The O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West, University of Montana
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WITHOUT NECESSARILY KNOWING what it is, there has always been a strong sense among Montanans that Montana, while large in size geographically, is actually a small part of something much bigger. In this part of the country, it is not difficult to see and feel the expansiveness of the place. You can see with your eyes how boundless it is as you peer across the horizon. And with these boundless horizons and the landscapes they contain, the sky appears to be very "big." This is "Big Sky Country" — "tall, wide, and handsome" as journalist-historian Joseph Kinsey Howard put it in his seminal book published in 1943.¹

The Rocky Mountain West as a Geographic and Ecological Region

The region's tall and wide landscapes span the U.S.-Canada border and the area at the region's cross-border

The Rocky Mountain West region is first and foremost defined by the mountains — the Rocky Mountains, the spine of North America. Photo courtesy Rick and Susie Graetz, Montana's Spanish Peaks.
center is sometimes referred to as North America’s “Crown of the Continent.” And at the center of this cross-border Crown area is the world’s first international peace park — Glacier-Waterton Lakes International Peace Park.

In this Crown area the continent divides left and right, west and east and also, a little bit, north and south. This accounts for the Rocky Mountain West being one of the world’s most important “headwaters” regions. Many of North America’s most important rivers have their beginnings in the high country of the Rockies. These include the Missouri, which eventually flows into the Gulf of Mexico, along with the Platte, the Arkansas, and the Rio Grande. They also include the Colorado, Snake, and Columbia Rivers which eventually all flow into the Pacific. Also included are the Peace, Athabasca, and Saskatchewan Rivers, which flow from the Rockies into the Hudson and northern lake systems of western Canada. And they include a variety of streams flowing west from the Rockies through British Columbia and into the Pacific.

These river systems are monumental in scale but all essentially originate somewhere in the Rockies, carrying and distributing some of the world’s freshest waters — something increasingly not to be taken for granted. As these waters disperse, they sustain plants, animals, and people throughout the entire western and middle portions of North America. The rugged terrain, waters, and vegetation of the Rockies make it an amazing and unique ecological region with diverse habitat supporting an incredible array of wildlife, including large animals like moose, elk, bison, and bighorn sheep, and large carnivores like grizzly bears, mountain lions, and grey wolves that occupy the top of the animal food chain.

The Rocky Mountain West also is where the continent’s central Great Plains meet the continent’s most imposing mountain range. Coming from the large, flat Plains, visitors to the region have always been able to sense the region’s power and identity as the mountains in the distance come into view. In the United States, the southern reaches of the Rocky Mountains extend to New Mexico. In Canada, the northern reaches stretch to British Columbia’s northern border with the Yukon Territory, following the border area B.C. shares with Alberta for much of the way.

As the crow flies, it is roughly 900 miles from Missoula, Montana, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and it is roughly 1,000 miles from Missoula north and west to the Rockies’ northern reaches. Many if not most Americans see the mountains of western Montana as being part of the “northern Rockies.” But within a larger continental context that recognizes the full reaches of the Rockies in both directions, northwestern Montana falls almost squarely in the “central Rockies,” with as much of this magnificent mountain range north of us as south. Of course, this less confining perspective is what one gains by looking beyond boundaries defined by men and by historical circumstance (national boundaries) to boundaries defined by the planet itself and its most prominent features.

A prominent feature of the Rocky Mountain West is the presence of many national parks on both sides of the border. Perhaps the most notable ones are Yellowstone, Rocky Mountain, and Glacier National Parks in the United States and Banff and Jasper Parks in Canada. There are many other smaller but equally spectacular provincial and state parks among these. Areas selected for inclusion in national parks are considered special places worthy of national protection. And because of their special beauty, they are magnets that attract many visitors to our region each year. For example, while not many people live in Montana (a little over 1 million), many more people who live elsewhere visit the state and region (approximately 11 million a year).

The region also has many other types of public lands, including wilderness and wildland areas, forest lands, and reserves, and grasslands like those managed by the Bureau of Land Management in the United States. Having so much public land has served to retain much of the region’s natural vegetation and defining landscapes. But it also accounts for why so many visitors to the region who share in the ownership of these lands can consider these places their own.

So there are many geographic reasons the Rocky Mountain West is a region on such as grand scale. But beyond these, because of the growing mobility of people, our increasingly ubiquitous information-sharing technologies, and the globalization influences in the economy, our transnational region also is becoming more intertwined in social and economic ways.

The Rocky Mountain West as an Emerging Transnational Economic Region

As the world becomes more globally interconnected largely by economic and technological forces, regions stretching across national boundaries are becoming increasingly relevant in economic terms. This is particularly true in Europe as many large transnational subregions become more defined and integrated economically and culturally under the development of the European Union (EU). The same is happening in Asia under the development of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Countries and the regions within them are becoming more interdependent and economically and socially integrated.

As the world becomes smaller, regions become bigger, often extending across national borders. This
The North American Rocky Mountain West

The Rocky Mountain West is a trans-national region of North America. It extends north into north-central British Columbia north of Prince George, B.C., and south into north-central New Mexico south of Pueblo, CO. The University of Montana is located almost at the north-south mid-point of this large region. Most of the work by the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West focuses on areas in the region within Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, as well as southern Alberta and southeastern British Columbia.

The map shows population distribution across this large region (red dots mapped at the U.S. census block level and Canadian census subdivision level). The region's largest population centers are Denver and Salt Lake City in the south and Calgary and Edmonton in the north. Spokane and Boise are the dominant population centers on the region's western flank. Lying inside of these larger cities are many smaller cities – places like Billings and Cheyenne, Missoula and Idaho Falls, Bozeman and Caspar, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. These are widely spaced and separated by expansive and sparsely populated areas.

The region is known for its mountains and fresh-running streams that originate in the region's high country and for its large forests and wide, outlying prairies and grasslands. Across these diverse, largely natural landscapes are large wildlife populations ranging from bear and bison, wolves and wolverines, bighorn sheep and mountain goats, moose and elk, deer and antelope. The region has large concentrations of public lands (also shown in the map by category), including national forest and national grasslands. And is interspersed with many of the continent's most spectacular national parks, including Yellowstone and Glacier in the U.S. and Banff and Jasper in Canada.

US / Canada Public Lands

- Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Reservations
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- BLM Wilderness, Wilderness Study, N. Man. & Other
- Department of Defense (DOD), C. F. B.
- Department of Energy (DOE)
- National Forest Service (NFS) / Alb For Mgmt Agreement Lands
- Forest Service, Other Lands / Public Lands
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- National Park (NPS) / National Parks
- NPS Wilderness, Wild. Study, Preserves, Rco. Areas / Provincial Parks

Each red dot in the U.S. represents 100 people mapped at the Census block level in 2010. In Canada, each red dot represents 400 people mapped at the Census subdivision level in 2011. Census subdivisions in Canada are larger in size than the U.S. Census blocks, resulting in a greater scattering of dots.
is how many nations, rich and poor, make their initial entree into the global economy and into global society — by first developing more ties and relations with their cross-border neighbors. It is easier to get to know your neighbor better, even strange as they can sometimes seem, before you more fully engage with others in more distant places, all the while globalizing nonetheless. And nationally-defined trading blocs and associations are only becoming more numerous and more highly developed with time.

As one of the world’s most highly developed nations, the United States has a well-established presence in international commerce all around the world. But it, too, recognized the need to develop closer relations with its neighbors and did so with both Canada and Mexico through passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA, entered into by all three nations in 1994. While NAFTA was not universally favored, the United States and Canada had the world’s largest trading relationship prior to NAFTA and this has only grown since its passage, retaining its position as the largest binational trade relationship in the world.

Montana shares a very long border with our friends in Canada. And, for many Montanans, their first venture into the world of international trade and global society comes from simply driving across the border to nearby communities in the neighboring provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan or selling to them from businesses here in Montana. This isn’t so easy for folks in Kansas or Nebraska. Although much of the wheat and corn they grow may end up in places like China, this international trade is very impersonal.

Along the U.S. southwest border where communities in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas share a common place in the world with neighboring communities in Mexico, trade and relations are often personal. People living on both sides of this border know each other. And this is similar to what exists along much of the U.S. border with Canada. Cross-border relations are imbedded in how these regions operate.

Regions are places with common characteristics and important inter-relationships and interdependencies. Transnational regions are ones where these features and relationships stretch across national boundaries. The Rocky Mountain West as a region and a place is not an artificial contrivance. It is not the product of academic thinking. It is real and something experienced and sensed for almost anyone — residents and visitors alike — traveling about the region.

Founding and Development of the O’Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West

The University of Montana and Missoula lie at nearly the center of this increasingly recognizable and important transnational region of North America. The O’Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West was founded in recognition of the importance of this larger region to the identity of the state of Montana and to the university itself. It was created by then-UM president George Dennison in 1991 and 1992 because he saw the need and the opportunity to project the university beyond its role as one of Montana’s flagship state universities to one of the larger region’s most important institutions of higher education and study.

The center was borne out of an early initiative aimed at enhancing Western regional history studies at the University of Montana. This was the purpose of an endowment gift provided to the university by the O’Neill family of northwest Montana and their gift of $600,000 to UM in the early 1990s. UM history professor William Farr served as the center’s founding director and the center initially operated as a small program within UM history.

Humanities programming at the center has placed a high priority on exploring the rich heritage of the region’s Indian peoples and how that history impinges on contemporary issues. A second concentration has focused on ways regional identity is defined in terms of literary and artistic understandings. These efforts have led the center to ever-widening circles of new contributors and audiences across the Rocky Mountain West, including a lecture exchange between the University of Montana and University of Calgary. In just the last several years, center humanities personnel have:

Published a book through the University of Oklahoma Press entitled Blackfoot Redemption — A Blood Indian’s Story of Murder, Confinement, and Imperfect Justice, 2013. In writing this book, William Farr was awarded the Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize for 2013 by the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska.


Cosponsorship with UM’s Department of History the annual Hammond Chair Lecture in Western and Environmental History.

Cohosted and participated in a major conference celebrating the anniversary of Glacier National Park, in association with the National Park Service and others.
Hosted the annual Native American Lecture at UM, including one in 2011 featuring the executive director of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation.

Continued work toward a book to be entitled: Going to Buffalo that explores the history of buffalo hunting by tribes in the region, pre- and post-Western settlement.

Planning and teaching of a UM course entitled: Regionalism in the Rocky Mountain West, mainly under the direction of Prof. Farr, with the course cross-listed in geography and history (tuition dollars from the course are shared by these departments).

Attention began to increasingly focus on cross-border regions of North America when the North American Free Trade Agreement was being deliberated. The University of Montana hosted a symposium in 1992 focused on “New Economic Regionalism in the Rocky Mountain West” with participants from both western Canada and the United States. A follow-on conference was then held the following year at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Because of the interest generated by these conferences, a decision was made to expand the vision for the Center for the Rocky Mountain West to include work on the region’s economy.

Thoughts for expanding the center also resulted from several attempts made by the university at grants for regional studies programs from the National Endowment for the Humanities. NEH had funded several new regional study centers at other universities, including the University of Nebraska and its Center for Great Plains Studies, started in the 1970s. In its third attempt UM secured an NEH challenge grant for the center totaling $520,000 in 1994.

The grant required NEH dollars to be matched 3-to-1 with endowment gifts by other donors. NEH reviewers also insisted that the center be more supported by the university, and a commitment was made to doing so including some state funding. The NEH match requirement was fully met in 1999 while former Missoula mayor and author Daniel Kemmis was center director and the
The center's total endowment grew to almost $4 million. The largest donation at that time was by well-known television and movie actor and UM graduate Carroll O'Connor and his wife and also UM grad, Nancy Fields O'Connor. The center now carries their name. More recently, the center received endowment gifts totaling almost $1 million from James and Chris Scott and the Scott-affiliated Foundation for Community Vitality. This allowed us to establish our first partially-endowed senior fellow position at the center — the Scott Senior Fellow in Regional Economy. We're now seeking to endow a second senior fellow position at the center — our senior fellow position in regional history and culture now held by UM History Professor Emeritus William Farr.

The center's Regional Economy program is an applied research and education effort focused on building a better understanding of the large forces shaping economic change in the region. The work also focuses on how this change is translating into the lives of people in the region's communities. A major achievement of this program was the design and development of a comprehensive database system for analyzing sub-regional and local area economies called READ or the Regional Economic Assessment Database. This work was supported by grants from the Ford and Hewlett Foundations, as well as the Scott family of Billings. The center has completed a wide range of studies and reports for federal and state agencies, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and area community organizations under this program.

Through this evolution, programming of the center gradually broadened to include focuses in regional history, regional economy, and regional policy. A decision was subsequently made to move away from a specific focus on regional policy as other programs at the University of Montana had already existing and similar policy study orientations. Center programming is continuing to evolve, grounded in a variety of academic disciplines and areas that reflect the most important subject matter for a region like the Rocky Mountain West. The center currently plans to develop a focus in regional energy studies, mainly because of the transformative nature of large-scale energy development in the region on both sides of the border.

**Center Development of Media Programs**

Because of its public education mission, the center also is gradually developing a variety of media programs that help in exploring the region's identity, current condition and key challenges for the future. The centerpiece of these media programs is *Mountain West News* — a web-based regional news service that summarizes key stories from around the region each day and each week of the year. This news service, now in its fourteenth year, is highly acknowledged for its quality and is supported by major foundations in the state and region. Journalist Shelle Nelson serves as its editor. Its early founding and development was the result of generous funding by the Hewlett Foundation. You can visit the website at: http://mountainwestnews.org/

The center also has a weekly radio program called *Mountain West Voices*. The program was conceived and developed by Clay Scott, an Emmy Award-winning journalist and humanist who essentially produces storytelling radio programs with profiles of people and places throughout the region. The program is broadcast weekly on Montana and Yellowstone Public Radio stations and also picked up periodically by other stations in the region. You can visit it online at: http://mountainwestvoices.org/. The center recently completed a pilot project to extend its *Mountain West News* program and website into a regional news program for private commercial radio stations throughout Montana. This pilot was funded by the Greater Montana Foundation. Three two-minute regional news segments were produced each day for airing by radio stations in three different cities in Montana. There are plans for expanding this program in the future.

*Mountain West News* is dedicated to compiling, producing, and communicating the daily storyline of the Rocky Mountain West, highlighting the region's most important stories — ones about events, happenings, and trends that shape the region's growth and change and that define the region's failings and successes. Because of the nature of the Rocky Mountain West, heavy emphasis is placed on stories about land and water, economy and environment, and people and places. In producing it, we attempt to identify news stories that come closest to telling real stories about what is happening in our region, stories about the place and its places, its people and the wonderful environment in which we live, the region's history and unique culture, and its future.

**The Center's Ongoing Mission and Purpose**

The O'Connor Center serves as an important and credible resource for people in the state and region in understanding the region's past, present, and future. In interpreting important cultural, economic, and social change, regional awareness and perspective matter. The Rocky Mountain West has a rich history and a culture unlike any other in North America. The larger region also is experiencing great change with fast-growing regional economies in both the United States and Canada. It is world-renowned for its outstanding natural environment which sustains a high quality of life.
for its residents and attracts millions of visitors.

The O'Connor Center's ongoing highly-acclaimed media programs convey the region's continuing storyline. The center is active in research and inquiry, conducting over $3 million in externally funded research and programming since the mid-1990s. It has steadily built a $4 million endowment and has plans for expanding this beyond $6 million over the next few years. Center personnel regularly teach and lecture at the university in many different departments, adding regional content to undergraduate and graduate course offerings of the university. And with its cross-border emphasis, the O'Connor Center contributes to the university's core goals in international and global education and leadership.

In this changing world, regional awareness matters. And this is why the O'Connor Center exists and will continue to develop and contribute in the future.

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Notes
2. When enacted in 1994 and signed by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, NAFTA created a tri-national, continentally-based trading bloc. It superceded the earlier Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, while expanding this arrangement to Mexico. NAFTA was not favored by all and one of its most prominent opponents was organized labor in the United States who feared it would reduce labor standards and lead to unfair trade in some areas. Some U.S. farm groups also opposed NAFTA, fearing increased competition by Canadian producers of some agricultural commodities.

LARRY SWANSON is a regional scientist, PhD economist, and director of the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana. He also serves as the center’s Scott Endowed Senior Fellow in Regional Economy. He has done hundreds of studies examining key aspects of growth and change in the region and its subregions. He also has extensively studied area economic prosperity and its link to environmental quality, population change dynamics, natural resource and environmental restoration, cross-border international trade in North America, and strategies and approaches to area economic improvement and community development. He has served on numerous boards including the founding board of Pascal International — an international organization dedicated to comparative studies in city and region learning and advancement based at the University of Glasgow.