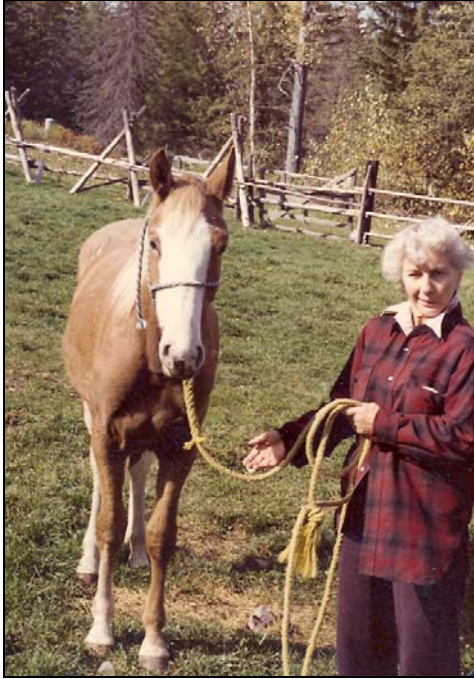


Gyda Monrad Newman

Interview by Suzanne Vernon.



When you see the sparkle in this woman's bright, blue eyes, you know that she loves life. Her Norwegian ancestors would be proud. Her life has been framed by challenges, and she has met them all with confidence and dignity. Many times over, the mountains of the Swan Valley have provided a place of refuge for her during hard times. The granite peaks, spruce green forests and turquoise lakes have nurtured her soul.

Gyda (pronounced "gee-da") Monrad was only a few weeks old when her parents carried her across the threshold of the family's homestead cabin in the Swan Valley. Fate had brought her into an alpine world which seemed, at that time, to be held wholly apart from the rest of twentieth century America.

Gyda's father, Hans Monrad, and his older brother, Nels, first saw the Swan Valley in the early 1900s.

"My uncle was doing surveying, so they lived in a tent, and went all through the valley," Gyda explained. Nels started the process of filing for a homestead claim here. "My uncle, I think, figured this was the most beautiful place on earth. Up Elk Creek."

Nels Monrad came from Norway to Western Montana as a surveyor during a rush of Northern Pacific and U.S. Department of Interior mapping in the Swan Valley, between 1902 and 1912. Nels' younger brother, Hans, came to Montana at about the same time, working as a bridge builder for the railroad.

However, tragedy changed their plans when their father died in Norway. Since Nels was the oldest son, he returned to his homeland to help his mother, and other siblings. In about 1913, Hans took over the homestead claim in the Swan Valley. In 1917, Hans moved his wife, Anna Aarrestad, their young son, Jens, and their infant daughter, Gyda, to the Monrad cabin in Section 10, Township 20, near Elk Creek at the foot of the Mission Mountains.

Then came the flu epidemic and more tragedy. "My mother died when I was about six months old," Gyda said. "There was a man at the Gordon Ranch that got the flu. He came down to our house and he gave my mother and my brother and me the flu. My mother died, and this man died. They wrapped them in canvas and put them out in the woodshed, until they could haul them out," she said. Gyda and Jens recovered, and Hans loaded the family into the sleigh, including Anna. They traveled to Missoula and bought train tickets to Glendive, Montana, where Anna would be buried close to her family.

Hans often talked about that train ride. "My dad told me there was some woman who was really complaining about this little kid that was bawling her eyes out all the time, and that was me. My dad told her, 'Well, her mother is in the baggage coach ahead up there.' I don't know whether that shut that woman up or not," Gyda explained. "[Dad] had it really tough," Gyda said.

And things got worse. Hans had purchased sixty cows, which were pastured

at the homestead. The people who had offered to take care of the cattle while Hans was gone didn't know that the animals would not eat snow and that they should have been watered every day. Thirst drove the cows to the nearest stream. "They all went over to Elk Creek and broke through the ice. They all drowned. So, my dad lost his wife, lost his cows, and the Norwegian bank that he had money in, he lost that, too. He was left with two squalling kids," she said. "I think it affected his mind a little bit."

Hans left Jens and Gyda with Anna's sister in Glendive when Gyda was still a toddler. Gyda never forgot that experience. "She was mean, mean to us kids," she said. A few years later, Hans moved the children to Missoula, where another aunt lived, a twin to the one in Glendive. "And this twin was just as mean as the other one. She used to lock us in the cellar all the time. There was a light there and my brother found out how to turn the light on. So, what did she do? She took the light bulb out so we didn't have any light. We were down in that dark cellar all the time," she said.

Gyda started first grade in Missoula, but it wasn't long before her father brought her, and Jens, back to the Swan Valley to the homestead cabin. The two-room log cabin had been built next to a little lake. However, an earthquake in the late 1910s apparently affected the water table in the area. The lake went dry, along with their well.

Packing water from Elk Creek became a memorable experience. "[Jens] had a wooden yoke and put two big buckets on it and I had two buckets I held in my hand," she said. They carried the buckets a half mile to the creek, then back to the cabin.

The cabin was typical of homesteads in the valley. The walls were made of eight-inch lodgepole logs, chinked with mud. A shake roof covered the dwelling. The cabin was furnished with a cookstove, heating stove, a round wooden table, chairs, a china closet and beds. "My mattress was a slough hay mattress. Every other year I'd get a new bunch of slough hay in there," she said. "By spring you'd be snuggled way down in that. It was really nice."

Some of the chores at the homestead included cutting firewood, and washing clothes. "I had to wash clothes on the washboard," she said. "In the summertime, when my brother and I were there, the only clothes I ever wore were bib overalls, and nothin' else!" she laughed.

When Gyda was growing up, she didn't realize that her family was poor. "If you don't know you're poor, you just don't know you're poor. And if you had a little trouble, like getting in wood, you didn't know . . . that's just the way it was. You just did what you did," she said, matter-of-factly.

Hans Monrad usually worked away from home, for the Forest Service. However, one summer, when Gyda was about seven and Jens almost nine, Hans worked close to the homestead. "He was on lookout at Elbow Lake, Lindbergh Lake. We lived up there on that lookout with him. The lookout tower was just a big tree they'd climb all the time," she explained. The Forest Service brought supplies to the camp with horses. The family ate and slept in tents. "We kept looking down at the water on Lindbergh Lake, wishing we could go down and go swimming!" Gyda laughed.

On his days off, Hans walked home, with the two children, along a Forest Service trail that led several miles north from the lookout to the family's homestead on Elk Creek.

Hans Monrad was an athlete. "He did a lot of running and walking," Gyda explained. The kids learned about hiking at an early age.

"We learned to get around in the woods. We didn't get lost," she said.

When the kids grew older, they walked to dances, even in the winter. "We just walked, all the time. In the wintertime we'd walk from up where our cabin is from there over to one of the schools, and dance all night long. At six o'clock in the morning, here we'd be going back through the snow to go home," Gyda said.

Since Hans was gone a lot, the siblings lived with other families in the valley during their grade school years.

"He farmed us out. I lived with Haasch's, Wilhelm's, Stroms, Maloneys," she said. "My brother and I were shoved here, there, all over the valley. You get kind of aware of people. You know when you're running out of your welcome. You can tell by the looks on their face. We'd have to move on," she said.

One of the first families that Gyda remembered staying with was the Hartwicks who lived about a mile south of Holland Lake. Bob Hartwick worked for the Forest Service as a fire lookout at Holland Ridge. Mary Hartwick was a writer, and she wrote several fictional short stories based on the lives of Swan Valley homesteaders, including stories about the Monrads. "Mrs. Hartwick wrote a story about my folks. A lot of it is fiction," Gyda said, shaking her head, warning readers to not believe everything in the stories.

Gyda lived in a tent one summer, with Hartwicks, on top of Holland Ridge, when Bob was watching for fires. This was before the Forest Service built a cabin up there.

"(It was) just a big rocky outcropping," she explained. "I lived there. I didn't especially take a good view of the valley or anything. It was just a long ways up, I know."

The kids walked all over the valley in the summer, and in the winter, they skied. "From November until April, you'd have to ski down to get the mail. My brother and I, we skied to school."

Hans Monrad skied with the children, too. One year at Christmas, the trio went to a party at the Elk Creek School. "My dad stuffed me in a pack sack and packed me through the woods over there. My dad skied and my brother stood on skis in front of my dad. That's the way the three of us went," she said. They enjoyed the Christmas program, but Gyda paid a price.

"I froze my feet. You'd ride with your legs cramped up like that. I froze 'em again one time. We didn't know exactly what to do. We knew they were frozen. Somebody had told [Dad] you'd put kerosene around them and wrap them up. So we did that. When we took the wraps off in the morning

it was one big blister. We spent the day sticking needles in there, letting the fluid out," she said.

Other home remedies consisted of somewhat safer combinations.

"If we had a cough or cold, my dad's remedy was a spoonful of whiskey with sugar in there. That was all," she said.

"He made homebrew, homemade whiskey, and wine. I don't like whiskey, either . . . He'd have to have my brother and me sample that whiskey . . . see if he was getting a good "do" on it."

Gyda and Jens knew better than to protest. "We didn't like it. You know, if you make a kid have to do something, they don't like it. Best thing probably ever happened to me," she laughed.

Hans Monrad gave his children a tremendous amount of freedom. Freedom to stay with whatever family would have them, and freedom to go hungry in between stays.

"We stayed with a family up here and they had two or three kids, and my brother and me. We ran out of groceries so they went to Missoula to get the groceries . . . They were gone for about ten days. We didn't have anything to eat except oatmeal and cocoa . . . We went up to Haasch's place, which was just a little ways away, and went in their garden and we stole all kinds of vegetables. Mr. Haasch came down. He knew we'd done it. He could see our tracks. He went back home and brought us down meat and bread, and everything. Actually, we were just starving to death," she explained.

Gyda remembers being hungry more than once. Sometimes, she and Jens could order groceries from a store in Missoula, "But we hardly ever ordered anything. We just lived off of what we could find," Gyda said. "We picked strawberries, huckleberries. We found out that the bottom end of a timothy stalk is pretty good eating. [And] the inner bark on these willows is good, too. So we ate that."

The timothy grew where the homesteaders had cleared land for hayfields. The willows were plentiful along streams and the river.

Swan Valley families ate a lot of deer and fish. In the winter, Rainy Lake was a good place to catch native trout. Hans and Jens, and several neighbors, camped at the lake. "They'd catch a lot of fish, and bring them home," she said. The fish were kept frozen, outdoors. They stored venison the same way.

"We were allowed two deer . . . Two shells, two deer. If you shot a deer and wounded it, you had to stay with it until you got it. You didn't leave a wounded deer running around. We had this big screened porch on the back [of the cabin]. We'd just hang the deer up whole. We just carved some meat off of it," she explained, continuing, "It was cold. It kept good."

Gyda didn't like to shoot deer. She liked animals. "We always had pet deer. I always put a red ribbon on it, but the hunters, they still shot them . . . Every year I'd have to have a new deer," she said. Gyda fed her deer black moss that hung from the branches of the lodgepole trees, and hotcakes. "They like hotcakes," she said.

When they weren't feeding hotcakes to the deer, Gyda and Jens sometimes visited Forest Service crews who worked in the Elk Creek area, showing up for meals. "We learned about what time they would eat their supper, so we'd go get our water at that time. We'd walk over there and stand around with our hands behind our backs, looking. They'd start opening up cans of fruit and cans of this and cans of that. It was really good. We were just regular moochers," she grinned. She learned to like Forest Service food. "I think that's where I tasted my first grapefruit," she commented, adding, "They had canned meat, canned fruit, canned butter . . . We'd go over there about every other day, have a really good lotta food. All the goodies we didn't have."

The summer after Gyda finished eighth grade, she and Jens once again faced hard times. Their father remarried, and moved out of the valley. The new stepmother took all the food out of the homestead cabin.

"I remember running out of food," Gyda lamented. So Gyda went to work, once again, for room and board. Another local

homesteader, Annie Hollopeter, needed help cutting trees and piling brush on her property south of the modern-day Forest Service air strip. "We cleared enough land so she could prove up on the place," Gyda said.

The trees at Hollopeter's were little, at the time, but they are large now. "They've grown up a lot. That's about seventy years ago," she explained, adding that hard work, like clearing trees, wasn't all that bad. "It was kind of good for a person. We didn't really have time to get into a lot of trouble. By the end of the day, we were tired," she said.

Annie Hollopeter rewarded Gyda with two dresses and \$16 cash for the summer's work. It was the first time Gyda had ever earned wages. Annie's generosity sparked a major decision.

"I ran away from home to go to high school," Gyda said. She attended school in Missoula, but wasn't able to finish. "My dad died of cancer. I quit high school to take care of him. Had to go to work. The first job I had was serving beer at the Park Hotel. I hate beer. My brother worked in the Forest Service then. He was in the South Fork on a lookout there. Between the two of us we had enough money to take care of my dad and pay for hospital bills," she explained.

In the late 1930s in Missoula, Gyda met Bob Newman. They were married in 1939. In Missoula they raised two children, and every chance she got, Gyda returned to the Swan Valley, to camp with the kids and work on the homestead property. In the 1970s, when Bob retired from his work as a conductor with the railroad, they purchased the Forrester homestead on Glacier Creek Road, and moved back to the Swan full-time.

Adulthood and marriage brought better times for Gyda, but Jens' life ended too early. He died while working on the Alaska Highway in 1943. "I have a picture somewhere of the Alaska Highway. It was just a mudhole. My brother wrote and he said he got stuck every day, going along the highway there. It was just a series of bogs. He left in about May . . . and he got killed in

September of that year. He wasn't up there very long. He said the mosquitoes were as big as airplanes."

The Newman family still owns and manages the original Monrad homestead. Gyda was first interviewed in 1995, when she was 78 years old. She consented to interviews again in 1999. Notes, tapes and transcripts are on file at the Swan Ecosystem Center. During the winter of 2002, Gyda suffered a stroke. She now resides in a Missoula hospital facility.

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