“Kalispell”

If Ohio represents the Midwest, its pioneer farmers of the late 1700s and early 1800s, then Montana represents the West, land that Lewis and Clark explored in 1804, home to American Indian tribes, cowboys, Indian wars, the gold rush of the 1860s, lawmen, and desperados, and wild animals that used to exist in pre-1700 Ohio – the buffalo, elk, cougar, bear, and antelope. Yes, Montana is the West of today, much more so than any of the other western states. There’s no Dallas or Houston here, no Phoenix or Salt Lake City or Denver. Montana’s largest city is Billings – with a population of just over 110,000. That peanuts to a Texan. But it’s the real West – raw, sparsely populated, unspoiled, wild. People here are honest, dependable, and rugged. To survive 100 degree heat of the summer and 40 below zero in the winter demands toughness. Surviving a grizzly bear attack demands the same.

On a trip my college roommate and I took in the summer of 2017, retracing our steps from 1972, the summer before our last year in school – when we drove here and other parts west, sleeping on the ground in KOA camps in my tiny tent from boy scout days – we found the people of Montana not only exceptionally friendly but also enthusiastic. Maybe that’s because their summers are so beautiful, but maybe they’re that way in the winter as well.

Kalispell takes its name from a Salish Indian word meaning “flat land above the lake.” We spent a few days here, though in a hotel this time – for a visit to Glacier National Park and other small towns – and got a good feel for the town, founded – when the Great Northern Railway needed a stop – in 1891. That was the same year that troops from Fort Missoula removed the remaining Indians to the Flathead Reservation. In 1904, when the railroad diverted its line to Whitefish to the north, the town didn’t collapse as many others had when the railroad moved out. It kept going and today it survives as a town of 22,000 – with a downtown of restored buildings of the 1890s. Just north of Flathead Lake, just south of Glacier, and just west of prairie land, Kalispell enjoys the wonder of nature without the hassle of big city traffic.

It’s located in Flathead County, named after the Indian tribes that, until a visit from Lewis and Clark in 1805, were unknown. Ironically, the Flathead Indians did not have flat heads. They didn’t practice cranial modification, resulting in a flattened forehead as did the Chinook tribes further west. These were principally the Salish and Kootenai Indians who, after a series of “misunderstood” treaties, received a reservation of about 2,000 square miles, including most of the large Flathead Lake. Today the tribes receive revenue from operating the massive Kerr Dam, timber farming, and a resort and casino on the lake. Compared to other reservations, this one seems to be vibrant, though a far cry from 200 hundred years ago.