world at Joe's on the Missouri River – multiple Bloody Marys that is – directly across the tracks of a rail road line that appeared to be abandoned.

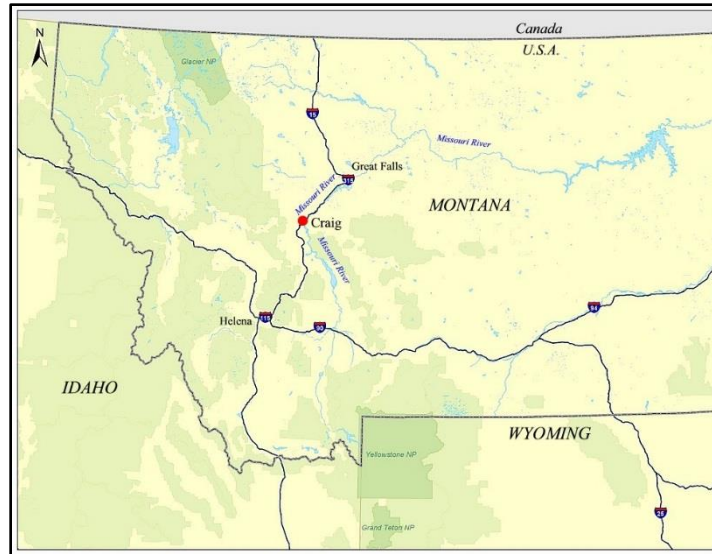
That morning, I had been standing in the Great Missouri River fishing using bead-head pheasant-tail nymphs to cast in a cascading riffle between braided sand bars. Smooth cobbles camouflaged an army of hungrily-munching brown trout that were rising to the surface like popcorn in a pan of hot oil. Our two old dogs balanced their front paws on our dory's gunnel waiting for the day's venture, faithfully guarding our lunch. I imaged that we would get in the dory soon and leave our motorhome with its newly leaking fuel pump for the shuttle driver to discover. After all, he was charging us a stiff fifty bucks to get our rolling-motel-from-hell delivered down the river to the take-out.



**Fishing a riffle in the Missouri River.**

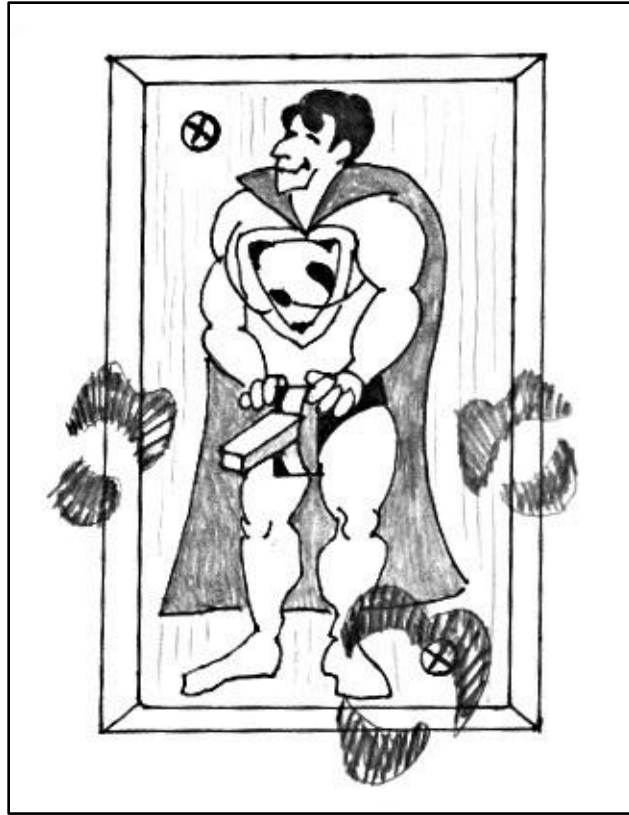
My huzbun was still in the motorhome, sitting woefully behind the steering wheel in his waders. Both of his rods were rigged and waiting for him in the boat. All systems go. Yet, he sat pondering what kind of immoral life we would be leading if we left the limping motorhome for the shuttle driver to deal with. He gave in to moral obligation rather than to fishing glory. We re-hitched the boat to our motorhome and headed for town.

If your motorhome ever breaks down anywhere in west-central Montana, you should try to make it to the town of Craig. They have a mechanic there, (Ray), who keeps 20-year old Chrysler parts in stock. We watched Ray step out of somebody else's motor coach onto steps that magically appeared and then disappeared from under the chassis. We were humbled. We use a medium size hammer to whack our steps into and back out of the iron slot they live in under our door. We were elated when Ray stopped what he was doing and began to work on our hillbilly vehicle. My wonderful spouse suggested I go to the local bar and wait for him there, considering the owner and locals are known for their hospitality.



**Craig, Montana on the Missouri River.**

Joe's Bar is a hub for sophisticated humor, the kind your dad would like. In addition to a barrage of third generation paper copies of clever sayings tacked all over the walls like, "If your wife calls and you're not here, YOU tell her," and, "You've only got one liver – so live 'er up!" they also have the best light switch I've ever seen in a ladies' room. The switch cover is a plastic Superman with the lever sticking out of his crotch in either the up or down position. There are red rings of different colored lipstick kisses on the wall around the switch. I'll never go fishing in Montana without my lipstick again!



**Superman light switch in the ladies' room.**

Another amusement in Joe's Bar is the result of a New York Times article critiquing the fly fishing along this stretch of the Missouri River. If you sit at the bar and show any interest in fly fishing, someone will eventually bring the article to your attention because of an error the journalist made about some guy's horse. The article, though flattering about the torpedo-size fish to be had in the river, made reference to, "an old gray mare" - probably for local color, I am guessing. This horse was actually, "a blue-roan stud", which makes a significant difference if you are the owner of said horse - which, I am guessing the bartender was. Further, the critter has since been "cut-proud" meaning one of his two-McNuggets was gone and the other was intact.

Ray (the mechanic, remember?) replaced our fuel pump in the time it takes a person to consume two Bloody Mary's. However, for the rest of the summer our motor home continued to suffer from uncanny problems (chassis separating from the floor, wiring shaking loose - eventually, two fenders peeled off of their rivets when we were driving over Monarch Pass, Colorado and the U-joint simultaneously broke off its hinges forcing

us to coast downhill for 6 miles with no transmission and metal fenders-a-flappin' in the wind from our flanks like Dumbo's ears).

As a result of suffering too many stressful situations of owning the motorhome, by next summer, we returned to the Great Rivers of the North in a brand-spankin' new F-350, full crew cab, SUPER-heavy duty, 12-ton, power-stroke-you-to-the-moon turbo diesel-guzzling PARTY-barge with an enormous new camper. The combined length of truck, overhanging camper and dory in tow was 38 feet! Plus, when our NEW vehicle developed an electrical problem on its virgin road trip to the Missouri River, we headed right for Craig (and right for Joe's Bar).

Our problem with the new truck was that it wouldn't shift out of park, though it would start. We discovered this malady while blocking an entire fueling island and the main entrance to a gasoline station just west of Great Falls. The station attendant, who used to work at a Ford dealership, suggested that our truck wouldn't shift due to the fandoogled digital brake sensor blowing a fuse due to an electrical short circuit in the wiring harness somewhere between the bumper and North Dakota. So, in order to get shifted out of park, (and to thereby clear his gas station island for the growing traffic jam waiting to enter the premise) we had to keep flipping new fuses into the appropriate slot of the fuse-box, (as was demonstrated to us by a knowledgeable paraplegic passing by the pile of vehicles in his wheelchair.)

After clearing that obstacle, we diverted our course westward to Craig where we knew we could count on the reliable mechanical service of Ray, (the guy who had fixed our 21-year old motor-home with a leaking fuel pump the summer before). And, as before, we knew that when we are having an engine problem near Craig, it's best to wait for Ray to perform his miracles over a Bloody Mary at Joe's Bar next to the abandoned train tracks. Besides, it was August and the temperature in western Montana was over 100 degrees – too hot for fishing.

We found Joe's Bar to be wonderfully dark and cool for our hot tempers (we were not happy with our new truck.) Sensing our foul mood, Joe produced from under the sink an old, small acoustic guitar with plastic strings – the kind your dad might have put under the Christmas tree when you were a kid. Apparently, everybody at Joe's Bar can

play the guitar. Big, mean-looking guys and little sweet-looking guys traded the guitar and played and sang old ballads by Gordon Lightfoot, Eddie Arnold, Hank Williams Sr., and many other almost forgotten but still vaguely familiar tunes (including "On Top of Old Smokey" with the original words – NOT the errant meatball version.) We sang like day-care children in Joe's Bar in the middle of the afternoon, drinking Bloody Mary's, beer and whiskey with only a few other anglers, losing track of time. Joe's Bar is, in that sense, a timeless place, good for letting go of one's worries.

That's maybe why I parked our rig on the train tracks. It was 104 degrees (Fahrenheit) in the shade that day and everything in western Montana was on fire except for trout fur. (I had caught some Brown trout with singed eyelashes, obviously the result of feeding on burning mayflies the day before.) It was way too hot for fishing or even just floating down the river under the hot sky. You couldn't touch your beer without searing your lips. My reel had vapor lock. The sun beat down on our heads like a tired old elephant's butt. There was no respite in dunking our hats in the Missouri River. Along the shore, professional outfitters parked their dories to let their glum clients hide in the shade of cattails, futile lines hanging limp over the gunnels.

We didn't think we could take our dogs into Joe's (though I've never asked), and as I said, it was a really hot day. I could tell by their deflated, molten bodies that the dogs didn't care if I left them to melt into poodles on the back seat of the truck during Ray's repairs. I rolled the windows down for public appearance to look as if there was a breeze for them to enjoy.

Though Ray fixed our truck in 15 minutes, I didn't want to get back out on the hot river. So, Joe told me to park our rig under the shade of an enormous, uncontrolled elm in his front yard next to the bar. I tried to park there but the top of our camper made a crushing noise, threatening his living room window by bending the huge tree's branches back. Still, there was no shade on the dogs. I saw that not too far from the bar was another large elm casting a fully available shadow across a nice flat-looking place about the size of our Ford land-barge. I scoped the scene for practicality: no driveways would be blocked if I parked there. I saw only the old train tracks that were mostly obscured by dry, dead, knee-high weeds. Obviously abandoned.

So, I parked our brand spankin' new truck-house and dory in tow under the OTHER elm in its magnificent shade away from Joe's Bar. The dogs were unconscious panting in their dreams about having gone to Dog Hell and being forced to chase rabbits on fire without any water. I left them in that state.

When I returned to the bar the patrons were fashioning an enormous caddis dry fly out of a beer bottle and a bent spoon with some straws. We were way into our 30<sup>th</sup> round of campfire songs, Joe was yodeling cowboy style as the guitar got passed around and people sang and laughed and drank and told jokes and the afternoon was really going very well, when I heard a train whistle. A TRAIN whistle. So, I asked the cozy group in general,

*"Hey – does a train still run through here?"*

They all answered that 'yes,' once in a while a train does come through here.

So I asked to no one in particular, *"Does it run on these tracks right outside of the bar?"*

Now, I had my huzbun's attention (he's pretty sharp). They said that there was only one set of tracks. And I said,

*"I'm talking about those weed covered, abandoned tracks."*

*"They're not abandoned",* patrons answered.

*"WOO-oooo-WOOOOO!!!!"* said oncoming train.

My darling huzbun quietly asked me, *"Michele, where did you park the rig with the dogs and dory?"*

The train whistled yet again but much closer now and I stood not so quickly as to alarm anyone but my 'bun was faster than me and he disappeared through the door quite rapidly. I didn't want to witness any pending events in action but I went outside also to be available should an unforeseen catastrophe suddenly arise.

In a short while, the train came rattling by and produced a mild breeze. I was surprised to see that the sun was still up – always an uncomfortable discovery when you've been drinking all day. And there were the doggies, all tongues and tails lolling out the

window of the crew cab in the shade of Joe's elm, having been moved by a simply astounding huzbun only moments before.

My wonderful "Love Bun" rejoined the festivities in Joe's Bar with a perspiring face. He ordered another beer before he would even look at me again. Joe had complete confidence in his ability to woo any woman by yodeling, (he was looking awfully cavalier and suave with his little guitar and gallant eye.) Though I'm particularly partial to older men who can yodel, he had no idea of the heroic feat performed. My huzbun not only delivers me to and from rivers in Montana, he also delivers me from catastrophe.

We ended up sleeping in the camper right where "bun" parked it in Joe's front yard at a safe distance from the train tracks. The next day, we continued fishing rivers and streams amidst Montana's inferno, grateful for a good mechanic, good people, and great Bloody Marys at Joe's Bar. In particular, we are grateful for slow locomotive engineers who have enough foresight to anticipate that a large truck, camper and boat might be parked on their tracks outside of Joe's Bar on the Missouri River in Craig, Montana.