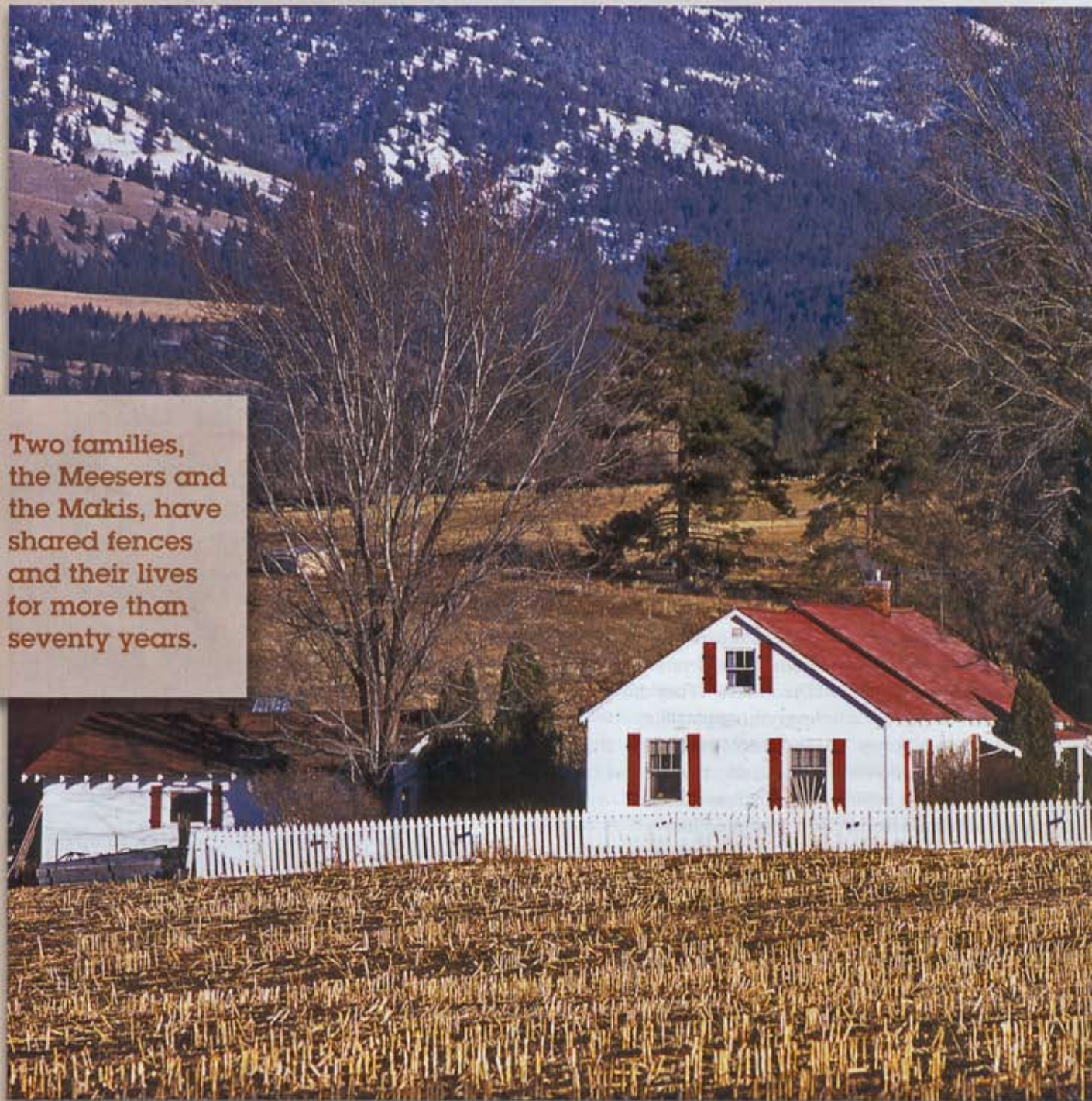


# Rooted in the Bitterroot

Two families, the Meesers and the Makis, have shared fences and their lives for more than seventy years.



BOB BREEDING PHOTO

**T**HERE ARE NO documents in the Ravalli County Courthouse recording the oldest neighbors in the Bitterroot Valley. However, some old-fashioned sleuthing probably would turn up a list of neighbors who trace their shared fences back decades. Despite explosive growth in the Bitterroot, there probably remain families that have looked across cow pastures to the same neighbor's farmhouse for more than a century.

The story of the Meesers and the Makis begins in the 1930s, recent history in a valley that includes the oldest permanent European settlement in Montana: the St. Mary's Mission, founded by Jesuit missionaries in 1841 in what is now Stevensville.

They may not be the oldest neighbors, but the story of the Meesers and the Makis remains a link to the Bitterroot's past. Generations of the two families grew up on small family farms in Hamilton Heights, east of Corvallis, sharing Maki Lane as a driveway. It's also a story that hints at a future in the Bitterroot Valley more



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEESER FAMILY

complex than the one suggested by the headlines. Despite growing by forty-four percent in the 1990s, from 25,000 to 36,000 residents (and to just under 40,000 by 2005), not every story in Ravalli County is about the loss of farmland—and a way of life—to the crush of suburban development.

### There at the beginning

Another reason to tell the story of the Meesers and the Makis is that we still have a witness to the beginning. Ruth Meeser moved into the Ditch House—bordered on one side by Maki Lane and the Big Ditch on the other—in 1933, at a time when

barely 10,000 people lived in the county. The young, once-widowed mother brought two children—Robert and Barbara—into her new marriage with George Meeser. The couple added two daughters,—Mary Lou and Margaret—to the family. As a wedding gift, Ruth's father, Otto Haverlandt, gave the couple sixty acres across the lane from the Ditch House. Otto had assembled the farm by buying ten-acre tracts for the price of back taxes.

Ruth, now 98-years-old, stayed on that land until 2005, leaving only after she broke her hip in a fall. She's recovered now, and getting along fine at the

Discovery Care Center in Hamilton. Her memories of life on the farm remain rich and vivid, and the spry, tiny woman recounts them with relish as she sits in her new home, one leg folded up under the other as she crafts braided rugs.

Maybe the families aren't the oldest neighbors in the Bitterroot, but Ruth thinks the Meesers and the Makis have established a milestone for longevity.

"We lived there a long time together and never had a squabble," Ruth says. "I think that's a record."

### Taking care of neighbors

The bad times were never far off. All that stood between the Meesers and the Depression were those sixty irrigated acres and what they could produce during the fleeting Montana growing season. They ran sheep, a dairy herd and a few beef cattle.

*ABOVE: Ruth and George Meeser as newlyweds in front of a stone house built by her father.*

*FACING PAGE: The Maki farmhouse sits east of Hamilton in the fast-growing Bitterroot Valley.*

They churned their own butter, raised chickens for eggs and the pot, and grew a large garden that filled the pantry with canned vegetables for the winter. Electricity didn't make it to the Meeser place until 1939, Ruth says, so freezing produce wasn't an option.

The families took care of themselves, but still relied on one another when the need arose. "Everybody was doing the best they could with what they had," Ruth says. "We weren't dependent on our neighbors, but they were there for you. If they needed help, we'd help them. If we needed help, they'd help us."

They were some of the lucky ones. During a time when few were rich, the families' adjoining farms provided most of the necessities. "Somehow we got along without money," Ruth says. "You can survive if you want to without money. Well, a little bit helps."

Hard times were often never farther than the front door. Cash poor but land rich, George and Ruth Meeser provided for themselves, their four children and for anyone who knocked.

"Really, truly, we never



*Above: Ruth Meeser celebrates her ninetieth birthday in 1998. Now ninety-eight, she still lives in the Bitterroot. The Makis grow hay to feed their cattle on a ranching operation that now covers about 1,000 acres.*

felt hard up," Ruth says. "But those people in town were hard up. The people all came to our house when they got hungry."

It wasn't unusual for George and Ruth to come home and find folks in the kitchen cooking themselves a meal. After all, Ruth says, "We never did lock the door."

The Meesers made do in the two-room Ditch House until 1943, when they traded a ton of hay for an adjoining half-acre and made plans to build a house. Unfortunately, lumber was in short supply due to World War II. Ruth says the housing authority told them they could only buy lumber to build something that would contribute to the war effort. A barn dedicated to food production, for instance, was allowed. A house wasn't. So the Meesers decided to build a "cow barn" instead.

Construction of the "cow barn" was a three-person effort. George sawed the lumber. Ruth's dad held the boards. Ruth hammered them into place. "I guess we built that house, the three of us," she says.

The resulting structure still stands on the half-acre. Ruth's grandson Doug Mason and his son, Colton, moved into the place last year. Though it never housed livestock, Ruth still sometimes refers to the old place as the "cow barn."

### Lambing season

The Meesers started raising sheep just after they were married in 1933, when a friend, Lloyd Rennaker, had to dispose of his flock. "He talked us into taking them on shares," Ruth says. "It was a partnership. We didn't have any money and he didn't have any place to

put his sheep."

The deal was sealed in the spring, during lambing season. They drove most of the sheep up the hill from the Bitter Root Stock Farm — once the 22,000-acre horse ranch of Copper King Marcus Daly, today an upscale development of million-dollar vacation homes — to the Meeser place. But the pregnant ewes weren't up for the journey so Ruth hauled them to the farm in the back seat of the family's '28 Chevy. Some held on and gave birth at their new home. Others were in too much of a hurry, popping lambs in the back seat.

"Those old ewes were slobbering down my neck the whole way," Ruth says.

### Handy with a sewing machine

Ruth's first husband, Aaron Lindsey, suffered a serious injury in an oil-field accident in California. He died in 1931, shortly after the family moved to the Bitterroot Valley to live with Ruth's father. More hard times were to come, as the Depression hit the valley especially hard. More than a few times Ruth—the proud owner of a pedal-powered sewing machine given to her by George's mother as

a wedding gift—stitched or sewed up a garment for someone in need.

In 1972, when Neil and Francie Maki were married, Francie walked up the aisle in a dress made by Ruth. Francie had planned to make her own wedding dress, but was beginning to have second thoughts. “Maybe that’s a bad idea,” Francie remembers thinking.

Ruth, with her legendary prowess at the controls of a sewing machine, offered to make the dress. One night, Francie had a bit of trouble on Maki Lane, getting stuck in the snow driving to the Meesers, where Ruth was busy with the wedding dress.

Francie finally made it to the Meesers, soaking wet. While George and Neil’s father, Earl, went to fetch her stuck car, Francie stripped off her wet clothes so they could dry over the wood stove. She spent the evening in George’s bathrobe. “That’s family,” Ruth laughs.

### Maki boys and the farm

John Maki and his wife Emily met while working for the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in Hamilton. John’s son, Earl, was seventeen when

his father purchased the Maki farm in 1926. Earl eventually took over the operation, and later passed it down to Neil, one of Earl and Helen Maki’s four sons.

Today, Neil and Francie live in a house originally built by John and Emily. Neil’s brother, Kevin, lives across Maki Lane in Earl and Helen’s old place.

Neil ran milk cows, grew grain and raised hogs. In 1968, he bought the Meeser farm, enlarging the Maki place to about 250 acres. Sons Andy and Alan Maki now run the operation, raising cattle and hay. In addition to the family farm, the brothers have leased four or five adjoining farms. They’re now working about 1,000 acres. They raise cattle for the commodities market and to be competitive, they’ve grown the operation beyond the family property. Both are graduates of Montana State University’s College of Agriculture.

One constant challenge for the brothers is that

they rely on leased land. They know that in Ravalli County, which grew at a faster rate than any other Montana county in the 1990s, the land could be subdivided for houses at any time. So the brothers have focused on vertical expansion with direct-to-consumer sales and cash hay. Horizontal expansion—increasing the size of their commodity-beef



production—might increase their profits. But it would also increase their exposure to the Bitterroot real estate market.

Subsistence farms made sense when food was more expensive and made up a bigger share of household expenses, Alan says. But today the Makis can’t gear their operation toward family subsistence, not when the well-stocked shelves of supermarkets are available twenty-four hours a day.

The brothers remain confident in their choice to come home and work the family farm. Selling out to buy a bigger spread in eastern Montana doesn’t interest them. The soils, water and climate in the

Bitterroot are some of the best in the Montana, they explain.

“We have a good thing here and we’re not taking it for granted,” Alan says.

And there’s something more at stake. This is the land where three preceding generations of Makis—not to mention their closest neighbors, the Meesers—worked and raised their families.

The brothers don’t talk about the family farm in terms of mere ownership. Their relationship to the farm represents something more: neighbors, family and a respect for those who worked the land before them. That land isn’t a commodity, it’s a gift.

“That’s the biggest part of the equation,” Alan says. “Here, we have roots.” **M**



**ROB BREEDING** is a Meeser by marriage. His wife, Karen, is Ruth Meeser’s granddaughter. After eight years living out of state, the Breeding family returned to Montana in 2006. They live in Kalispell.