
The View From My Window

For the last few days, I have been at my wife's family reunion in northwestern Montana, where her great-grandfather and great-grandmother came as homesteaders in the late 19th century. I had never been to Montana before, and at least this area is often stunningly beautiful: no wonder many Montanas have taken to calling their state the "Last, Best Place." Right now, I am looking over Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, which is really an extraordinary natural gem.

And oh yes, the Sky is Big. Really! Looking up and around, the atmosphere seems to carry on endlessly. But why?

I expected after an internet search to find some explanation of how perceptions of natural phenomenon might change based upon other objects in the field of vision. For example, the Moon Illusion causes the moon to appear larger when it is closer to the horizon than when it is high in the sky. But no. Here is the story I saw most often repeated:

> A relatively recent nickname, "Big Sky Country" originated with a 1962 promotion of the Montana State Highway Department. It is a reference to the unobstructed skyline in the state that seems to overwhelm the landscape at times. The name came from a book by Alfred Bertram Guthrie Jr., Big Sky, recalled by a Highway Department employee. Mr. Guthrie gave the Highway Department permission to use the name and Montana has been "Big Sky Country" ever since. The legend "Big Sky Country" appeared on Montana license plates from 1967 to 1975. This was shortened to "Big Sky" on license plates stamped from 1976 to 2000.

So it's all basically an advertising campaign? Well, not completely: obviously, the phrase occurred to Guthrie. *He* didn't create it for an ad campaign.

But I still don't know why we think of the Montana sky in this way. The notion of an "unobstructed skyline" can't be right: you don't think of Wyoming, or Kansas, or various Dakotas in the same way. Maybe it's the combination of no obstructions and mountain peaks: Montana is famous both for its mountains and its valleys, such as the Bitterroot, so maybe its the valleys. But other states have valleys.

Perhaps the sky just looks big here because we've all been told that it's Big, and we have been prompted effectively. That seems the best explanation for me. Montana gets to be the Big Sky State because they thought of it first (much like the Al Franken Decade). Sure, the phrase occurred to Guthrie, but if he had worked in Wyoming, then maybe Wyoming would be the Big Sky State.

Is that disappointing? Is it all about being prompted? Perhaps. But it's hardly complete: you could have the greatest ad campaign in the universe, and you couldn't turn Michigan (low clouds) or Rhode Island into Big Sky Country. Maybe it just means that sometimes we lack objective explanations for our feelings, that subjectivity and irrationality still exist — not completely, but enough to give us a sense or wonder and awe. I certainly felt that looking at a Montana sky. And that made me feel pretty good, even if someone had originally suggested it.

Just don't tell too many people about Flathead Lake. The locals will get ticked.