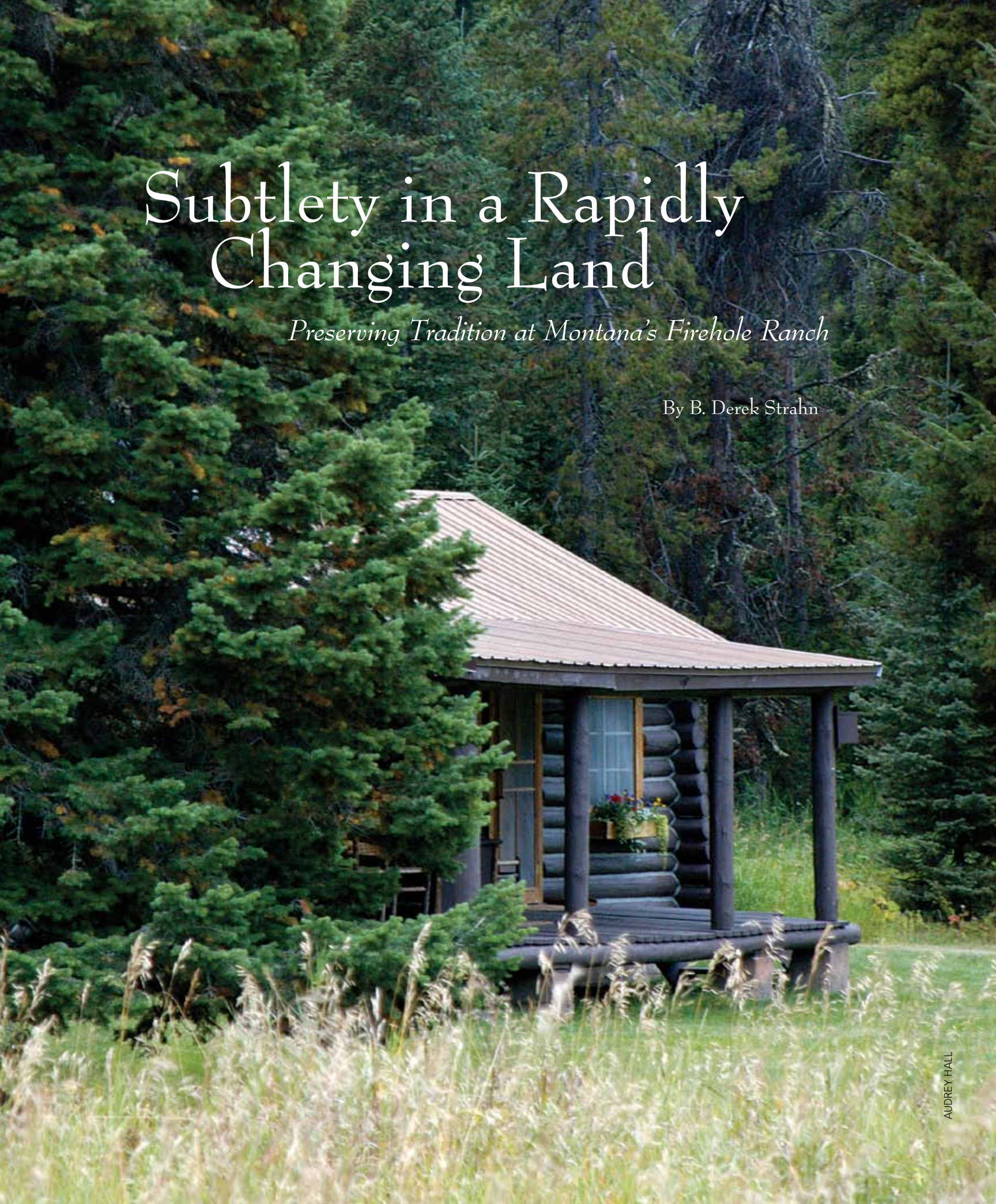
Subtlety in a Rapidly Changing Land

Preserving Tradition at Montana's Firehole Ranch

By B. Derek Strahn



AUDREY HALL

Left: Firehole Ranch and its modest guest cabins (cabins two and three are shown above) sit in a park at the edge of the timber, just a few yards from the banks of Hebgen Lake.

COURTESY OF JULIE SMITH MANNINO

Parking my car on the north shore of southwest Montana's Hebgen Lake and approaching the Firehole Ranch by water, I felt almost as if I were leaving the modern world behind. The scattered pace of my hectic, familiar life—like the rushing current of the Upper Madison River—drifted away that warm June afternoon, when the receiving boat slowly pulled into the glassy stillness.

Having never experienced this place before, I assumed that this historic tourist destination would announce its presence loudly with large impressive landmark buildings and the clamor of noisy vacationers. But I was mistaken.

Even as the boat nudged the remote southern shoreline, I strained to identify one of the West's premiere fly fishing lodges on the landscape. And there it was. The simple, one-story log buildings were rustic and natural. Crouching close to the ground, they seemed almost organic, blending harmoniously with the quiet backdrop of these incredible surroundings.

The Firehole Ranch is a special place where the past still breathes. Here, 140 years ago, homesteaders formed cooperative and respectful ties with the land. Their work, their buildings—their very way of life—were necessarily compat-

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Top: Under the watchful eye of Coffin Bowl, horse riders K. Smith, Leila Wright, Janne Smith, and an associate, pose in front of the family cabin. Employee housing, the corral and a barn also are visible. Photo circa 1954. The main lodge's living room is as comfortable today as it was in 1954 when this classic family photo was taken. Seated from left to right are baby Leila Smith, Anne Wright Smith, Janne Smith, grandmother Leila Wright, K. Smith, Julie Smith and the dog, a Labrador named Schmidt. Opposite: The main lodge today has changed very little over the decades.

ible with the country upon which they depended. Today, that subtle, sustainable tradition is preserved in a modern business that beckons its visitors to immerse themselves in an intimate and memorable relationship with the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem's changing, but still pristine environment.

Places like this are important to preserve, not only because they reflect broad patterns of historical development and proud—if understated—architectural traditions. They are, likewise, important to preserve because they offer temporary respite from a frequently unsatisfying modern life, where superficial glitz and crowded, fast-paced hype have become the norm. In providing but a glimpse of an alternative mode of living—one that is anchored in tradition and place—historic destinations like the Firehole Ranch can teach powerful lessons to us all.

Nestled beneath the Continental Divide and 10,600-foot Coffin Peak, the historic log cabins, barns, and corrals of the Firehole (formerly known as the Watkins Creek) Ranch are virtually one with "the point," a sagebrush and grassland projection that helps form the scenic southern shore of Montana's beautiful Hebgen Lake. The world's first national park and the bustling gateway community of West Yellowstone lie some 18 miles to the east. But none of this was here in the mid-1860s, when a young, gravel-in-the-guts pioneer named

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George S. Watkins located a primitive cattle camp in the lush, virgin grassland then known as the Upper Madison Basin.

Watkins was born in Kentucky in 1837. At 27, he rode a raucous wave of migration that carried thousands westward from the chaos of the nation's deadliest war to the makeshift gold camps of Montana Territory. Disillusioned by mining prospects at Virginia City, he secured lands near present day Ennis and adopted a new vocation. He quickly earned the moniker of "The cattle king of Madison County."

Ambitious Montanans took what they wanted in those days, and Watkins was no exception. By the mid-1860s, he had laid claim to roughly 600 acres—a remote, inaccessible Shangri-La with grass, as son Spencer Watkins recalled in a 1968 interview, "as thick as the hair on a dog's back."

"If ever there was a hunter's paradise and a perfect summer range for cattle," he asserted, "that Madison Basin was it."

In 1866 alone, Watkins cut and stacked about 150 tons of hay in his new Eden. What was not fed to livestock, he sold in still-booming Virginia City for as much as $100 a ton.

Profit soon inspired permanence. From a base camp christened the Watkins Creek Ranch, cowpunchers branded calves and supplied Yellowstone National Park with hay, beef, and horses for nearly four decades.

But change is always around the corner in Greater Yellowstone, and Watkins' luck soon ran out. In the early 20th century, a power and light company announced plans to dam the Madison and flood virtually all of the Upper Basin. To remain in the cattle business was futile.

"There was no place to run them," afterwards, remembered the younger Watkins. "They'd have to swim."

Although George Watkins sold out to the Madison Power and Light Company in 1904, his life spanned nearly another 30 years. He saw the shores of Hebgen Lake largely defined, and witnessed a new generation of homesteaders file claims along Watkins Creek. In the 1920s and '30s, drought and depression robbed those following the trail he blazed. It was more than a decade after his death that the post-World War II years finally carried an invigorated spirit back to the foothills of Coffin Peak.

By the 1890s, wild places no longer dominated American life. Now that Americans had subdued the forest and its native inhabitants, and realized their manifest destiny; now that affluence and leisure time had become more commonplace in the great population centers of the East, the average citizen could, as historian Roderick Nash observed, "approach wilderness with the viewpoint of the vacationer rather than the conqueror." Craving release from the stress and stale familiarity of urban industrial culture, early 20th cen-

Right: The Living Room in the main lodge. Photo by Bert L. Brown, Northern Pacific Railway, circa 1950. Opposite: The modern-day lodge living room, complete with fish sculptures, a massive moose head, classic western paintings and, of course, the requisite roaring fire.

COURTESY OF JULIE SMITH MANNINO

tury Americans read bestsellers like Jack London's "Call of the Wild" or Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Tarzan of the Apes" series, and longed for a wilderness escape.

Meanwhile, railroads aggressively promoted Yellowstone as "America's Wonderland." As a complement, they also marketed growing numbers of neighboring dude ranches as romanticized getaways, where trails led "not only to the scenic heart of the Rockies, but back into the past of frontier life."

Together, these tourist venues popularized a new economic engine in the region. Thousands soon embraced the rugged and unspoiled scenery, a bygone way of life, and the newfound merits of conservation espoused by Teddy Roosevelt and others. In complete contrast to the extractive industries that colored so much of early Montana's history, Yellowstone and its dude ranch sidekicks helped inspire a modern environmental ethic that still touches and inspires many.

Down in Salt Lake City, Leila and Clarence "Clix" Wright sensed opportunity. In 1944, they purchased the Watkins Creek Ranch, with their daughter and son-in-law, Anne and K. Smith. Seeking to capitalize on the historic rough-hewn character, the family gradually converted the property to the thriving guest facility that would eventually become the Firehole Ranch.

"Rustic was just the thing to do," remembered granddaughter Julie Smith Mannino. "The more remote a property, the more it was in demand."

After constructing several log guest cabins along Hebgen Lake, the new owners erected a matching lodge that reflected not only the vernacular architectural character of the original Watkins Creek Ranch, but also popular architectural precedents from tourist-oriented facilities in Yellowstone. A massive stone fireplace, handmade furniture and colorful Native American rugs simultaneously celebrated a nostalgic view of the past and the area's character-defining landscape. But the ranch embodied the frontier dream envisioned by affluent urban Americans in more than just architecture. Regular visitors, like Isabel Lincoln, granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, responded to the glossy brochures and other forms of advertising that beckoned non-Westerners to "Vacation in Montana, The Dude Ranch Way..."

"One can do everything with the pleasant satisfaction of knowing there is nothing one must do," a 1948 publication noted, "and plain and fancy loafing is rather popular."

Those desiring more activity could "ride after cattle, enjoy horseback trips in the woods, fish to their heart's content in all types of water ... enjoy boats on the lake, swim, shoot skeet, water ski, play badminton, or horseshoes, or just sit on a corral fence and swap stories." Some adventurous guests even followed in the footsteps of George Watkins and traveled "by horseback and pack-outfit to the Park over the back-country trails." For the more faint of heart, guided auto excursions to Yellowstone regularly drove what locals call "the big loop," visiting Norris, Canyon, Lake, and Old Faithful before returning to evening bridge playing, bonfires, sing alongs, and

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cocktail parties on the moonlit shores of Hebgen Lake.

Success was almost immediate. "The Blue Book of Western Dude Ranches" branded the Watkins Creek Ranch one of "the best dude ranches of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Nebraska," just three years after the ranch had welcomed its first paying guests.

But in Greater Yellowstone, the tremors of transition come at a moments notice. Never was this more clear than at 11:37 p.m. on Monday, August 17, 1959, when one of the greatest earthquakes ever recorded in North America rattled this area, plunging half of a 7,600-foot high mountain into the restless foam below and launching a raging, 20-foot high torrent of water down the narrow Madison Canyon. The event disturbed the very foundations of the Watkins Creek Ranch and foreshadowed bigger changes yet to come.

Following the death of Clix and Leila Wright, the Smiths sold the ranch in the fall of 1967. For the next quarter of a century various owners did little to expand upon the guest ranch traditions developed since World War II. Slowly the ranch fell into disrepair. Then, in 1992, the property transferred to new investors who renamed the property the Firehole Ranch in hopes of enticing a fly-fishing clientele. When profits failed to materialize, the partners carved the 660-acre Firehole Ranch into 33 separate homesites. Like so many scenic parcels in the West today, the promised land of George Watkins stood poised to be auctioned off, piece by piece.

But in this instance, the unpredictable current that shapes Montana took an alternative and far more desirable course. As a third generation summer resident and "neighbors for many, many years," Lynda Caine possessed intimate knowledge of the area. She appreciated, for instance, that the willowed shoreline of Hebgen Lake was calving ground for the Coffin Peak elk herd. In the springtime, she often filmed the grizzlies that lumbered down from the Great Divide to stalk the weak

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and unsuspecting at the water's edge, and for her, the thought of upsetting this precious habitat was unthinkable.

"The land had already been subdivided for 20-acre ranchettes," Caine recalled, "and it saddened me to see it go to a subdivision." In August of 1999 she purchased the entire Firehole Ranch, erased the lot lines, and set out to find an environmentally compatible way of working with the uncommon landscape she loves.

Today, Caine and her staff are keenly aware that the Firehole Ranch is intertwined with, and dependent upon the healthy environment that still surrounds it. They respect and actively seek to preserve the environment that has long defined the rich heritage of the region.

Fly fishing remains at the heart of the ranch's conservationist mission, according to head fishing guide Jim Berkenfield. The ranch possesses a "unique assortment of outfitting permits" and strives to connect its guests with a number of "incredible and extremely diverse" environments within the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. Over the course of a weeklong stay, guests can fish a different stretch of water on some of the world's best fisheries every day, he noted. For this reason, the Firehole Ranch is widely considered "one of the West's premiere fishing resorts."

After working in the West Yellowstone area for 18 years, guide Rowan Nyman recognizes that the Firehole Ranch offers much more than an opportunity for tourists to land a trophy brown on some of the most beautiful trout water in North America.

"When they get here, this place grabs them," he commented, "and by the time they go back to the office in New York City, they appreciate what they've experienced, and how special it all was."

The impacts are lasting, not only for these lucky vacationers, but also for anyone concerned with saving the last great places of the American West. "So many people...don't have an opportunity to understand why it's important to preserve all of this," Nyman continued. But after visiting the Firehole Ranch, "Our guests get it, and they pass it on to their friends, and family, and the next generation."

Although wholly compatible with the quiet sport of fly fishing, transitioning to the authentic, stripped-down simplicity of the Firehole Ranch is, for some, jarring at first. The well-preserved buildings still wear their "original patina" and efforts are now underway to document the historic and architectural significance of the ranch as a still-functioning expression of Montana's cherished, but increasingly threatened heritage. By the fall of 2006, the ranch will be listed on America's honor roll of culturally significant locations—the National Register of Historic Places.

But Caine freely admits that the guest's experience, while "elegant," is "not grandiose." For those addicted to the exaggerated tempo of modern life, the lack of televisions and telephones can be disconcerting. While many vacation destinations "are just as crazy as the places that people are desperately trying to get away from," visiting the Firehole Ranch is like "dropping back in time," she observes, and "the pace is very subtle."

For Caine, the reward is "watching people get more in touch with nature." Here one is afforded an opportunity to "tie into the rhythm of the day, and of the season, in a way that most don't in

their busy lives."

"You can see them changed by the end of the week," she maintains. "In connecting with this place they become whole again."

The modern story of this region is characterized by transition more than permanence and—like the flowing rivers of this well-watered land, so rapid and breathtaking—of momentum and consequences.

Change has always come quickly in Montana. Consider the buffalo and their precipitous decline; Butte's explosive metamorphosis into an industrial island of nearly 100,000 in a mere 20 years; and the annihilation of Custer's entire command in about the time, as one Northern Cheyenne recalled, that "it takes a hungry man to eat his dinner."

Today, in the temperamental Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, uncertainty is still all around us, and the pace of the ongoing transformation remains untamed and treacherous. This 18-million-acre playground now ranks as one of the most rapidly developing regions in the entire country. Here, sadly, it seems increasingly difficult to find the quiet, the understated, and the familiar. Here, in the rush to leave our imprint on the land, we seem ever more likely to stamp out the traditions that have historically granted us intimate connections with the environment.

The Firehole Ranch offers a critically important alternative to this trend. Preserving both built and natural landscapes, as well as the subtle, sustainable traditions that have historically shaped the region, this historic venue grants its visitors an opportunity to connect with and learn from an earlier Montana that still speaks to those who listen. BSJ