



A Montana rancher stands his ground against subdivision

NAME
Vernon Gliko

AGE 86

HOMETOWN
Belt, Montana

OCCUPATION
Farmer/rancher

HE SAYS

"They were friendly people back then. Everybody was trying to help everybody because they were in the same situation. Well, now, you know, you may not even know your neighbor."

BIGGEST CHANGE IN HIS LIFETIME

Transition from using horses to tractors

KNOWN FOR

Getting hit by a bolt of lightning as a boy

HAS HAD

Five hip replacements, three knee replacements, and "lots of bumps and bruises."

Vernon Gliko has lived along central Montana's Belt Creek for all his 86 years. His vision is shot, he's on chemotherapy for colon cancer, and the passage of time has left a lot of sadness in its wake.

"My family is a dog and two cats," he says. His wife died a few years ago at the age of 83, and tears well in his eyes when he speaks about it. "From that day on, the world just changed completely."

Gliko lives in a simple 1950s ranch house near the town of Belt, 23 miles southeast of Great Falls. He still works his ranch — 1,800 acres of hills and prairie — although it's a much smaller operation than it once was. Every other day, he climbs into his tractor and brings hay to his four cows and two horses.

He's not entirely alone; neighbors from Belt check on him regularly. But a visit from a reporter and photographer provides a welcome opportunity for him to sit down in his favorite living room chair and share some old stories.

His bright blue eyes light up as he describes a hardscrabble childhood. His mother died when he was 6, and he and his brother and sister were left to fend for themselves in a two-room log cabin while their father — a Croatian immigrant — worked in the fields. "It wasn't one of these fancy cabins — it was pretty rustic," he says, recalling winter mornings when he had to chip the ice off the water bucket in the kitchen. "I don't know if we ever took a bath."

Gliko made it to the eighth grade before his father pulled him out of school to work in the fields. As long as he could pick rocks and dig postholes, his strong back was more useful than an educated mind. Land was real wealth, and Gliko's

homesteader father was willing to share his riches — Gliko, his brother and his sister were each left their own ranch upon his passing.

Despite hardships worthy of a prairie Dickens, Gliko looks back at his youth with fondness. "I think I've done things that very few people have done, as a young kid," he says. There was the time he and his father took a steam train to Chicago to sell their cattle. The time a lightning bolt knocked him unconscious for eight hours. The time he gelded a horse that was to appear onstage in Hollywood.

"I'd love to go back. Even as hard as it was," he smiles, explaining that the everyday struggle went hand-in-hand with a neighborly warmth that's hard to come by today. "Now it's no fun anymore."

Gliko didn't inherit his father's disdain toward education, but he shares his fiercely protective love of the land. He recently agreed to donate his ranch as a 1,800-acre conservation easement to the Montana Land Reliance.

When asked why, he points to a road cutting across the hillside on the other side of Belt Creek. Forty or more houses will be built along the ridgeline. "I've never seen so much greed in my life," he says, adding that the houses will cost between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000.

"I think they're crazy. These aren't local people. I think they have no idea how the wind blows."

Jay Erickson, managing director of the Montana Land Reliance, lauds Gliko's donation.

"He didn't need the tax deduction, he really didn't need to do estate planning — he just wanted to see that protected," says Erickson, explaining that the land is home to upland game birds like sharptail and Hungarian partridge. "Somebody like Vernon, who essentially gets back just his peace of mind that his property will always be a ranch — those folks don't come along every day."

We're all just caretakers of the land, anyway, according to Gliko. "Who does it really belong to? To humanity, that's all."

BY RAY SIKORSKI

The author is a freelance writer in Bozeman, Montana.



Vernon Gliko and his "family," Tippy (left). Gliko's 1,800-acre ranch near Belt, Montana (top), will remain free from development even after his death.
ANNE SHERWOOD