“A Fair Chance” was sponsored by the Montana Preservation Alliance as part of a joint project with MPA and the Bureau of Land Management to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the original 1862 Homestead Act. Additional funding for the project was provided by the Steele Reese Foundation, the Montana History Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Many thanks to Chere Jiusto at MPA for the opportunity to collaborate on this project. Chere helped arrange the interview with Ivan Doig, who lent his perspective and insights to the piece. Christine Brown and Patty Dean of MPA were helpful throughout the entire project. I should say here that MPA has for years done important preservation work (and continues to do so) on houses, barns, churches, schools and other buildings from Montana’s homestead era.

I also owe thanks to Ken Robison of the Overholser Historical Research Center in Fort Benton, Montana for his critique of some of my assumptions about the homestead experience. Hank Armstrong, whom I visited at the site of his family’s homestead near Geraldine, Montana, and who has done considerable research at the Overholser, was also a great help to me. Sarah Carter, professor of history at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and the author of the remarkable study “Montana Women Homesteaders: A Field of One’s Own” generously made her research available to me.

In addition to the photographs I took for this piece, Tom Ferris was kind enough to let me use several of his beautiful images of historic barns in Beaverhead County (some of which appear in the beautiful book on historic barns: “Hand Raised: The Barns of Montana” by Christine Brown and Chere Jiusto.) The Montana Historical Society, The Beaverhead County Museum, Gale Schaff of Lavina, and Sylvia Waters of Fairfield also gave me permission to use some extraordinary family and community photos from the homestead era.

Sometime last spring, Chere Jiusto asked me if I might be interested in working with MPA on a series of radio stories that would deal with Montana’s legacy of homesteading. I was. We agreed on a series of five vignettes of six minutes each that would air as part of Mountain West Voices, and a half-hour, documentary style piece that would air separately.

I figured 30 minutes would be plenty long enough to touch on the most important aspects of the homesteading experience in Montana. As it turned out, there were lots of issues I didn’t have time to go into in depth, or at all. One of the big ones, as I see it, was the impact of the homesteading movement on Native American communities in Montana. I had a chance to speak with Rosalyn LaPier of the Department of Environmental Studies at the University of Montana, and asked her about the Native perspective on homesteading.

“I think to a certain extent most people don’t recognize that when homesteading occurred, that they were not entering land that was...empty. In the romantic version of the story, that they’re going into uncharted territory, that they’re going to be homesteading on property that has never been used before, that is sort of just ‘out there in the West’, open and free, and in reality, people lived there, and had been living there, and in many cases had just been very recently moved off of
those lands.

In human history, when one group – I don’t want to use the word conquer, because that’s not really the right word – but when one group asserts authority over another group, or another place, and sometimes it’s not against the group but against the place – so if they want to assert authority over a place, then you have to move people into that place, to prove that it is yours. So if you claim a certain territory belongs to you, you can claim all you want, but if other people are living there, then that claim really has no meaning.

Most Native people are very aware of the history of the State of Montana, especially as the history pertains to them. Most Native people don’t think of history as something about the past, they think of history as something that is part of their present day lives, and they believe that literally their daily lives reflect the history of the state of Montana.

In terms of homesteading, there are certain reservations that were really dramatically impacted, for example by the 1909 Homesteading Act. The Dawes Act (the allotment act) wasn’t enacted here in Montana until right before the Homestead Act. So, for example, the Salish and Kootenai Reservation was really impacted by the Act, because their land was allotted. It’s no secret that the Tribe was given literally the worst land on the reservation, marginal land, and the land in the middle, by the lake and the valley, was all open to homesteading.

People in Montana are very proud of their homesteading history, and across the state, people will say, ‘Well, I’m fourth generation Montanan,’ or ‘I’m fifth generation Montanan,’ and that gives them a certain amount of authencity in terms of their Western identity, or their Montana identity. Native people…it’s different.

Native people have been here so long, and for the most part have no intention of leaving, right? This is home. This has been home. And so people aren’t going anywhere. Whereas we’ve already seen in eastern Montana, and rural Montana, we’ve already seen this sort of boom and bust cycle of homesteading. People move in, people live there for a while. But Native people look at Montana, and they see this boom bust cycle that has already occurred, and they’re still there, and they’re going to be there.

The romantic idea of homesteading is that people were coming out to a place that was sort of untouched by human hands; that they were going out to this virgin territory. A “Garden of Eden”. The advertising of the day was extremely one sided, and it gave you this view that nobody lived there. And I think there are stories where people come out to Montana and they’re shocked. Surprise! There’s people already living here! And people who had been using the land, and it wasn’t quote unquote virgin land, and it wasn’t the Garden of Eden. It was a place that people had been living for tens of thousands of years.” Even today, when you talk to people who are the fourth generation, fifth generation; they still are surprised that their families were moving onto land that, you know, people had just been using – moments before.”

An aspect of Montana’s homestead era that I had been pretty ignorant of until recently is the remarkable history of single women homesteaders in this state. Sarah Carter’s book was an eye opener for me, and I had a chance to meet Sarah recently after having read her book. Here are some excerpts from our conversation.
“There are dramatically different landscapes – gendered landscapes – when you look at both sides of the (U.S. – Canadian) border. What is most striking is the comparison. So that you see women here being able to have an opportunity to own land and to farm, and they might use that land as a source of income to start a restaurant, or other business, or to further their education, and these opportunities were so restricted and narrow in Canada…”

One striking thing was “that so many felt they ought to leave a record behind of what they did. They must have had a sense that they were doing something that was breaking out of the mold; of what were expectations of femininity at that time.”

Their reasons for homesteading “are virtually the same as male homesteaders. It might be for some the sense of a new adventure to explore; for others, it’s really a case of dire poverty. They may have been deserted by a husband, they may have children to care for; they may have been thrown on their own resources unexpectedly, and in need of a source of income. I think some of them were escaping situations, it might be a marital situation they wanted to escape, like an abusive husband. There’s certainly evidence that women were trying to leave those situations behind and start anew.”

“Women came out in groups. They might have come out with family members…sisters, perhaps, or sometimes a mother and daughter would homestead. But men came out in groups as well. The distinctions become fewer and fewer when you really begin to look carefully. They opened land for homesteading that should never have been opened for homesteading. A lot of eastern, northeastern Montana is absolutely terrible land – it’s really only grazing land. And a lot of these women had absolutely no idea what they were doing. Some had some farm experience, some had been raised on other homesteads, but quite a number of them had absolutely no experience and had no idea.

I think for all Montana homesteaders the hope was the new wisdom of the dry farming techniques that were supposed to make the arid prairies blossom…and you know, some of these schemes were pretty crackpot! And a lot of people – males and females – must have fallen for them and were not aware that they were…that the rain does not follow the plow! Sadly, the homesteading experience was not a Nirvana for most people – women or men. But the homestead movement was still hugely significant for single women…for everybody, really…”