

BIG, BELLS, BAY: BEAUTIFUL BLUE

By Fred Hobbs

“Blue skies smilin’ at me, nothin’ but blue skies do I see.”

The melody “Blue Skies” by the great American song writer Irving Berlin is said to have been written in 1926 in celebration of his first daughter’s birth and coinciding with the end of a brief low point in his life and career. “Blue days, all of them gone, nothin’ but blue skies from now on.”

Berlin wrote the song as a metaphor for a mood, not in praise of a condition of nature. But several locations on the globe provide spectacular examples of real and *really* blue skies smilin’ at you. The American West offers three locations illustrating the point: First, the “Big Sky” of Montana.

My wife became quiet intrigued with Lewis and Clark and their famous expedition, which included a major portion of Montana. In 2005, we decided to visit Great Falls, a key point in the Lewis and Clark journey. We had heard the slogan “Big Sky Country”, but were astounded how big and, on our trip at least, how blue the skies of Montana actually are.

Montana is a huge state, fourth in size to Alaska, Texas and California. Driving from Billings to Great Falls covers 219 miles of mostly open land stretching as far as the eye can see. The blue sky above seemed endless, akin to being in the middle of the ocean when you cannot see any land in sight. The experience was awesome and even a little bit unsettling.

Great Falls gets its name from the series of waterfalls in proximity to the Upper Missouri River Basin. It was adjacent to these falls that Lewis and Clark and their team had to portage over an 18-mile stretch, lifting their canoes out of the water to skirt the falls and river rapids. They had to tote them by hand or in make shift wagons along with all the expedition supplies. No official notice was made in the communications back to President Jefferson, but one would hope that the explorers had some moments to enjoy the expansive blue skies above.

As to the bells, they are closer to home; two colorful 14,000-plus peaks in the Elk Mountains eight miles from Aspen: The Maroon Bells, at perhaps the single most beautiful spot in Colorado. The Bells derive their distinctive color from the fine-grained mudstone rock of which they are made. Set below a typical Colorado blue sky, crowned in season by the white of the snow, reflected in the waters of a small lake, aided by the meadow’s light green carpet, varied aspen hues and the dark forest green of the surrounding pines and firs, Maroon Bells provide a photographer’s delight.

And the bay in the story’s title? True, it’s often shrouded in fog. And yes, rain frequently falls there. But as the sun begins to set over the blue waters reflected from the sky, nature blends the various shades of blue with brilliant orange, yellows, purples and indescribable hues into a remarkably dramatic splash of color. And, when the weather gods permit, the blue of the sky over the San Francisco Bay rivals any.

So, you can head up to Montana, stay near home and catch the Bells or, even if you have left your heart there (as another popular song suggests that you might), you can always return to the City by the Bay and find those Blue Skies smilin’ at you...eventually!