Hiding Out Underneath The Big Sky

Timothy Egan

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LAST CHANCE GULCH leads into the old stone buildings of Montana's capital, to Lewis and Clark County Jail, which now holds a man suspected of being one of the most sought-after fugitives of the century. Last Chance is not just a name for a main drag. In Montana, it seems like a state motto.

For Theodore J. Kaczynski, the student prodigy who graduated from Harvard at age 20, the promising math professor, Montana was the best of all hideouts. Virtually everybody in the hamlet near his one-room cabin knew him, but nobody asked who he really was.

Now, of course, Mr. Kaczynski, as the chief suspect in the Unabom case, is on his way to becoming a househhold name. At the same time, a band of tax-hating individualists and accused check forgers called Freemen wait out an F.B.I. siege on the other side of the state. The timing of the two events is utterly coincidental, but suddenly people all over the world are wondering what it is about the Big Sky Country that makes it such a shelter for people who want to hide or otherwise thumb their nose at the idea of an organized society.

It is not, it turns out, a foolish question.

"There is this idea here that your neighbor's business is your neighbor's business until it actually causes harm to you," said Ken Toole, of the Montana Human Rights Network. The organization monitors hate groups and extremists, and has had a busy year.

"Much as I would like to deny it, there is no doubt that we have become a haven for some of these militia leaders and extremists," said Mr. Toole. "Yet, this is also a state that has stood up to these people."

But it is also state where a hermit, a fugitive or an extremist can go for years without feeling a ounce of pressure. There are fewer than a half-dozen people per square mile in Montana, and no daytime speed limit. Garfield County, where the Freemen are holed up, is as big as Connecticut, and it has only two law enforcement officers.

Even in the West, where individualism and self-reliance survive as regional values, Montana stands out. It is the third most sparsely populated state in the nation, and there is a long history of unconventional attitudes toward what constitutes law and order. In the second half of the 19th century, the state was a haven for outlaws and, in response, a center of vigilantism; it also was a hotbed of labor radicalism where miners rose up against the "copper kings."

Last week, Mr. Kaczynksi was charged only with a single odd felony — possessing bomb components not registered to him in the National Firearms Registration Transfer Record — but he is said by the Federal authorities to be a prime suspect in the case of the Unabomber. The mail-bomb terrorist, who has written of his hatred for the way technology is transforming society, has killed three people and injured 27 over an 18-year period.

For nearly two decades, the Unabomber has been one of the most wanted persons in America. And of all the places to hide — from the crowded anonymity of the big city to the swamplands of Florida — this suspect, the authorities say, chose a little

fold in the Rocky Mountains where everybody knew his name, and he kept a homey rural mailbox with Ted Kaczynski stenciled on it.

"He would wave, I would wave," said Eileen Lundberg, who has lived down the Stemple Creek Road from Mr. Kaczynski for more than 20 years. "He would say hi. I would say hi. He would bring me parsnips from his garden. I would bring him beets."

And did she ever ask her neighbor of 20 years what he did to earn money, or where he had disappared to over stretches of time?

"I would never have asked," said Mrs. Lundberg. "It was none of my business."

Which is what made the place perfect. For until anyone knew who he was, all the satellite surveillance in the Federal arsenal couldn't home in on this suspect — as it did shortly before the arrest.

"In the cities you suspect the worst, but in the country you expect the best until proven otherwise," said Andy Malcolm, press secretary to Montana's Governor, Marc Racicot. So it was when dozens of F.B.I. agents began showing up in Lincoln, an unincorporated village, 50 miles from Helena and four miles from Mr. Kaczynski's cabin, weeks ago, and nobody asked any questions. People say they thought the agents were just a bunch of guys on an extended snowmobile outing. Even though the F.B.I. took all 4 cabins and 16 motel rooms at the Seven-Up Pete Ranch, the owner, Wayne Cashman, said, "When you're running a business, you don't ask questions."

More than 300 miles east of here, on a ranch in the high, frozen plains of eastern Montana, a dozen fugitives who call themselves Freemen have been holed up. Most of the Freemen, who are wanted on a multi-million dollar check fraud scheme, have been on the ranch for more than a year, saying that what they do is none of the Government's business. They have their own courts, own laws, own judges and own money, they say.

On the western side of the state, in the tiny mountain town of Noxon, is the Militia of Montana, a very media-savvy group of about dozen people, most of them new arrivals to the Big Sky State. Between monitoring for black helicopters and issuing warnings about global domination, they make appearances on such shows as "This Week With David Brinkley," feeding a stereotype of this state as a place where the oxygen of public discourse is different, to say the least.

In the last week, there have been dozens of calls into tourism offices in Billings, the state's largest city, from people who wonder if it's safe to drive through Montana without bumping into an armed siege, a most wanted fugitive, or a bunch of middle-aged men in camouflage outfits.

"I come from the South, and I didn't spend my whole life being stereotyped as as racist redneck, only to come out here where we are stereotyped as being a bunch of Nazis," said Rick Bass, a writer who lives in the Yaak Valley of northwest Montana.

About five years ago, hundreds of people poured into Paradise Valley, just above Yellowstone, saying they were preparing for nuclear Armageddon. They belonged to the Church Universal and Triumphant, and most of them purchased a bomb shelter

from the church when they arrived. Though neighbors were alarmed, they could not do anything about it: Montana has no zoning.

The open space tends to amplify the actions of a few. So, if a tiny group in New York suddenly declared that the Government was illegal, they would be laughed at, or, more likely, ignored. Here, they buy a ticket to "Nightline."

The open space also provides an enormous amount of room to roam. "When I worked for the Forest Service we would occasionally bump into people up in the Bitterroots, in little cabins, and you were never sure where came from or whether they would ever come out," said Mr. Toole.

Mr. Kaczynski, in one respect, was a rather ordinary Montana recluse, a matted-hair hermit in an olive-drab sweathshirt, and an Army backpack — a "sweet little neighbor," as one Lincoln resident called him.

The Lundbergs would occasionally give him rides to Helena. But they wouldn't ask him about his travel plans. "This is God's Country," said Mrs. Lundberg. "Wide open spaces. It doesn't pay to snoop."

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