

SPECIAL FEATURE

It began with a solemn handshake in a log house in one of the loneliest parts of Montana. At that moment Ron Losee, fresh out of medical school, made a pact with a roomful of strangers that would change his life—and the lives of a tiny village to which he would one day bring worldwide attention.

No Place So Beautiful

BY KATIE McCABE

RICH PEALS OF LAUGHTER echoed through the tiny Madison Valley Hospital in Montana, resounding from one end of the hushed corridor to the other. From inside an office marked “R. E. Losee, M.D.” came the sound of two voices—one

deep and gravelly, reciting a litany of relatives—

“I took care of your papa ...”

—the other higher pitched and softer, answering:

“That’s Jack.”

“And his papa ...”

“That’s Jack S.”

“And your Aunt Jacqueline ...”

The list continued, and the voices blended, piling name upon name. On this snowy December morning just one week before Christmas, Ron Losee, the renowned bone doctor of Ennis, Mont., was huddled with his patient, counting with the

utmost concentration not her bones and joints but the number of her relatives.

The patient, Jackie Ann Northway Kirtley, had had a lot of orthopedic problems. She also had a lot of relatives, and Ron Losee knew them all. He couldn’t resist the

temptation to take a tally of them.

Side by side the two of them sat, the delicate blond woman and the burly, white-bearded doctor in plaid shirt and red suspenders. They went back a long way together, the 43-year-old patient and the 75-year-old doctor. He had known her since the night he delivered her, a preemie so tiny he could hold her in one hand.

Ron Losee had watched her grow up from a little girl who bravely overcame leg problems caused by cerebral palsy and learned to walk. When she married, he cried. When he learned of the birth of her daughter, Kelli Rae, he cried. And when Jackie's little Kelli Rae cried, he slipped jelly beans into her socks to comfort her.

"Dr. Lucy," Kelli Rae called him. But everybody else simply called him Doc.

"Okay now, let's see," Losee continued, "how many generations is it I've been taking care of your family? We got your little girl, Kelli, and we got you."

"Yup!"

"And then we got your mama, Kathryn. And her mama, Kelli's great-grandma. And then we got your great-aunt Zora. I took care of her mama, Ida."

"You did?"

His round face flushed with delight. "Yup. And that'd make her Kelli's great-great-great-aunt Ida. Five generations!" He let out a low whistle. "That makes your old friend here awful old!"

"No, it doesn't," Jackie Ann

insisted, chuckling. "You just started awfully young."

Losee leaned back in his wooden chair and let out a big laugh. "Now we're horsin' around too much," he said, more to himself than to Jackie Ann. "We gotta get serious." Through all his passages as a doctor—from general practitioner to orthopedic surgeon to surgical consultant—he had relished nothing so much as these grand entanglements in the lives of his patients. And he worried about each and every one.

"So tell me, sweetie," he asked, his face furrowed with concern, "what's bothering you?"

"I know I need foot surgery, but I probably won't have it done," she began. "Because you don't operate anymore. And you're the only one I trust."

Outside Losee's office, phones rang and nurses rustled by, but he heard none of it. With an intensity that blocked out every sound around him, Losee listened to his patient. He leaned forward, adjusted his wire-rimmed spectacles and prepared to bear down first on the medical problem before him, and then on the real problem, her fear.

"You're the only one I trust," she repeated.

How often, over the years, had he heard that from the people he took care of?

And yet it had not always been so. There was a time before patients like Jackie Ann were born when Losee was an outsider to this valley, and everything he knew about practicing medicine was in the textbooks he'd

hauled west with him from Yale. As for the business of "doctoring"—he had only a vague dream, a boy's dream, really, that being a doctor had something to do with curing people. And not much more than that.

Into the Valley

HE REMEMBERED IT as vividly as yesterday. The year was 1949, and it was a late-November afternoon. As twilight deepened over the Montana Rockies, Ron and his wife, Olive, peered ahead in the blowing snow, trying to imagine the spot where their friend Buddy Little was driving them. It was a dot on the map called Ennis, and it was their last shot at a dream. The Pontiac coupe struggled against the fierce crosswinds that whipped through the mountains. As the old car sputtered up the steep, icy road leading to Madison Valley, the wind gusted harder, then harder still, whistling and shrieking. Inside the car Ron and Olive were quiet. There was so much on the line.

Until a few weeks before, it had all seemed so simple. They had decided to move west to start living the dream they had shared since Ron's medical-school days. Ron and Olive promised each other they would head to the part of the country they both loved, to do their doctoring and nursing in a little town, and raise a family there. They already had their three-year-old daughter, Becky, and another baby was due in the spring.

The West had tugged at Ron from the time he'd spent his college summers on his father's Nevada

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ranch. Olive, too, fell in love with that part of the country when he brought her out to visit. To them it was an untamed land, a world where everything seemed possible. Ron had ached to build a life there.

So for four months they had criss-crossed huge expanses of the West, only to find that the region was full of old-time doctors who either jealously guarded their turf or wanted to impose their own rigid, restrictive rules on anyone who offered to practice with them.

By the time they reached Oregon, their money almost depleted, Ron admitted aloud what they both already knew: they were out of prospects. "We gotta go back East," he said.

Exhausted and defeated, they'd pointed their car homeward, heading back through Montana. They stopped in Helena to visit Buddy Little, a college friend with a medical practice there. During dinner Buddy surprised them with an announcement: he had talked to friends in a town called Ennis, an hour southwest of Bozeman. They were searching for a doctor and were so eager for medical help that they had begun building a doctor's office with living quarters attached.

"Let's go take a look!" Ron said immediately. Buddy called ahead to arrange an interview, and they all piled into the Pontiac for the drive.

And that was how Ron found himself driving with his friend and his family down this strange road, tire chains clanking on the pavement.

Slowly the coupe chugged up the

last stretch of an icy incline and rounded the curve at the top of the pass looming over the valley. In the seconds before they began their descent, the travelers leaned forward and looked down. Spread out before them in endless folds of white was a valley so vast and wild it made every other part of the West look tame.

In the entire expanse of blowing, billowing snow that lay between the Madison Range to the east and the Tobacco Root Mountains to the west, nothing moved. It was empty, untouched and, so far as they could tell from the mountaintop, absolutely unpeopled.

Before they knew it, the coupe flew down Norris Hill. In an instant, it seemed, they were swallowed up by the valley, at one with the vastness, speeding over mile after endless mile of snow-covered road toward—something. A “little cow town,” Buddy had called it when he first described it to them.

At last, from out of the gathering dusk, the bare studding of what would become the doctor’s quarters appeared. The road dipped, and there, plainer than plain, in all its roughness, lay the two whole blocks of Ennis, Mont., aglow with saloon lights.

Ron and Olive gazed silently at the raw little pioneer town and then up at the black-and-white mountain peaks towering over it all. Majestic and alluring, they dwarfed everything around them.

The darkness deepened as Buddy drove the family on, past the storefronts and bars and gas stations, and

on toward the moonlit mountains. Through the blackness they followed Jack Creek to where it emerged from the Madison Range. There, in a sod-roofed cabin, warming themselves around a smoky fire, the people of Ennis waited.

A Montana Contract

THE INSTANT Ron, Olive and Becky stepped into the little log house, they felt the chill and darkness of the November night dissolve. The valley’s medical committee had gathered there to greet them. “Come in, doctor. Sit by the fire! You and your family must be half-frozen,” host Lois Bry said. Benches scraped as the people at the far end of the room stood and crowded forward, hands outstretched, to introduce themselves.

“Up to the table, everyone,” Lois called. From great platters came sizzling slabs of elk meat—“just off the hoof,” one of the ranch hands bragged.

When Olive asked for a phone book to raise Becky to table height, the crowd around the table chuckled. “The Sears, Roebuck catalogue might do better,” said Lois Bry. Grinning, she held up the Ennis phone directory—all two pages of it.

Ron complimented the chef on the elk, and the men eagerly described the hunt for him. But he knew this was more than a casual dinner. It was the town’s chance to get a look at him.

At first glance it was the most offhanded “interview” of his entire academic career. The group seemed

to ask about everything but his medical background. Yet no admissions committee—not at Dartmouth, where he’d gone to college, not at Yale Medical School, not at McGill University, where he’d trained as a surgeon—had ever scrutinized him as thoroughly as the five men and three women who sat by Bill and Lois Brys’ fireplace.

Ron was well aware from the moment he took a seat that eight pairs of eyes were marking his every word and gesture. When the committee talked about the tough life of cattle ranching or the advantages of sod roofs, they watched him hard. When he asked his questions about the winter and local road conditions, they studied him even harder.

They had reason to be wary. A whole string of slick M.D.s had come before him. They rolled into Ennis and stayed long enough to fish and hunt, but left before the blizzards came.

And so with each question the townspeople asked, they watched. And Ron watched them right back. In some intuitive way he felt drawn to these rugged, no-nonsense Westerners, so desperate for a town doctor that they were building free living quarters. It was

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a more than generous offer and yet, in a place that was 80 miles from a major hospital, Ron felt the town could put the building to better use. Without some kind of emergency medical facility, he and Olive couldn’t properly do the job they wanted so much to do.

The fire had burned low when at last the moment came for dealmaking. Alice Orr, the town’s gray-haired matriarch, turned toward Ron from her great wooden chair in the corner. The buzz of small talk quieted. Mother of the architect who’d drawn up the doctor’s office blueprints, Alice was an ambassador’s widow and



one of the shrewdest, most respected ranchers in the valley. When she spoke, she spoke for everyone.

"If you choose to stay here," she offered, "we will build a place for you to live and an office at the edge of town." She took a drag on her cigarette, eyed Ron and slowly exhaled.

Ron looked directly into her sharp brown eyes. "No," he told her. "We don't want that. What we want is a hospital."

There was stunned silence. No one seemed to expect this answer. They knew the doctor was right. There at the table sat Claude Angle, who'd had to be flown to a hospital in Sheridan last winter for an emergency appendectomy. And there was power-plant manager Ralph Brownell, who had watched helplessly the previous March as a former employee died in agony from a blocked bowel because the valley was snowbound for three weeks.

For nearly a year, Ennis town meetings had raged with the question of whether a hospital or living quarters would be better "doctor bait." Even after the building was begun, the people were still deadlocked about what it should be. Now here was this handsome young New Yorker resolving the question for them.

"Are you serious?" someone finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes," Ron answered calmly.

"You *don't* want the house?"

"Oh, no," Ron said easily.

Under the smoky haze that hung low overhead, people shifted in their chairs as they revised their opinions

of this newcomer. For all the other would-be cowboy doctors, the promise of free living quarters hadn't been enough. Now here was this Easterner, as sincere as anyone they'd ever seen, telling them they could have it all: a doctor and a hospital.

"My family and I will find a place to live," Ron continued. "We expected to do that. With all the effort you folks are putting into that building up the road, why not make it something we really need?"

The lines in Alice Orr's leathery face crinkled into a smile. She looked around the room and called out: "All in favor of building a hospital, say 'Aye!'"

The chorus of approval was loud, enthusiastic and instantaneous.

In a matter of minutes, the remaining details fell into place. Until the new doctor found a home, the Brys offered lodging in their house. Ron and Olive accepted. The skeleton of studding that was to have been the doctor's living quarters was redesignated on the spot as a tiny hospital. The blueprint's kitchen was now a delivery room, and the living room became space for five patient beds.

Each of the men and women on the committee came forward and sealed the bargain, Montana-style, with a solemn handshake, and Ron Losee was the doctor of Ennis.

The Doctor Is In

WITHIN DAYS the phone wires all over southwestern Montana were buzzing with the news: there was a

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new physician in Madison Valley. From Pony, 30 miles north of Ennis, to West Yellowstone, 60 miles south, the word went out. Switchboard operators passed along almost daily updates: the doctor and his family were at the Bry ranch. He had begun making house calls. He fixed Grandma Evans's hernia and Nels Jacobsen's back, and was treating Lulu Grady's heart trouble.

With every move Ron made, the party lines crackled, until finally, the week before Christmas, the biggest bulletin of all went out: the doctor had found a permanent place in Ennis at Winifred Jeffers's log house on Main Street.

Within days, people were at the door.

"How on earth did they find us, Ron?" Olive wondered. "And so soon!"

"Damned if I know." He chuckled. "Where are we gonna put 'em all? Or examine 'em? All we've got is one Army cot."

His new patients didn't care that the cabin had no medical supplies, fancy instruments or lab equipment. They came anyway: mothers with fussing babies; ailing cowboys tracking in mud and manure; shepherders and miners and rodeo riders with broken bones.

One morning in the midst of it all, Alice Orr and some of her ranch hands roared up in a pickup truck. Seconds later she was shouting and directing her men to bring in an old cowhide sofa, a chair and a homemade desk. She surveyed the bedlam inside the cabin and grinned at Olive as she ushered a sneezing boy to the Army-cot "examining table." Then she flew out the door, calling over her shoulder, "Just something to get you two started!"

It did help—but barely. The problem was that they had more to think about than just the two of them. There was Becky and there was Christmas only days away. Between their meager income and even more meager savings, they could buy a small supply of lab chemicals and have a few dollars to spare. That extra money was just enough for a blood-pressure cuff, or the wicker doll carriage Olive had spotted in a Butte toy store for Becky.

The blood-pressure cuff waited. But as Ron and Olive discovered, patients didn't. Not for Christmas, or New Year's, or good weather, or sometimes even for daylight.

Each morning in the predawn darkness, amid sounds of donkeys braying and cows mooing outside their window, Ron and Olive would

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awaken to the low murmuring of a crowd of patients on the other side of their bedroom wall. Out Ron would stagger, yawning and stretching, to be greeted by the sight of whole families sitting on the living-room floor.

"Take your time, Doc. Have your breakfast!" they'd call good-naturedly, then return to the business of exchanging gossip and cattle prices and symptoms. Olive passed around coffee, their neighbor Anora Goetz slipped in the back door with doughnuts, and Ron boomed out his morning greetings to usher the first patient of the day into his rear chambers.

It seemed as if every ailing person in the valley found his way to "Doc and Olive's." Against the background noise of hammering and sawing at what was now the hospital site at the top of the hill, he listened, examined, prescribed and advised on everything from boils to broken bones.

The one group of patients Ron never saw was the expectant mothers. They still raced over Norris Hill between blizzards to have their babies in city hospitals. Even though they trusted him to treat their older children, they did not trust him with delivering their next one. They believed their personal obstetricians miles away were still "the best in the Northwest."

January rolled into February, with no letup in the number of patients. Every day from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. people filled their living room. "Sometimes I wonder whether they've been saving up their illnesses for years, just for us," Olive mused one day. More

than anything in the world, she had wanted to be right in the thick of things, not a bystander to her doctor-husband's career. This was a little thicker than she'd imagined.

Sometimes she'd wince when she'd hear little Becky out in the waiting room greeting more patients: "Do you need to see my papa right away, like that lady over there?" Or: "What sickness do you have?"

Then she'd hear the door open and close again, and Becky's interrogation would be drowned out by the shouts of yet another family descending on the place. Occasionally someone would wander into Olive's kitchen to ask for milk for a baby.

"Ennis is a small town," she said to her husband. "Where are they all coming from?"

Ron shook his head. *What would they say at Yale about this houseful of bedlam?* he wondered. Cast plaster smeared the kitchen floor, the smell of ether wafted through the bedroom, and Olive sterilized surgical instruments in her pressure cooker.

Even when Ron was away from the office, ailing townspeople but-tonholed him in the barbershop, the post office, the drugstore. They seemed to demand his undivided attention almost round the clock.

Many of his Yale classmates by now were ensconced in comfortable private practices. And here he was in the middle of the Wild West with patients camping out in his living room.

Yet he loved it—every bit of it: the country, the town, the make-do

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practice, the people. Most of all, the people. He couldn't think of a single reason he or any other sane physician would willingly immerse himself in this much madness—except for love. Without that, none of it made sense.

Gift to the World

HE WOULDN'T HAVE PUT IT in exactly those words on the long-ago day when he decided to become a doctor—but that was what it was all about. On a golden autumn afternoon in 1933, he'd stood on a grassy hill behind his grandparents' farmhouse in Upper Red Hook, N.Y., mulling over the challenge the town's new minister, Larry French, had repeatedly issued to the teen-agers: what are you going to give to the world, to pay back what you owe for the privilege of living?

It was a big question for a 13-year-old, and it set Ron searching for an answer. From the time he was a little boy, he had traveled with Granddad Losee on house calls to villages up and down the Hudson River. He lost himself in biographies of men of science. *What better way to give back to the world, he thought, than saving people's lives like the heroes in "Microbe Hunters"?*

From that point on, everything he did was about becoming a doctor. After high school came the tough premed courses at Dartmouth, then the grueling regimen at Yale Medical School, compressed into three years because of World War II. Even his trips west visiting his father during college summers became part of his larger dream.

And then there was Olive, the pretty, dark-haired, brown-eyed woman who came into his life during his second year at Yale in 1942. Just beginning her second year of nursing school, she was smart and determined and, Ron discovered, as gritty as she was beautiful.

Ever since she was a girl, she told him, she'd wanted to be a nurse someplace where people really needed her desperately—maybe in Appalachia, but certainly somewhere in the mountains. Suddenly everything in Ron's life began pointing in the same direction. Olive's "someplace in the mountains" became "somewhere west" for both of them once they visited his father's ranch as newlyweds.

There had been stopping points in Ron's pilgrimage between New Haven, Conn., and Ennis, Mont.: two surgical internships at the Denver General Hospital, a stateside Army tour after the war and a senior internship at McGill for more surgery. But there was never much doubt where it would all lead.

True, his work at Ennis was a lot wilder than the more gentlemanly country doctoring he'd seen on house calls with Granddad Losee, and even further removed from the heady world of the microbe hunters. But for him it answered the question Larry French had posed years before: what are you going to give back?

Every minute of every day, the men, women and children who came to him for help reminded him that the practice of medicine was as much about heart as it was about science. They were scared, they'd tell him

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across the card table that was his makeshift desk. They felt awful, they said, listing their symptoms, and they didn't understand why. At no time at Yale was he ever taught the response he found himself giving, as he reached for one of his well-worn textbooks: "I don't understand either. Here, let's look it up together."

They would lean over the books with him and listen as hard as any med student, their questions taxing his memory, his training and his expertise, sometimes challenging his assumptions and his pride.

And when he least expected it, they humbled him with their gratitude. One day brought 18-month-old Mike Judd, who bawled at his penicillin shot, rubbed his sore behind as Ron cradled him, and told him

through his tears, "Tank you." Another brought Kathy Gould and her fiancé, Jack Northway, who sat blushing and laughing as Ron and Olive teased them about their marriage blood tests, then surprised the doctor and his wife with a wedding invitation.

Always there were moments he dreaded. Every day, people who should have been in the hospital in Bozeman arrived at his door instead. What to do, he and Olive agonized, with the dehydrated woman who collapsed on their bed? Ron drove a nail into the bedroom wall and hung a liter bottle of saline from it; Olive started an I.V. drip. Then they kept their fingers crossed.

For emergency suction equipment Ron rigged cider jugs with corks and plastic tubing, courtesy of Angle

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Hardware, and kept his fingers crossed even harder.

It was stopgap medicine, but so long as it worked, the people of southwest Montana did not care. They kept coming back and brought their children, their relatives and their neighbors. And Ron, feeling every inch the doctor one minute and no doctor at all the next, jury-rigged his way from crisis to crisis, never quite sure how he'd make it until tomorrow.

Very Special Delivery

TOMORROW always brought another surprise, as it did one late-winter morning. The storm that blew into Ennis on the afternoon of March 10 had begun as an ordinary snowfall, but by midnight it had turned into the kind of blizzard that kept even the hardiest folk indoors. People bedded down their livestock, stoked their furnaces and bolted their shutters.

That's why nobody saw Gil Hansen and his pregnant wife, Jean, set out for Bozeman. No one knew that the frantic husband had tried to drive up icy Norris Hill so his wife could have her baby in a city hospital. No one saw him try to shovel his way through snowdrifts by himself before giving up and backing down the mile-long incline. And no one saw the Hansens return to a silent, dark Ennis, exhausted and terrified.

The voice that pierced the mid-morning bedlam belonged to Tana Rakeman, the druggist's wife. "Come quick, Doc," she called. "Jean Hansen is going to have her baby."

Olive phoned a neighbor to watch

Becky as Ron ducked into his office, grabbed his copy of *William's Obstetrics* and began speed-reading through it, inhaling whole chapters. His entire obstetric preparation consisted of six weeks' instruction at Yale and six weeks of unsupervised experience as an intern. He had carefully kept the book for the day when he would have to deliver his first baby alone.

Obstetrics, with its responsibility for two lives, was his greatest fear. It didn't help that the text offered a litany of horrors: what to do if the mother hemorrhaged, if the baby breeched, if the cord was wrapped around the neck.

As Ron read, his insides quaked. They kept on quaking as he raced up Main Street to the Hansens' and descended the narrow stairwell to their basement home, and heard Jean Hansen screaming.

Suddenly there was no time for his fear. The woman who lay on the bed was frightened and in pain, and he was responsible for her life and her baby's. He truly believed that when there was a job to be done, no doctor had the luxury of fear.

"It's going to be fine, Jean," he heard himself saying, with such confidence he barely recognized the voice as his own.

When Olive arrived minutes later with bandages and obstetric supplies, she held one of Jean's clenched fists gently in her hand. "There's nothing to worry about now," she reassured the frightened mother. "The doctor and I are here."

Softly she kept talking to Jean as Ron took over, arranging a makeshift

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delivery room. Ron's voice joined Olive's, quiet, calm, encouraging. "You're doing fine, Jean," he kept repeating, talking her through the waves of pain. "Just beautifully ..."

The doctor's wife, so pregnant herself she could barely bend over, never stopped moving as she helped her husband. Jean had no way of knowing that Olive Losee had been an obstetric nurse at Connecticut's Middlesex Memorial Hospital, but instinctively she sensed the cool assurance in her.

Now Ron's voice was authoritative and brisk, not betraying a hint of the tension he was feeling or his astonishment at what met his eye when he looked up at the basement window just above the head of the bed. There, squeezed into a tiny window well and peering, goggle-eyed, was a group of neighborhood children and their dogs.

Isn't anything in this damned town private? he thought. Then, out loud, to the mother, "Oh, wonderful, Jean. You're doing wonderfully. We're almost there. ..."

At that moment, all thought of

the audience overhead was wiped out by the sight of the baby entering the world—with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck.

Ron had seen newborns who were purplish-blue from lack of oxygen, but this infant's face was almost black. Quickly he cut the cord and carefully unwound it from the neck—once, twice, three times. Within seconds, the baby turned pink and let out a mighty wail.

"Congratulations!" Olive called out to Gil. "You have a beautiful little girl!"

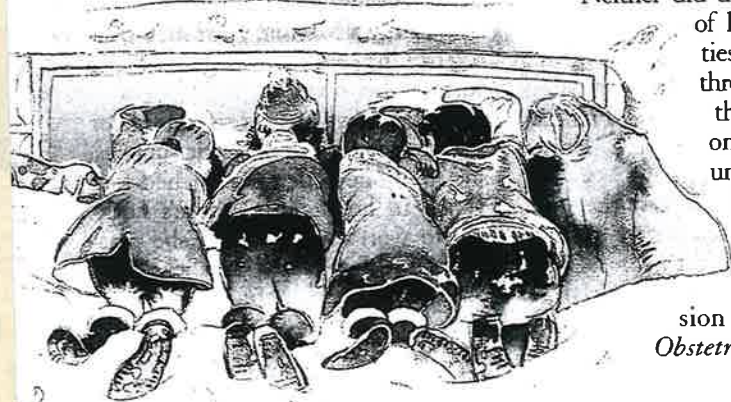
Ron, dripping sweat and beaming, lifted the tiny infant in the air. Jean Hansen looked at the exquisitely formed baby wriggling in Ron's big hands and breathed, "She's beautiful, just beautiful."

"We decided, if it was a girl, we'd name her Charlotte," Gil Hansen said.

"Charlotte it is," Ron grinned, queasy with the sudden rush of nerves and pent-up fear and just plain joy that he felt. *What would these parents think, he wondered, if they knew that this was the first baby I'd delivered in practice?*

Neither did they know the list of horrible possibilities that had raced through his mind in the eternal 30 seconds it took to unwrap the umbilical cord.

Thank God, he thought, for the precision of *William's Obstetrics*, for Olive's



coolness and for the position of the basement window, with the Hansens none the wiser for the invasion of their privacy. And thank God for beautiful Charlotte, the newest citizen of Ennis, pink and full of oxygen and wailing for her supper.

If there had been a public-address system in Ennis, it could not have broadcast the news of Ron's first delivery any faster than the kids who raced home to tell their parents. By week's end, everyone within miles was aware of the new doctor's most recent triumph.

It was only one baby, but it was enough to thaw the frosty reserve of the one segment of the population who'd held Ron at arm's length: the expectant mothers. Now, along with the regular onslaught of colds, viruses and fractures, he was greeted every few weeks by a smiling new mother-to-be.

"Leave a Light Burning"

GRADUALLY RON settled into the hectic routine of his one-doctor practice. Like his grandfather, he made house calls, only his took him out into much wilder and sometimes hostile territory. He soon discovered that the gulches and canyons he and Olive and Becky loved to explore on Sunday afternoons during the summer turned into treacherous labyrinths in the sooty blackness of Montana winter nights.

"Leave a light burning," he'd ask his patients, "so I can find you." On many a cloudy, moonless night he'd peer along his headlight beams for tall grass peeking through the snow,

trying to follow the road's edge as best he could. His eyes would search the darkness ahead for the telltale dot of lamplight that marked the home where a family waited.

He'd walk through the door and hear the relieved "Doc! Thank God you made it," throw off his coat and head for the bedroom—to treat a baby's fever, or hook up an oxygen tank for one of the old hard-rock miners, or wrestle a hernia back in place or, when all else failed, help bring a critically ill patient to the hospital.

There were other reasons he'd make his treks to the rough cabins and ranch houses. House calls that began as "quick checkups" on lonely old folks turned into evenings of storytelling over long meals. After one of his more terrifying obstetric vigils ended, the whole family gathered around and refused to let him go until he helped name the new arrival.

"You delivered him, Doc. You decide!" insisted Wilma and Vern McLean one night in July when Ron brought their son into the world. "Should we call him James or William?"

"How does Jimmy sound?" Ron suggested, feeling more like a godfather than a physician as the parents and the baby's grandmother nodded approval. The boy became James William.

There were times, too, when he was honored and touched by how much they trusted him. "We want you to do the surgery, Doc," Helen and Denny Wonder insisted after Ron diagnosed their daughter Doris's condition as acute appendicitis. "We'll drive her to the Sheridan hospital,

and you can operate on her there." Denny Wonder turned to a friend standing at Doris's bedside and told him, "This man is the greatest surgeon in the Northwest."

They tugged at his heart, these people, and so did their valley, which was becoming *his* valley too. On his long night drives home, Ron would sit up straight at the wheel and stare at the sight of the sun peeking over a local promontory called "the Beehive," as it set the whole sky ablaze. To the east, towering above the highway leading into town, loomed the delicate accordion-folded peak of Fan Mountain, rising up from the mist each morning to welcome him back home. On clear nights the moon, tinted pink in the sunset, cast an old-rose glow over the tips of the Tobacco Root Mountains, just as it had his first night in Ennis. He had never seen a place so beautiful.

Always overshadowing his triumphs, however, was the specter of failure and death. Just three weeks after he delivered Charlotte Hansen, he lost his first patient. Erick Maybee was injured horribly when a horse fell on top of him, driving the pommel of the saddle into his abdomen and crushing his liver. By the time Ron reached him, the young man was already dying. Ron tried everything he knew to save him, and when that failed, he rushed him to the hospital in Bozeman for liver surgery—only to watch him die outside the operating room.

Sometimes all he could do was pray, as he did on the frigid March night he had to use a tractor to get

through the mud to treat Ruth Skank. Feverish with a massive abdominal infection, Ruth drifted in and out of consciousness.

"Get her to Bozeman, quick!" he told her husband, Ermin. The roads were almost impassable, but they had no choice. Ruth made it to the hospital and survived—with only hours to spare.

Fear of not being able to do enough for people dogged Ron constantly. Each time the phone rang and he heard a frightened voice on the other end, the dread would rise in his chest.

He would rush out into the bitter cold, start his Jeep and roar into the blackness, his gut churning with terror that he might lose a patient. What if the morphine or penicillin he carried in his bag wasn't enough to fix the problem? What if he couldn't diagnose the ailment?

What kind of doctoring was this? Ron agonized. The frantic rush to beat blizzards, the transfusion emergencies, the gamble with people's lives—it was madness. Until he had a hospital, he felt he was practicing medicine with one hand tied behind his back.

The truth was that though Doris Wonder sailed through her appendectomy once they got her to the Sheridan hospital, she might well have died during the 30-mile trip. Before Jimmy's birth, Wilma McLean's blood pressure had been so high that she was at grave risk of convulsing during labor. She didn't, but she might have.

The town needed a hospital desperately. No one had worked harder than the people of Ennis for their five-bed hospital-to-be. Long before

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Ron's arrival, the medical committee had already been staging rodeos, auctions and talent shows to raise money.

Ron worked right along with them, once taking shamelessly to the stage as part of a talent-show fund-raiser. "I hate to make an ass of myself," he yelled to the crowd as he stomped out in his jeans and plaid shirt and cowboy boots. "But for the hospital, I'll do anything!" He played his concertina and belted out a medley of bawdy college drinking songs. They laughed, clapped and cheered, and—except for one or two of Ennis's senior matrons—roared hearty approval. But in spite of all their efforts, they were still short of funds. To make matters worse, long winter blizzards delayed hospital construction. There was nothing for Ron to do but wait.

Suddenly, in a way he could never have predicted, the waiting ended.

"How Can We Help?"

IT BEGAN AS ONE of those rare, relaxed evenings when the Losee household was humming with laughter and talk with out-of-town guests. From

the West had come an aunt and uncle who'd grubstaked Ron and Olive on the last leg of their cross-country trek; from the East, Hugh Long, the dean of Yale Medical School, and his wife, Hilda. All of them were fussing over four-month-old Jonathan Losee as they basked in the brilliant August sunset.

Beer and medical stories flowed as Ron and his former dean and mentor relaxed. The talk grew louder—so loud, in fact, that nobody heard

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the distant growl of a motorcycle engine, or the shattering of glass, or the screams from the far end of Main Street. Nobody at the Losees' had any idea that outside Angle Hardware, Win Angle had accidentally thrown her brother Bud's new motorcycle into gear, sending herself through a plate-glass storefront and Bud into a concrete wall. Until Ron's phone rang.

One minute he was pouring drinks for his guests, and the next he was bending over two young people in a sea of blood. Gashes covered Win's face, chest and arms. Although some of her wounds were deep, Ron saw that as long as he could stop the bleeding, she wouldn't be in danger.

Bud Angle seemed in much worse condition. He lay on the ground, motionless, comatose.

A chorus of voices was telling Ron what he already knew. "It's time to open the hospital, Doc." They had managed to finish the shell of the building and much of the interior. In fact, Ron and Olive were hoping to open it in a month or two after they had bought some medical supplies and equipment.

"They got plumbing there."

"Yeah, Doc, the water's running."

"Come on, Doc."

Ron looked up at the crowd and yelled, "This is it! The hospital is now OPEN!"

With Win loaded in the back of Ron's Jeep and the comatose Bud in another vehicle, everyone headed up Main Street, past the Losees' house, to the hospital. "Better come up," Ron called to Olive, who stood

watching. Handing baby Jonathan to Hilda Long, Olive was on her way.

A good fraction of Ennis's 400 citizens followed her up the little hill to the hospital. Some carried Bud to the single patient room, and others gently lay Win down on a cot in another room. Ron cleaned and sutured Win's cuts, then raced to help Bud.

In the tiny room where Bud Angle lay, his new bride, Janice, waited—white and mute in one corner. Claude Angle and his wife, Ella Mae, were in another. Papa Angle stood rigid and tight-lipped as Doc bent over his tall, handsome, athletic son.

There wasn't a sound as Ron gently lifted one eyelid, then another, shone his flashlight and watched for the pupils to contract. "It may be dangerous to move him," Ron had been warned when he'd phoned Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls to speak with Dr. Alex Johnson, Montana's only neurosurgeon. "Watch him, Ron," Dr. Johnson advised, "and wait." So, in the hushed little room, Ron sat with the family, and watched, and waited.

Outside in the hallway, pandemonium reigned. "How can we help?" the townspeople wanted to know.

"We need beds," Olive said.

"What about linens?"

"Anything!" Olive cried out. "Bring whatever you can. Sheets. Towels. Pillowcases. And pillows! We don't have a single pillow!"

Moments later, big, strapping Otis Crooker, proprietor of the Sportsman's Lodge across the road, came through the door. He was wheeling two rollaway beds. "Where to, Mrs. Doc?" he asked.



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She pointed him down the hallway.

Olive called to the women who stood in clusters around her, "We need food. And pots and pans. And something to cook on. A hot plate. Groceries. More sheets. Bring whatever you can spare!"

The word went out. Men unloaded tables and chairs from pickup trucks. Women jockeyed by one another with armloads of linens. Olive stood in the middle of the chaos, directing traffic.

In Bud's room the fading daylight at the curtainless window marked the passage of time. The Angle family restlessly shifted between Win's room and Bud's, waiting for news from Ron.

"Is it time to move him, Doc?"

For hours now, he'd been checking Bud's pupils. "Not yet," Ron answered. He paused, looking at shy, earnest Claude, and Janice, and Bud's married sister Roberta, who'd just arrived. "When it's time to take Bud to Great Falls, I'll go with you," he told them. "But I'm waiting until Dr. Johnson gives the go-ahead."

Throughout the night and all the next day, Ron kept his medical vigil. Hour by hour, Bud's condition worsened. His blood pressure had begun rising, signaling a dangerous increase of pressure inside his cranium. Unless that pressure was relieved by surgery, Ron knew Bud could suffer irreversible brain damage.

He realized there was no more delaying the long drive to Great Falls, 180 miles away. "This is it," Ron declared at ten o'clock that second night. He walked out into the dark

hall and dialed the phone. "Alex? Ron Losee in Ennis. We're on our way."

It was nearly midnight when Ron and the Angle family pulled out onto the highway leading north.

While Ron helped Dr. Alex Johnson save Bud Angle's life at Deaconess Hospital, the people he'd doctored and counseled and sat with and sung with on so many dark nights were beginning to perform a miracle of their own.

At Last, a Hospital

IT DIDN'T LOOK MUCH like a miracle to Ron when he came rolling back into Ennis the next day, bleary-eyed and exhausted from the Great Falls drive.

Wave after wave of volunteers came to help Olive in the next few days. People came from all over the valley, their cars and pickups and trailers loaded with whatever they could spare. Some came to clean. Others came to help nurse patients or to launder soiled linens. Otis Crooker toted in trays of steaming food from the Sportsman's Lodge. Maurice Hickey hauled up another couple of beds donated by the newly opened Parkway Motel on Main Street.

The hospital was overrun with patients. There was old Clarence Althouse, with a gash in his head, checking in, just as Win Angle was leaving; and there was Darwin Pasley, who'd fallen into an irrigation ditch and broken his arm. And right along with the arrival of newly hired nurse Madeline Flowers came the event

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Ron had prayed would wait until they had a delivery room.

"She would never have made it to Bozeman, Doc," sputtered Pete Jackson as he raced in from the town of Norris with his very frightened, very pregnant wife, Johnnie.

"She's damn lucky she made it here!" said Ron as he timed Johnnie's pains and tried to figure out where he was going to find an extra bed in the next three minutes. Or two. Or one.

"The sawhorses," he yelled to Madeline Flowers. "Get a couple of the workmen's sawhorses. And one of the doors that hasn't been hung." Just minutes after the assembly of the makeshift obstetric table, the Madison Valley Hospital's first baby arrived. Ward Jackson, premature but pink and feisty, was just small enough, Ron calculated, to fit into a drawer in the linen cupboard.

It was a scene to set any big-city doctor's teeth on edge: a preemie in a linen drawer, "incubated" with a mechanic's droplight, lulled by the sound of drilling and hammering and sawing.

The hallway around Ron teemed with carpenters, plasterers, plumbers and people from all over the valley. There was John Krauss, the Jacksons' neighbor, who offered to drive all the way to Helena to borrow an incubator for Ward; Gen Hickey, who, when she wasn't sitting with her sick brother-in-law, took turns preemie-watching with Madeline Flowers; and Dar Pasley's wife, who helped Ron tend her husband and other patients.

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Summer turned to fall, and more help kept coming—from local women who insisted they could scrub floors, cook and do laundry just as well for the hospital as they could at home, to men who stopped by after long working days in the fields to landscape the entrance before the ground froze.

Everyone in town was proud of the hospital and was ready to chip in. When Ron needed blood donors the night 13-year-old Steve Hubner was hit in the buttocks by a shotgun blast in a hunting accident, Olive knew where to go: the bars on Main Street.

She stood in the door of the Silver Dollar Saloon and shouted, "We need blood." Instantly the place emptied, and she was on to Oscar Clark's Bar, then Julie Erdie's. Long after Ron had the donors he needed, men were still coming in, rolling up their sleeves and standing in line, just in case.

In the weeks that followed there was no way to tell, amid the onslaught of babies and surgeries and heart attacks and accidents, just exactly when the little red-and-white frame building that looked like somebody's house truly became a hospital. But a case could probably be made that it was somewhere between the wild night of Bud and Win Angle's accident and the beginning of the bitter winter that ensued. That was when Olive and Madeline Flowers transformed the crowds of willing but untrained townspeople into an efficient cadre of volunteers.

"The Pink Ladies," Olive called them.

They included big, gentle Nan Taylor, granddaughter of a physician who'd doctored in Virginia City in the gold-rush days; Janet McAtee, who came all the way from Cameron, 11 miles away; and tiny, unflappable Frances Womack, a veteran valley medical assistant.

They proved themselves one terrible night in 1951 when Wilma and Vern McLean's house burned to

the ground. Madeline and the staff moved into action, calmly attending to three-year-old Verna McLean and her brother Jimmy and helping Ron treat the burns that covered Jimmy's legs and abdomen. Every day during the three weeks of the little boy's recovery, through all the painful changes of bandages, the team did the job with care and efficiency.

For all the nausea and sheer terror Ron experienced with every delivery, the nurses actually had him

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laughing on the blizzarding January nights when he delivered five babies in 48 hours. It was his worst nightmare: five mothers, all in the final stages of labor, all arriving at the hospital almost simultaneously, each one an obstetric challenge.

With a full team on duty, Ron was free to do the things only he could do. He could talk with the terrified mother-to-be who understood nothing about what was happening. He could console Bea Clark as she wept in pain and frustration during her long, difficult labor. He could tell jokes to calm Ginny Judd and Peg Todd.

When it came time for the quintuple delivery and he needed five extra pairs of hands, he had them. They didn't make it easy, his team of nurses

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and volunteers who never stopped coming. But they made it possible.

His Folks

ON NIGHTS LIKE THAT, Ron could almost forget how alone he'd felt in the "old days." The awful experience of Bud and Win Angle's accident was a distant nightmare, eclipsed by the birth of Bud's first child. Steve Hubner, now a strapping 15-year-old, had become an Ennis legend. Town folklore had it that he regularly spat BBs across the kitchen, purging himself of the shotgun pellets from the wound in his backside.

"Yeah, sure, I spit a few," Steve assured skeptics.

Doris Wonder, minus the appendix Ron had removed in the Ruby Valley Hospital, occasionally pinch-hit for

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her mother as Becky and Jon Losee's baby-sitter. Although his legs bore scars from his burns, Jimmy McLean was unstoppable as he pedaled his bike through the streets. And every so often Charlotte Hansen, child of the blizzard, toddled across Ron and Olive's back yard with their two-year-old Jonathan.

Now Ron had a whole new crop of mothers to worry about—mothers who were his neighbors, his friends, part of his hospital crew, church members and his Sunday dinner guests. They weren't just "obstetric patients," and so he worried all the more.

Tiny, blond Kathy Northway wasn't one of the expectant mothers Ron worried about—at first. All he felt he had to do when he told her she was

pregnant was to congratulate her, and remind her that he'd "known her when."

"When" wasn't all that long ago, really. Less than two years had passed since Kathy Gould and Jack Northway, who'd sat blushing in the log cabin while Olive did their blood tests, were married in a little white church in nearby Jeffers.

Ron remembered every detail. On that warm Easter Sunday he and Olive and Becky were still the new folks in town. Becky wore her brand-new Easter hat and swung her Easter basket, while Ron, camera in hand, stood in front of the church after the ceremony. On his signal everyone grinned his best grin, and he snapped the shutter.

Ron could still see Kathy, the tini-

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est of women, looking up at her tall, handsome groom, Jack, as they stood outside Holy Trinity Church. Next to them, in his best suit, was Jack S., father of the clan, with his wife, Nora.

There was no forgetting when Jack S. died, less than a year after his son's marriage. They had all known it was coming for months—Ron and the family and the oncologist who'd diagnosed Jack's cancer. As Jack grew sicker and sicker, Ron visited more and more often. Although there was nothing he could do medically, he wanted to be there for the big, kind man who'd been among the first to welcome him and his family to Ennis.

The night Jack S. died, Ron had kept the family company for hours, able to offer nothing but a little morphine to ease Jack's final suffering. When an emergency finally called him away to operate on a young boy with appendicitis, it was one of the hardest exits he ever had to make.

It had always been so with death. It was the one thing he could leave to no one else. "Gotta stand my watch on this," he'd tell Olive on those nights when he set out for some remote cabin in the mountains to sit with a dying patient until the very end.

But now, happy news. There was a baby coming to the Northway family. "My best guess is early July," Ron had told Kathy. Winter edged into spring. The May day when he and Madeline Flowers had driven back home from Helena with a truck full of fresh supplies for the hospital, Kathy was the last patient on his mind.

Then Jack Northway called, yelling

into the phone that his wife's pains had started. She was two months early.

A Tiny Beauty

RON PRAYED that the baby would come quickly, and she did. For that much he was thankful, because no infant as tiny as that little girl could have survived a prolonged delivery.

"What are you gonna call her?" he asked Jack and Kathy.

"We thought if it was a girl, we'd name her Jackie Ann," her father said.

"Another Jackie?" Ron exploded into laughter. "You've got so damn many Jacks and Jackies I don't know how you keep 'em all straight. What about calling her Kathy after her mama? She's the one who did all the work."

When Kathy Northway shook her head firmly, Ron knew this was one family that wasn't going to take his advice about naming their child.

Jackie was one of the most beautiful babies Ron had ever seen. She was so small she barely tipped the scale at three pounds and looked lost in the incubator. Instead of wailing when she was hungry, she mewed.

The baby's stomach couldn't hold down more than a few tablespoons of formula. Ron knew that in spite of all the vigilance of the staff, Jackie was probably not going to pull through unless he found a way to put weight on her—fast.

"If only I knew more," he fretted to Olive. He gathered advice from his pediatric colleagues. And alone in his office at night, Ron read and reread the "preemie" chapters in his

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"Baby Bible," *Holt's Diseases of Infancy and Childhood*, until he was satisfied he knew the best and safest course.

Just beneath Jackie's skin, in the hollows under her tiny shoulder blades, Ron inserted feeding tubes to deliver a solution of nutrients that could be absorbed into the bloodstream. "I know those little water wings look awful funny," he told the baby's anxious mother about the bumps that were forming around the feeding tubes, "but until she can hold down formula, this'll keep her going. We just have to be patient." Still, he kept wondering, *is there anything else?*

He spent every spare moment sitting by her. There seemed to be no end to the waiting, the worrying: about the swelling around the feeding tubes and about the lingering effects of her extreme prematurity.

Somehow Jackie Ann began edging—ever so slowly—toward a normal birth weight. Gradually she became a baby who could take a bottle, a baby who, finally, could be lifted from the incubator and held. When June turned into July and she weighed in at seven pounds, Ron knew that it was time for her to go home.

The day she was to leave the hospital, Ron lifted Jackie Ann up and

held her tight against his chest, just as he had the night she was born, put his big forehead up against her little one and breathed in the perfume of a well-scrubbed baby.

One tiny foot peeked out of the blankets, and he bent over to look at it. Everything about her had been miniature, but nothing smaller than the pin dot of a toenail on her baby toe. "Look at that!" he marveled. "It's a dot. A dot! I've never seen a toenail so little." Then he inhaled her perfume one more time and handed her to her mother.

A Fair Exchange

"IT'S STILL A DOT!" Ron boomed at Jackie Ann, peering at her toes. "It never did grow!"

He chuckled, caught between two moments, one 43 years ago, the other right now.

During those intervening years Ron Losee the baby doctor had become Ron Losee the renowned bone doctor. One winter night in 1957 he knew the time had come to leave Ennis and go to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal to study with Canada's master surgeons and pursue his great medical love, orthopedics.

There was another day, two years after he had left Montana, when he knew it was time to return. No one



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but Olive understood why he had to go back to Ennis.

"Ron, go to a bigger place," urged his mentors at the Royal Victoria

gled at him. For years he walked or ran behind his knee patients, trying to analyze why their knees gave way. It was frustrating because, like a car that refuses to misbehave in the shop, the knees always seemed to function perfectly when Ron examined them.

Then one unforgettable June morning in 1969 when he was manipulating a patient's knee, he felt it go out. Even before the patient yelled, "That's it!" Ron realized he was on the verge of solving a problem that had confounded the orthopedic world for years.

Again and again he was able to repeat the procedure that caused on-the-spot dislocation. He X-rayed the joint. Finally he solved the mystery of how the knee's injured front ligament let the joint slip, or unlock. He conceived a method for reconstructing from the knee's own tissue a supportive sling that

stabilized the joint without stiffening it. The "Losee Operation" they called it when Ron published his findings with two Yale colleagues in 1978.

Almost overnight, the little hospital began teeming with patients from the outside: athletes from Montana State in Bozeman, rodeo riders and ranchers. Finally, surgeons from all over the United States and even France found their way to Ennis.

For Ron, fame changed everything. And nothing. The people of Ennis continued to fill his office, bringing



Ron Losee with (left to right) Vurnie Kaye Barnett, Angie Lee Knowles and Holly Ann Clark. "I delivered them all!"

Hospital. But he didn't doubt for a second he had to go back to Madison Valley. He returned, eventually found someone to help in his practice and had time to ponder the orthopedic problems that fascinated him.

Back in the shadow of his mountains, he listened to patients who came to him in pain just as he always had—only now with a specialist's ear. He began to question the conventional orthopedic solutions to joint problems. More than anything else, the problem of the "trick," or unstable, knee nig-

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to him, along with their orthopedic problems, fears and questions about their health and their need to talk things out just as they always had. Just as Jackie Ann had this day.

"Oh, sweetie," he said, "it's only your toes this time? I thought it was something big. That's awful little." She grinned, and so did he.

He was remembering the many medical crises in Jackie's childhood, years of horrific surgery that corrected problems in her legs caused by cerebral palsy, but left her with a terror of any operation.

She was remembering how scared she felt about the foot operation Ron then had to perform on her—twice—after he returned to Ennis as a bone expert; and how, as she was wheeled into the operating room, he'd gently held her hand; and how, when she came to, he was there, standing over her, comforting her again.

Although Ron was explaining to Jackie Ann the procedure for the new surgery she needed, and that he'd be referring her to a protégé in Billings, they both knew the real reason she was there: for the soothing presence of the "Doc" of her childhood.

Even before she asked, Ron knew what Jackie Ann was going to say. "So you'll be there for the operation?"

Ron answered in his booming voice, "Absolutely." Then, quietly, he told Jackie he'd work out when he and Olive could both go down to Billings and be with her.

As he and Jackie sat talking and planning, outside his little hospital the morning mist rose and unveiled the snowcapped peaks of the Madison Range, stark against the winter sky. It was a quiet, windless December day in 1994, years since Ron had felt the pull of those mountains as he drove into Ennis for the first time, and since he had declared to a roomful of wary strangers, "We need a hospital."

None of them—neither he nor the committee—had imagined, as they shook hands in the firelight, how much more they would build together.

Now he and Jackie Ann sealed their pact, not with a handshake, but with a bear hug. Even so, the deal was pretty much the same one he had made over four decades before in a sod-roofed cabin: the people trusted him with their lives, and he gave them his.

Ron Losee has published a book about his life in rural Montana entitled "Doc: Then and Now With a Montana Physician" (Lyons & Burford).

