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# Transcript for Episode 10: Prairie Populism: Being Raised a Progressive in Montana Farm & Ranch Country - Governor Brian Schweitzer

Brian Schweitzer

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**[Prairie Populism-Being Raised a Progressive in MT Farm & Ranch Country]**

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**[Music]**

00:00:03

**Narrator:** From the beginning of Montana's distinctive yet troubled history, the Treasure State was dominated both economically and politically by powerful outside interests who shipped in capital and bought control of the State.

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Historians tell us that as the Anaconda Company and its friends ran Montana, economic and political power flowed out into the hands of distant capitalists and corporations.

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Policy was determined in far off New York City and control of the press was rigid. Anaconda's corporate dominance in Montana's political affairs was unique in American history. For its first 75 years, Montana was a one-company State. But then big winds of change roared across the Treasure State; between 1965 and 1980 Montanans ripped off their copper collar, transforming Montana from a corporate colony into a free modern State.

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The people finally controlled their own destiny. The pitched battle between the people and the established power structure was not easily won but fired In a Crucible of Change a new Montana was born. Join Evan Barrett and real history makers of the time as they shine the light on this remarkable era.

00:01:19

**Evan Barrett:** Welcome back to *In the Crucible of Change*. You know as we talk about the development of progressive politics in the period we've been looking into, it's very clear that the strength of the progressive changes in Montana were not something that could be just done because of urban progressive(ism) or liberalism.

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The progressive strength in Montana at the time involved a significant progressivity in rural Montana, a rural populism of sorts that was very strong across all of Montana. And so today's segment we call *Prairie Populism* and it's about being raised progressive in rural Montana and it features--we have featured a special guest today, which is Governor Brian Schweitzer.

00:02:07

Governor Schweitzer was Governor from 2005 to 2013 but he's got a very intriguing and interesting history as a rural progressive. And by--and in the interest of full disclosure, I worked all eight years of your Administration in Helena with you. It was some of the best--

00:02:25

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Well you actually worked about six out of the eight.

00:02:28

**Evan Barrett:** Well--

00:02:28

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Not a full eight.

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**Evan Barrett:** And it was some of the best times I had I got to say but this is a discussion and a conversation, not an interview and so I'm going to enjoy you sharing with the viewers some of what I've heard already and I'm sure I'll hear some new things about what it is like to be--and was like to be raised in rural Montana and raised as a progressive because you certainly were. You were born in 1955 and so you were 10 years old at the beginning of this period of change that we're talking about and you were 25 years old at the end of that period of change.

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So you saw it firsthand in a lot of very interesting and dramatic ways, but your family first came to rural Montana as a result of the Homestead Act; tell us about that.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** So I'm half Irish and I'm having German/Russian, call it Ukrainian. And we'll start on the Irish side. My--my grandpa, my Grandpa Mike [McKiernan] came from County Cork in Ireland and my grandmother Hannah [Friel] who married him after she arrived here and homesteaded by herself, she came from Donegal, County Donegal. And Mike--Grandpa Mike, Grandpa Mike was Irish through and through and a little bit full of the blarney but he always had a story to tell.

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And he was an organizer. Now he homesteaded outside of Boxelder and it didn't matter which Democrat ran for office, he was with them; he was for them. And at one point somebody said--they called him Irish Mike; they said to Irish Mike, Mike how long have you been a Democrat? He said well I've been a Democrat since before I left Ireland. Well how could you be a Democrat in Ireland? He said well the way it worked in Ireland is if the Republicans were in control in the United States then all we had to eat was potatoes and point. And they'd say potatoes and point? What's point Mike?

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Well he said when the Republicans were in the White House in the United States we ate potatoes and we pointed at the fish on the wall because that's all we had to eat.

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And so on my mother's side, they were Democrats through and through well before they even got to the United States. On my father's side it's a little bit different.

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These are people, these German/Russians who were--actually they came from Alsace, which is a German speaking part of France in about 1800. And they were invited by Catherine who was of German stock who had married a czar. And they had these huge areas in Ukraine where they had fertile land and--but not very productive farmers. And so, they offered essentially a Homestead Act to these German speaking, German cultural people to move from about 1790 to about 1820 to Ukraine.

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They--they lived in sort of separatist communities. They continued to practice Catholicism because they were Catholics and that was a right that was given to them by the czar. They continued to speak German; they spoke German in their schools. So it was a separate culture within Ukraine.

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But by--by 1900 the czar started taking some of their rights away and by 1905, 1906 the Bolsheviks had actually started to rise up in the country. And there was discussion about first you got to kill the landowners if we're going to get the land in the hands of the government.

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And so these--the Ukrainians, these German/Russians they left from 1905 to about 1920 in droves and they came interesting enough to North and South Dakota and Montana to Alberta and Saskatchewan and Manitoba in huge numbers. Even today if you see a German name in the--in Montana and they are old farming stock, they're likely to be German/Russians and not Germans just like my family who arrived.

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They arrived having been chased out of Ukraine essentially by Bolsheviks. When they arrived they were very conservative. Now they participated in a government program where they were given 320 acres of land if they could keep it, the Homestead Act. They lived far away from any organized communities; they--they were some 30 miles from the nearest little town up on the Highline. And they wanted nothing to do with government. In fact everything that came from the governments when they arrived seemed to be back. When they arrived in Montana they spoke German as a first language and then World War I broke out and as you may recall the **[Laughs]**--the--

00:07:02

**Evan Barrett:** You could go to prison for speaking German maybe huh?

00:07:04

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** --reading German, speaking German, people would spit on them, and they explained to people. We are not German. Our family came from France 100 years ago; we came from Ukraine. I've never been to Germany they would tell people. But it didn't matter because they spoke a kind of German as a first language.

00:07:21

They wanted nothing to do with government because what the government brought them in--in Ukraine, Russia, was mostly bad. And so they were very conservative. But you see many people don't recognize that the Great Depression started in Montana, not in 1929; after World War I the commodity prices collapsed. They--in fact, my dad told me about riding with his grandpa in the mid-'20s from their farm north of Gilford, 30 miles into Havre. And they had a load of pigs in the back of their truck--pickup. And they sold the pigs and the pigs didn't bring as much as the cost of the gasoline to get there, which wasn't very dang much.

00:08:04

Worse yet, in the '20s we had six years where it effectively didn't rain in Montana. And so most of those homesteaders and a lot of people don't know this--the Homesteading Act in Montana really kicked in at about 1905 to about 1915. Ninety-percent of those homesteaders were gone by 1930; they just up and left. Where did they go? Most of them went back to wherever they came from. They went back to live with families. They moved back to the coast. They went back to the Midwest. But my family, they had no place to go because the ones who stayed behind in Ukraine they were either executed or sent to Gulags. So they had to stay.

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Now this is--this is interesting, and my father would tell me this story and he told me this story from the time I was a small boy. I met some of my cousins the other day and I asked them if their father told them the same story. And they said absolutely just like that.

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It was the 1932 election and my grandpa was driving whatever old pickup they had and it was two of the older brothers that sat in the front seat with him. Both of them had been born in Ukraine. My father sat in the backseat with a couple of his sisters and his mother and they were driving to the polling place. I think it was probably Gilford, 30 miles away on a dirt road. And when they left the farm, grandpa and grandma because grandma was going to vote the way grandpa voted, they were both going to vote for the Republican because they always did because they listened to that message. You don't want any dang government. You don't want any regulation. The further government is away from you the safer you'll be. That was the message.

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But on the way to town, his oldest boy said dad; we can't go back to Ukraine. We're broke. We have nothing. And at least FDR, this guy Roosevelt says there is going to be a--there is going to be an opportunity in rural America. We're going to give you a chance. This will be your chance. You'll have to work for it but you will get a chance. And in the time that it took to drive, I don't know--45 minutes to get to the polling place, they convinced their parents to vote for Roosevelt.

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**Evan Barrett:** And in a way that's kind of a classic story where the younger generation sometimes persuades the older generation to be more flexible or to look at change differently. I know we went through that in our family. Ours was built around the Vietnam War. But it was the same type of thing. So they--so they--they convinced them and they went there and voted for FDR, huh?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** They voted for FDR.

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**Evan Barrett:** And didn't regret it?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Didn't regret it, and in fact, even those who didn't vote for FDR and there were some counties in Montana that didn't--Sweet Grass County you may remember has never voted for a Democrat of any kind--but anyway, even those who didn't vote for FDR they became supporters of FDR because they had never had any attention in rural Montana before.

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FDR put some--some price floors under the price of these commodities so that even if world events drove the price of wheat and--and to such a low level there would be a floor. The government would step in and buy it at a floor price, put it in storage, and then ultimately sell it back out into the market, which it didn't give them a

breakeven, but it minimized the losses that you had on the bad years. And furthermore, this is another thing that he did. This--we had this here because that was the electricity that was on the farms of--

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**Evan Barrett:** Before FDR?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** --before FDR. You had one of those out in front of the homestead. You had batteries in the basement. It was a 12-volt system. You generated your own electricity and you had storage in the basement. But so, many of the pieces of equipment were made as an AC and not a DC system, an alternating current; so these farmers paid more money for all of the appliances that they bought. Many of the appliances, the welders for example, they never made them so that they operated as well on DC. And so, part of what FDR said is that we can't have islands of poverty in an ocean of prosperity.

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So he said--he said to rural America, we're going to deliver electricity to you even if these for-profit utilities would not.

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**Evan Barrett:** Which they wouldn't.

00:12:09

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** They would not. They would not deliver it to even small towns in Montana let alone to farmers that were at the end of roads. And so, these for-profit utilities they were all about just getting to the places where they could route a lot of people together and they could--

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**Evan Barrett:** Make it easy--



00:12:24

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** --make a fair bit of money.

00:12:24

**Evan Barrett:** Yeah; yeah.

00:12:25

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** So he created the rural electrification and these REAs that were created all over America had farmers who sat on their Boards and they were able to get low-interest loans to build these electrical wires that went to every place in America so that we didn't have islands of poverty in an ocean of prosperity. And it was during those times, during the '30s and the '40s and into the '50s that rural Montana were overwhelmingly Democrats because those farms were saved by a change in Administrations. And people didn't forget that; they knew that it was Roosevelt and his ideas about rural America and people working together, communities pulling together, and in fact, during the early days of the Depression when people didn't have--they didn't have anything to eat, they didn't have soup lines. When you're 30 miles on a dirt road from the nearest town you didn't have a soup line. All you had is the food that you could produce if you could produce it, but it didn't rain for six years, or you had an opportunity with the WPA. And the WPA allowed some of these farmers during the winter to go out and work and maybe work on Fort Peck Dam or work on these public works programs and it gave full-time jobs to some of their kids which they weren't trained for any jobs in the city. They didn't want to move to Los Angeles or New York and stand in a soup line.

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So these public-work programs that built going to the Sun Highway and built the Fort Peck Dam and other things in Montana--gave rural families an income during some of the toughest times in the history of this country.

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**Evan Barrett:** And I think--I think it would be fair to say that roads were something that came through FDR. I mean better roads--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Sure.

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**Evan Barrett:** Farm to market roads.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Absolutely.

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**Evan Barrett:** Water.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah.

00:14:13

**Evan Barrett:** Water development. I mean the Fort Peck is the biggest example of it, but--and Boulder Dam, those huge examples but basically water development was a hallmark of the new deal.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** There was no infrastructure. You know the government had an idea that in order for us to prosper in these open areas of America is we will let people homestead it and we'll get those people out on the land and they'll produce crops and if they produce crops then they'll have some revenue. They'll be able to put it on the railroad and--and you know the Great Northern Railroad that was built to deliver that wheat from the Dakotas and Montana to Seattle and Portland would profit as well.

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The problem was is that we didn't have the infrastructure to deliver that wheat from your farm 30 miles from the rail head on a dirt road--could only be done on the days that it wasn't raining or snowing because those

roads were tough to get over. And so, this--Roosevelt understood that if you're going to have a country that is connected that you have to have an infrastructure that can exist and made those investments. And he employed those people in rural America that had no place else to turn.

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**Evan Barrett:** You know when we--we had an earlier segment featuring Judge Gordon Bennett who was raised in Scobey.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yes; he was.

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**Evan Barrett:** And Gordon talked about the desperation of people in the '20s. And you had to understand that desperation to understand their sudden receptivity to the--what Roosevelt was about. And that changed the nature of politics in rural Montana for generations. I mean you--you were essentially--when you were raised--by that time it had been around for a while, but is this what you heard over the kitchen table?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** All the time. All the time; you know my--my parents, both of my parents had just eighth grade educations. They--they grew up out on the farms and--and in order to go to high school their family would have been wealthy--had to have been wealthy enough to have a second house for the kids to live in town and they didn't. Neither one of them had that kind of wealth. But they were clever people, both of them; both my mother and father, they were bright, articulate people with eighth grade educations. And they were very politically active. They really cared.

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And they stayed engaged. They were involved in politics. They had opinions. Now a progressive then and a Democrat now may not completely look like your Democrat on the East and West Coast. Another story my dad told me is one of the first things the czar did as they started taking rights away from those folks in Ukraine, they had

these embedded rights when they homesteaded there that they could continue to practice Catholicism, that they would not have their children called to the Draft, that they could continue to speak German in the schools, but one-by-one they started taking those away. But my dad would tell me this; he said the first thing they took from us was our guns. We had a right to bear arms when we came to Ukraine. And that was embedded in the rights that we were given. And then the czar sent some people around and just wanted to register the guns so that we would have people available for a militia. And then after they registered the guns they came back and they took them.

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And so these populists, these progressives of Montana are also supporters of gun rights. My father was and I am. You know I'm not planning a revolution and I'm not thinking that the government is going to come and take our guns, but you know I live at the end of a dirt road and every once in a while I shoot a gopher--miss more than I hit, but Montanans of every stripe enjoy having guns. We're a little bit more rural.

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Also populist progressives in Montana, while we knew that we were a community as a whole and that there was a time for government to help, there needed to be safety nets for people with disabilities. There needed to be safety nets for people who have commodities that drop below certain prices. There needs to be public schools. There needs to be a transportation system that works for everybody.

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They also are a little suspicious of too much government and in a way, progressives in Montana, they understand that there needs to be enough government but there's still a suspicion about too much government which is a little different than some progressives and populists might be on the East and West Coast.

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**Evan Barrett:** Uh-hm; now if you think of it in terms of populism which is generally a reaction against bigness and power--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Corporations or businesses.

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**Evan Barrett:** --so there's a--almost a balancing act of well which big is better or which big is worse at any given time? Is big banks, big business--more fearful than bigger government under Roosevelt? And I think the balance there was clearly tilted in favor of the--the governmental side.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** In my family the--the least trusted, the least trusted were the cattle buyers and the grain companies because they were both robbing from farmers. Farmers worked 365 days a year. Farmers had at-risk their capital 365 days a year. And on one day during one hour a grain company could steal half or more of your profits, by a few nickels up or a few nickels down. And the cattle buyers were exactly the same.

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And of course that--that drove my father to be a--an integral part of the National Farm Organization that was all about collective bargaining. It's simply said; look, you're a farmer on 600 acres or 6,000 acres. You're not Cargill. You will never be General Mills. You're never going to be one of the meat cartels. So no matter how big you think you are, you are peanuts, but I'll tell you what. If 20 of us and then 50 of us and if 100 of us and then 1,000 of us can stand together and say you know what; we're going to put together a block of hard red spring wheat and it's not going to be just the 50,000 bushels that we produced on our farm, it's going to be 50,000 bushels times 10 and then 100 and times 1,000 so we put together a big block and we say to Cargill you'd like to buy some grain in Montana? We know where you can buy a big block of grain. You buy it from us, but you're going to have to pay 3-cents over market.

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And they were able to move the market by collective bargaining in much the same way as labor does. Oh, I'm telling you what; that was no popular with the grain companies. It was not popular with the meat companies and it certainly wasn't popular with the Nixon Administration. Well my father was the National Director of the NFO. They--they declared the NFO an enemy of the State. Why? Because they were collectively bargaining for farmers in rural America.

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**Evan Barrett:** You know I--it's consistent of course with their attitude toward collective bargaining anyway and of course collective bargaining and labor and the role of labor and workers, you know organized, unionized workers to try to influence things for the good of society and the good of themselves is a hallmark of this progressive period. In fact, one of the things that came out in an earlier discussion with our good friend Jim Murry was that the benefits of collective bargaining didn't just accrue to those that were involved in the organizing. But they accrued to the broader society because they were for education for everyone--not just for workers' kids. They were for those types of things that helped build up society for them and then everyone else could benefit, too.

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Your dad must have seen that as a prospect in terms of organizing like that. But wasn't he--don't I remember a conversation where he had the distinct honor of being on Richard Nixon's enemies list?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** All of the National Directors of the NFO were on Nixon's enemies list because you may recall that there was--after the Vietnam War there was a large inflationary period and Nixon actually coined a phrase called *whip inflation now*, and he had all of these plans, grandiose of controlling the economy in the United States and somehow tangling with inflation. And meanwhile you had this agricultural group that were suggesting that we have to have a breakeven price out here. We're not--we're not breaking even. We need a nickel here, a dime there, a penny here.

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And oh, so--and they wouldn't buckle under. They wouldn't buckle under. They were--they got a wag of the finger by the Department of Justice. They didn't buckle under. And of course Nixon, he--he took government retribution to new levels and as we found out later, his enemies had their income tax audited annually. And--and my father who was a small farmer in Central Montana--small farmer in Central Montana, and he had six kids. And I'm telling you; he lived in a small house and we weren't big farmers and I'm pretty sure most years he didn't breakeven. That's just the way it works in farming no matter how big you are.

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And he had his income tax audited three consecutive years. Now the--the--

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**Evan Barrett:** What are the odds of that?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah; what are the odds of that? I mean you--yeah my god you'd be better off to--to be that Donald Trump is going to be the next President of the United States than to be audited three times in a row.

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**Evan Barrett:** Being a small Montana farmer; yeah.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** He didn't understand why and it cost him a little money and he had to go to an accountant. You know he had done his own books but he'd go to an accountant because how are you going--how are you going to explain things to the IRS when you don't even speak their language? And he never understood why or how until later it came out about who was on Nixon's enemies list. And so this little farmer from Central Montana who was a--a son of immigrants from Ukraine became an enemy of Nixon because he tried to get 3-cents more for wheat for farmers in Montana.

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**Evan Barrett:** Now when he became cognizant of that--this sounds a little bit almost crazy to assume this would happen but I guess we've learned the lessons about wiretapping and about monitoring of phone calls in a big way now but in those days without warrant it happened under Nixon quite a bit, did he have a sense of that? And I seem to remember he used to have to use phone booths and stuff.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah; our--our phone was tapped. We knew it but of course we were on a party line, too, so--

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**Evan Barrett:** Well--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** The neighbors all knew before *[Laughs]*--

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**Evan Barrett:** Yeah.

00:25:31

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** --Washington, DC knew but yeah. He knew that his phone was tapped. They knew that all the National Directors' phones were tapped. And remember; he was a farmer by day and an organizer by night. And so you didn't get farmers in until dark and so in the summer that meant 10 o'clock and in the winter that meant 6 o'clock. But the point is--is when farmers started to get--he'd get on the phone and he'd say all right. We're putting together a block of this much grain. How much grain have you got? How much would you like to sell now? And so he was doing all of that.

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But when it became apparent to them that their--their phones had been tapped, I can still remember we'd be doing homework around the kitchen table. There were six kids you know and my dad would be--we didn't have a very big house. I'm sorry; he didn't--when--we had what was called the study but that was just where the phone was and that was next to the kitchen table. And my dad would get to a point and he would say I'll tell you what; I'll--I'll call you back. And then he'd get in his pickup and he'd drive down to Rainsford and that was about seven miles away and there was a little pay phone there. And he'd go and he'd call them back on the pay phone and then they would finish discussing how many bushels would be put in this block for this next go-around of selling some grain.

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And you know I watched that at my kitchen table. And so I come by my distrust of our Federal government peering into our bedrooms, into our phones, looking at our--where we've been on the internet, I come by it honestly. I watched it at my kitchen table where a man who--he was committed just to help other people. *[Laughs]* He wasn't



making any money doing this. In fact, he lost money because there were times where we should have been putting the crop in but he was out helping some other people get their crops sold. And for that he was having his phone tapped. This was a good government out of control and I'm not so sure sometimes we're not back there today.

00:27:19

**Evan Barrett:** Well governmental intrusion is--I think one time you said--someone said would you define the Democrat? I remember when the reporter you ran into in Butte said tell us about Montana Democrats and you said--my recollection was you said that basically whether it be Democrat or Republican or Independent or anything else that the primary thing about Montanans was a streak of libertarianism.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah; and--

00:27:48

**Evan Barrett:** And it found its way in the progressive side here didn't it?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** It does. And it does and that's why for example when I was Governor and we had the new Patriot Act that was passed by the Bush Administration which simply said that we're going to suspend a bunch of your civil liberties and we're now going to be able to spy on American citizens and we're going to be able to do a lot more things to watch what you're doing as American citizens, it was Democrats and Republicans alike in the Legislature joined with me and we wrote a letter to the President and Congress and asked them to rescind the Patriot Act. We said it is not an American value for neighbors to spy on neighbors. That's who we are in Montana.

00:28:29

And--and trust me; I grew up with that around our kitchen table, going back to when my grandparents arrived here and they were spit on and then we passed the Sedition Act in Montana and made it against the law to possess books that were written in German. A good part of the Catholic Churches in Montana at that time were these German/Russians, and many of them didn't speak English and so the--the ceremonies, the mass was said in

German. That became against the law. And then World War II again, you know if you--if you had a German surname there was a question about who you are and who you were loyal to. And then again, the Patriot Act--it looked like the Sedition Act all over again in Montana.

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**Evan Barrett:** And--and something right in the middle of it was McCarthyism.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Well [*Laughs*]--and right in the middle of it. Oh yeah; look. It--it ebbs and flows in this country. It ebbs and flows. And when the--when the power brokers in Washington, DC, when they feel threatened by the heartland well they decide maybe we need to spy on somebody. It happened again and again and again and it's happening now.

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**Evan Barrett:** Uh-hm; now you were 12 years old in--NFO was formed in 1955 which happened to be the year you were born.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** I didn't start it.

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**Evan Barrett:** You didn't--? [*Laughs*]

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** No; I got--I got an early start in politics but not that early.

00:29:54

**Evan Barrett:** Now when you were 12 was when this milk dumping started occurring and that was where the great notoriety of the NFO occurred. So was it at that point that your dad started getting involved do you remember?

00:30:06

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Not really. Probably closer to the late '60s because the NFO had really got its roots in the Midwest with the--with the milk, the dumping of the milk was where it got a lot of news, but the point is these dairy farmers were collectively bargaining. And it was a little easier frankly with milk because it's a perishable product. You know with wheat, you don't--

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**Evan Barrett:** You dump it and there it is. *[Laughs]*

00:30:32

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah; not only that with wheat it's in a bin and the grain companies know they're going to get you. Now if not today they're going to get you tomorrow and if not tomorrow it's going to be the week after because they would just stay in the grain until--in the bin until they could get it.

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So it was a little tougher to organize around grain and cattle than it was around milk. But by the late '60s my father started organizing in Montana with the NFO, the National Farm Organization.

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**Evan Barrett:** Uh-hm; now when he was doing that and that period, one of the primary things that happened in Montana that was evidence that Prairie Populism equaled sometimes Democratic votes, quite often Democratic votes was the Special Election in 1969 when Batten who was the Congressman from the Eastern District got appointed by Richard Nixon to be a Federal Judge. And it opened up the seat and we had an attorney from Billings running against a veterinarian from Forsythe, one John Melcher. And low and behold, a little bit of that Prairie Populism rising up aided and abetted quite a bit by Organized Labor and get out to vote and voter registration suddenly we had a rural Montanan in the US Congress in the form of John Melcher.

00:31:53

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Well John Melcher hit a sweet spot in--in our family because remember my parents had eighth grade educations. And where I lived in rural Judith Basin County I mean Judith Basin County is the size of Delaware and there's 2,000 people that live there. Today Geysler, Stanford, and Denton, three towns, 45 miles apart combine to make one six-man football team. So the--the person that I met from the earliest age who was an educated person, wasn't part of our family, he was our vet, he was the guy, you know we were in the cattle business and we had the vet out there quite a bit and this was a person that I looked up to. This--this was a man who was educated--college educated and then some and to have a veterinarian who is going to represent us in Washington, DC meant a lot in my family.

00:32:49

**Evan Barrett:** Yeah.

00:32:49

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** We had a big John Melcher sign; my parents were so proud. They lived on a paved road between Great Falls and Lewistown. And anybody who was running for office as a Democrat they knew they could count on Adam and Kathleen, Adam and Kay Schweitzer would put up the biggest doggone sign and if they needed one that was 100-feet long and 20-feet high they'd be out there with a tractor putting it up for them.

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**Evan Barrett:** So John Melcher, the veterinarian, a funny story; you know I did by the way work with--for John for seven years including working on his reelection in 1982 and heading up his Field Offices, so it was really a unique experience for--I'm not a farm person. I learned an awful lot about farm issues in those seven years.

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But I got the biggest kick when a columnist in the *Washington Post* wrote a column about John and in it whether it by type or whatever referred to him as the only vegetarian in Congress. **[Laughs]**

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** *[Laughs]* Well boy did they have that wrong.

00:33:57

**Evan Barrett:** Well of course he called a press conference and he ate a steak in front of the press conference. They wondered what--what are--the cameras are all set up. He sat down and he said okay now and they brought in a steak. And he started eating the steak and they said, what is this about? He said I'm showing for the people of Montana that I'm not a vegetarian. *[Laughs]* And I'm a veterinarian. And but you know people liked John Melcher, Eastern Montana veterinarian; you're another example of rural Montana progressivity that resonated with urban dwellers and carried the game in rural Montana as well. From a pure practical politics sense being a progressive from rural Montana would be helpful to you getting--in getting elected wouldn't it?

00:34:53

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** I think so. You know I think that there's a notion in Montana and maybe elsewhere-- is if you are a small businessperson, in particular if you're a farmer or a rancher you know how to squeeze a copper penny into a wire amount of *[inaudible]*. You make do with what you've got. You don't spend more money than you have. You make sure the money is in the bank before you try to cash the check.

00:35:20

And so whether you're a Democrat or a Republican in Montana, you believe in good fiscal management. And I think that they've recognized that those of us who came from the land, we had to make do with what we had, not what we wished we had. And some of these fancy high-fliers who have been in the corporate world who are able to raise money on Wall Street on a--on a whim and a load of BS and then they can grow a company until it just evaporates into thin air, that's not the kind of businesses that we want in Montana. And that's not the way people want to run a government in Montana. They believe you have to have sound fiscal management.

00:36:04

And I think when you look at people who come from rural Montana you see that in those folks and that has been part of what has been a success of a Prairie Populist in Montana. Conservatives in Montana say well I may not agree with everything that--that fellow has got to say or that gal has got to say but I know that they're pretty good

with money. And that's--that's something that's important about managing a government. You have to be good with money. It's not your money. It's the people's money.

00:36:35

**Evan Barrett:** Uh-hm; uh-hm. Now in the period of change we're talking about which is 1965 to '80, the biggest political issue of that period when your dad was doing what he was doing was the sales tax. The sales tax clearly was a Republican corporate concept that Democrats and Labor and rural Montana progressives opposed. And it became something that actually became dominant and when it was finally put to a vote of the people after an extended debate and huge election, 70-percent of the people said they were against it. That set the Democratic Party up and progressives up over and above the Republican Party which was identified with it. How--do you remember that issue floating at the time? You would have been in high school.

00:37:35

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Right; so a high schooler doesn't understand taxes. I mean you're thinking about a lot of other things. Of course that was--that was the era of the Vietnam War too. But let me say this about sales tax. This is what we knew and understood. We understood that because we talked about things around the kitchen table.

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We understood that we paid a property tax on our ranch and we understood that--that property tax wasn't that large of a--the expenditures that we had on the farm. You know agricultural land in Montana--many people don't know this but you don't pay a very large tax on it. If you have \$1,000,000 worth of a ranch you'll pay a couple hundred dollars in property taxes. If you had a \$1,000,000 house you're paying \$10,000 in taxes, just--just to give you an idea of how this works.

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But we also understood this because we talked around the table. If there's a sales tax that is--if the sales tax is 2-percent that's 2-percent less than we have to put on that kitchen table. That 100-percent of what you had as a disposable income was at risk with a sales tax because those of us at the lower end of that bell shaped curve in terms of income, we didn't pay a lot of income tax because there was no income. We paid a little property tax. But what

they were proposing to do was to get those of us who didn't make very much to pay more taxes so that those who made a lot could pay less. We understood that. And we understood what that meant on our kitchen table.

00:39:04

**Evan Barrett:** Now when you think of those taxes and also in this period about the time you were graduated from high school, although I think you attended high school out of state didn't you?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yes.

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**Evan Barrett:** Your folks sent you off to a--

00:39:19

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** A monastery.

00:39:21

**Evan Barrett:** Oh okay.

00:39:22

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Went to a Benedictine Monastery for high school.

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**Evan Barrett:** Are you Benedictine?

00:39:25

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Benedictine.

00:39:26

**Evan Barrett:** Yeah; when I went to St. John's it was Benedict--there were Benedictines up there, too. The--but at that time we had this New Constitution being created. And most of when it came to supporting getting the New Constitution, 70-percent of the people said let's have a Convention. And then when it was all over, a conservative rural group, the Farm Bureau became the principal opponent although they appeared to be really an ally of the Anaconda Company which didn't want the change because it was a change from protection--a Constitution that protected them to a Constitution that empowered people.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Anaconda didn't want any change because they controlled the entire State and more. Why would you want to change that?

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**Evan Barrett:** There's a crazy idea. *[Laughs]* And their--but their ally was the Farm Bureau.

00:40:18

**Evan Barrett:** Sure.

00:40:18

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** And the Farm Bureau even filed suit to say that the vote count didn't count the way it counted and it should be defeated. The Supreme Court 3 to 2 ruled in favor of the New Constitution. And that was a New Constitution that created fair taxes for the first time when it came to mining interests and this sort of thing. But so when you think about that was there much discussion and--because most of rural Montana voted against it and when it came in it voted--passed by 2,500 votes. Seventy-percent wanted to have the Convention and 2,500 wanted to pass; 2,500 margin to pass the results of the Convention. Did your folks talk about the New Constitution at all?

00:41:01



**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** They supported it. And one of the reasons is that there was--there was a lady and I won't say her name that was from our community that was a friend of my parents. And she had kept them informed during the entire process. And they were absolutely for it. They understood that this would empower citizens. And it's interesting about the Farm Bureau and for that matter the Stock Growers because the--the first exposure that agriculture had to the Anaconda Company was nothing but negative. And you may recall there was a big smelter built in--in Anaconda. And to begin with they just had little stacks and those little stacks couldn't get the poisons far enough out of town so it was ended up just going maybe two miles or a mile and it was concentrated over a small area. And the cattle started dying.

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And so the Anaconda Company and their--their minions they sent down folks and they were buying up that land for--people can't understand how Anaconda ended up owning so much land. Well they started owning a lot of land because they knew they were polluting land and they didn't want to get sued. So first they were buying it in close. Well then they built that big stack; it was the biggest stack in the world I believe at the time.

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And the idea was that we're going to still poison this community but we're going to spread it out far and wide so they won't get onto us for a little while.

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Well cattle were dying all over the Deer Lodge Valley. And these cattlemen they--they got together and sued the Anaconda Company. Well the Anaconda Company, they hired these--these veterinarians, these experts from all over the world that came in and testified in front of the Judges and the juries, the Judges who had been bought and the juries who hadn't and they testified well this is not arsenic, it's not poisons coming from that stack at all. They did a measurement out there; it had nothing to do with why these cattle were dying. In fact, they thought it was maybe a tropical disease. And then that veterinarian would no longer be available to testify. He'd be gone and they'd bring in another one. And it was the same thing.

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So these cattlemen and these farmers, their first exposure to big business was big business that poisoned their land and put them out of business. So how--

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**Evan Barrett:** But they flipped; they flipped at some point?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** We couldn't figure out in our family how Stock Growers and Farm Bureau could be aligned with the Anaconda Company. We couldn't figure that out for the life of us.

00:43:15

**Evan Barrett:** You still don't figure it out?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** I'm still having a tough time figuring that out.

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**Evan Barrett:** You know but it is interesting because the Stock Growers which is I think the oldest organization, formed in 1883, the--the Farm Bureau was in 1919, they were clearly allies of the Anaconda Company. Now maybe it was just the nature of who was involved with those organizations.

00:43:37

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Well there's more to it than that. My--my grandpa came here and he ran some cattle and he ran some wheat. And so by the time he got things kind of figured out, by about 1915 he thought well gee I'm a cattleman. I--I probably ought to go to the Stock Growers Convention. So he went to the Stock Growers Convention. I don't know whether it was in Havre or Shelby or Great Falls, wherever it was, but it was a pretty big deal for him to go to wherever it was. And he got there and I remember; he--he spoke German as a first language, spoke a little Russian, spoke a little French but he--he picked up English pretty fast. He was good with language. And he sat and he listened to all this and he--he watched this Convention for a day and a half. And all they talked about was--well they weren't talking about the price cap. They--they weren't talking about how you are able to get your cattle to market. They weren't talking about disease. They weren't talking about Brucellosis which was a

problem among all the cattlemen in Montana. All they talked about was this grazing and how they needed to get more rights on this grazing.

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Well he couldn't figure that out because what he owned was 320 acres. He had the ability to use the land within those fences on that 320 acres and apparently all these people cared about was being able to graze their cows in the mountains or out on the desert, land they didn't even own. And well so he went to a meeting the following year and it was the same thing. At some point he stood up and he asked questions. He asked questions about the price that we were getting for that meat and he asked questions about what we were going to do about this disease. And they looked at him like he was some kind of a crazy man. All we really care about is maintaining the right to graze our cattle for free on Federal land. Well he didn't have any Federal land. And he didn't know anybody around him who had Federal land. And so at that point he figured he didn't belong at the Stock Growers meeting and the Schweitzer family hasn't been back since. *[Laughs]*

00:45:23

**Evan Barrett:** Now *[Laughs]*--now it is interesting that--that in a way that's the early version of--we still have it today--but it's the leasing of Federal lands for minerals and for grazing and so the largest that has accumulated to usually stronger economic entities in the rural or in mining companies or ranchers and farmers is--was kind of the--what we'd I guess we'd call it corporate welfare as opposed to the other kind of welfare. Government had a useful purpose then didn't it? The government that served the interest of providing us with a lease; we still have that today in a lot of ways. The royalty issue is just a part of it as well.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** It is and the question is--is what's right? The State of Montana owns 5,000,000 acres-plus and most of it is grazing and timberland. Some of it's farmland. And the State of Montana leases land for grazing as well. And the State of Montana charges more than \$11 per animal unit. An animal unit is a cow and a calf for one month. And so and--and Montana has a competitive lease system. So you can lease it for 10 years and the contract is written how much you will pay per cow and per calf and the minimum is something more than \$11 today.

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And at the end of that 10 years if another rancher, if another family would like to lease that land they can show up and they can competitively bid that land. That's--

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**Evan Barrett:** Pretty good system.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** --you know what it's called--capitalism.

00:46:58

**Evan Barrett:** Capitalism.

00:46:58

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah capitalism. But when you have a concession to run your cows on Federal land you pay a buck and a half--little less than a buck and a half, \$1.48 which is by the way I've got a--I've got a private ranch not so far from Helena right now and the fellow who brings his cows and calves in pays me \$30 per cow and calf per month and this is in the mountains. And I'm surrounded almost all by Federal land, so it's the same kind of land. He pays me \$30 and he's happy to have the grass.

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All right; so the neighbors are paying \$1.50. Now at the end of 10 years and it's State land and it's going cheaper than a competitor thinks they might need--you know a capitalist, he can show up and he can bid on the land. But with this Federal land that the Stock Growers have been protecting for more than 100 years there's no competition. There's no bidding. There's no neighbor who can show up. There is a concession that's been granted to a few and they are dedicated to maintaining that concession--period--to the--to the detriment of every other issue that ought to affect cattlemen.

00:48:05

Figure it out.

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**Evan Barrett:** Well it's dollars and cents.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah.

00:48:09

**Evan Barrett:** Dollars--that'll make you into a--something, I guess--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** But you can't be the biggest capitalist on Main Street while you drink in the bar-- drinking in the bar beer and then go home and be dedicated to government subsidies in order to stay living--make a living can you? I mean how does that work?

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**Evan Barrett:** Well I think you one time said if you took hypocrisy out of politics--

00:48:36

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Hey nobody--

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**Evan Barrett:** --you wouldn't--. [*Laughs*] You know at the time we're talking about the Montana Legislature was predominantly Democratic, particularly in the Senate. The Republicans controlled the House in '67 and '69 and '71 until the sales tax battle and at which time the Democrats took over for another decade. The--the Democrats had the Senate through all that period and if you looked at the Senators, if you could go all the way from Libby to Wolf Point across the entire Highline it was all Democrats.

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They were rural kind of--what I'd say these Prairie Populists if you will.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Remind me of the year.

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**Evan Barrett:** That would have been 1960--well from--during this whole period '65 to '80.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** So from '65 to '80 let's just do a little math. From '65 to '80 a Senator is going to be 40 years old or more right?

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**Evan Barrett:** Yeah.

00:49:38

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** More or less. So if they were 40 years old in 65 they were born in '25. And when they were 10 years old there was FDR who saved the farm and their father and their mother, they knew and everybody up and down that dirt road, they knew that they would have had to move off the land if there hadn't have been somebody who brought electricity to the farm, who hadn't stood up and said we're going to invest in rural America.

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And so these were children along the Highline in particular where all of these homestead families lived and all those towns whether that town be Cut Bank or Chester or Shelby or Havre or Scobey or--or any place in Phillips County. Those farms were saved because of FDR's policies. And they knew it and they understood that and these were children of that.

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Now their children that would now be the grandchildren, they didn't actually hear that from grandpa and grandma who lived through it and said we would have starved to death or we would have had to leave. They didn't hear it from grandpa and grandma. They heard from their parents that well grandpa and grandma used to talk about that a little bit. And so now you go to the next generation and they say well by god, you know I--the ranch is paid for; I got rid of that old wire because we're not running those dang sheep anymore. I'm running all cows. And we got a four-wheel drive tractor. By god I must be a Republican.

00:51:05

**Evan Barrett:** So [*Laughs*] if you actually look and there's truth to that; it is the history has not been passed on well. That's one of the challenges always about if we don't learn from history we're condemned to repeat it as they say. But history has not been passed on very well when it comes to rural Montana and rural America and the New Deal and what it meant. So you end up with a--a different mix of things. When REAs got territorial integrity and they can--no longer could be stolen from--they have their power area taken away by Montana Power and the Legislature protected them, suddenly those Boards became almost like a PUD, I remember almost like an investor-owned utility.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** They rolled over like fat dogs to get scratched by Montana Power. That's what you're seeing. Yeah; okay.

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**Evan Barrett:** And so suddenly the REAs became protected conservative element instead of--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** There's something else. In politics, all right; what have you done for me lately? So you saved grandpa's farm during the Great Depression. Now I own that farm and I own three farms next to me. Now what I want is less regulation. I don't want you coming around asking for anything or telling me anything. You

say well all right if you don't want me telling you anything and then don't be asking for anything. Well I'm not asking for anything.

00:52:30

Well now how are you getting your grain from your farm to the grain elevator? Well you're driving on the highway. And before you drive on the highway you drive on a county road. Now that's all maintained by what? Well that's maintained by--by me he says, by me. I say well yeah but--but you're only paying \$600 a year taxes on your farm. How much road does that buy? Well I buy a lot of diesel. Well that's true; that--that helps--that helps pay for that payment there. But the problem is--is that you know as well as I that most of the highway funds that are spent in Montana aren't from highway taxes that are collected in Montana.

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That comes from someplace else because we're a larger community in this country and we've decided that we want to keep you in business, so we're willing to subsidize the road that comes to--from your farm to the town. Did you know that? Well I don't want to talk about that because I--I want to talk about I have too much regulation and I've got too much government out here. Well how much government do you want? Well I don't want any. Well how are we going to get our grain to--to the elevator? Well I'm going to haul it in my own truck.

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But you're going to haul it with the diesel that was paid for by somebody else? Well I don't like to look at it that way. So what are you going to do? I mean I'm going to tell you right now. A conservative message is an easier message to sell. Everybody wants to live by themselves and not have anybody bother them. Everybody wants to say well I'm above all that. Everybody says well gee I--I paid for this. I paid my taxes. I must have paid enough. Nobody wants to hear you say actually as it turns out, your kids go to a rural school that the bigger cities in Montana actually pay for education at a higher rate in the rural schools than they do in the city schools. Did you know that? No; I don't believe that because I pay property taxes.

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The--the easiest message in the whole world if you're running for office is I'm going to leave you alone. Ain't nobody going to take anything from you. And you get to have what you have and you're going to get to have a lot more in the future. Trust me. How do you vote against that? Then somebody raises their hand and says well now how is everybody going to get more? Doesn't that mean somebody has to give more? I mean those are complicated



questions right. But in--during the election season you just want to keep it simple. We're not going to tell you what to do and you're going to get more.

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Well [*Laughs*] it sounds easy and if you're not paying attention you ought to vote for that guy.

00:54:59

**Evan Barrett:** Well and I wonder if the for example in the same vein as the REAs when they got territorial integrity and became very conservative that what the CRP did to farmers who said we don't want government but by the way we appreciate the fact that we don't have to grow to get a payment and we can go down to Arizona in the winter.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** That--that occurred during the Reagan Administration. Okay so going back to FDR, the way the grain system was set up is there were sort of a--a floor on prices. If the price of wheat or barley or corn dropped to a certain price the government stepped in and they would buy it and they'd let you store it in your own bin and they'd pay you storage. Well that worked just fine but during the Reagan Administration they said we want freedom to farm. Here's what freedom to farm was; it doesn't matter what the price is we're going to pay you a check because we're going to get rid of all these payments.

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They didn't get rid of all the payments. What they did was give you a fixed payment just for staying on the farm whether the price was high and sometimes it was high or whether the price was low. So it ended up farmers were getting half of their income as a direct check from the Federal government. And as if that wasn't enough they created something called the Conservation Reserve Program which was fine; a lot of conservationists supported it but what it effectively did is gave you a payment for every acre whether you grew something or not.

00:56:18

**Evan Barrett:** Well you know as always this hour goes very fast, so we're almost done, and I really appreciate you sharing your perspective--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** It can't be over yet.

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**Evan Barrett:** Well almost.

00:56:31

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Where did that dang dog go? Jake get over here; you got to say one word--oh get up here. Say something Jake; say something into the camera. No; he never says anything. That's why people think he's so smart.

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**Evan Barrett:** [*Laughs*] You know he's been with us from the get-go hasn't he? You know he's 11 now?

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Yeah; he's 11.

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**Evan Barrett:** He's 11 now.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** He's a danged good dog. I'll probably--I'll probably never have a better dog than that one.

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**Evan Barrett:** Yeah; well he--

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** I still got his grandma and she's 17.

00:56:54

**Evan Barrett:** Wow.

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**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** She can't--she can't hear anymore. She can barely see but she gets around.

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**Evan Barrett:** Yeah; so as we wrap up your perspective about the potential for progressivity strengthening itself in rural Montana? We only got about a minute.

00:57:12

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Ultimately it's a community that pulls together that makes the community stronger. And people increasingly are recognizing that we grow together or we sink together, but we do it together. You are not an island. Nobody in Montana--there isn't a single business, there's not a single farm, there isn't a single Main Street that is so big that they can go it alone. It's--we have strength together. And that's what Prairie Populism is--strength together.

00:57:42

**Evan Barrett:** Well that's the kind of thing that I think we found that Roosevelt tapped into. He was--he was very clear that--that for several generations we were--we understood the growth that came out of the--the coming together that came of Roosevelt. We were all part of the thing together. Those of us that were--had least, they were willing to help. I think that's a personal characteristic that's important but it's also a political characteristic that's important.

00:58:17

**Governor Brian Schweitzer:** Part of strength together is a safety net for those who have the least. Those who are the fastest, those who are the strongest, they will always make it in capitalism. But there are among us in every one of our families and every one of our communities there are the last and the least. And if there's one thing that the community as a whole has a responsibility to do is to protect the last and the least.

00:58:41

**Evan Barrett:** Governor Schweitzer thank you for joining us on *In the Crucible of Change*. We'll see you the next time.

00:58:50

[*Music*]

00:59:49

[End Prairie Populism-Being Raised a Progressive in MT Farm & Ranch Country]