Stark simplicity of a country church near Potlatch, Idaho, seems akin to the rolling hills of the Palouse. Sprawling across the Idaho-Washington border, the 4,000-square-mile region embraces uncommonly rich

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farmland. With its often steep and hard-to-plow hills, the country challenged the settlers of a century ago. Today, Palousers maintain the initiative, resourcefulness, and down-to-earth character of their forebears.

the Palouse

By BARBARA AUSTIN Photographs by PHIL SCHOFIELD
THOUGHT that the best way to feel the Palouse would be to hitch a plane ride with Pete Fountain, crop duster. He was in the Palouse and yet above it, riding so near it he could smell the changing seasons, and yet he could pull away from it a thousand feet or more. From up there he could see the expanse of this unique 4,000 square miles of Idaho and Washington—some of the steepest farmland in the country, but a gentle and soothing place too, where at twilight the shadows and the deer come out and lie down together in the deep blue draws.

I had been driving up and down rolling wheat and lentil fields all day, watching houses and red barns suddenly pop out of nowhere, only to disappear. Once I saw a rider on a leopard-patterned Appaloosa jump up at the edge of a bright green lentil field, but when I quickly turned my head, horse and rider were gone, and so was the hill of lentils. From the ground the Palouse was a land that revealed and concealed itself within oceanlike swells. I was too close to see it whole. I needed to feel it all in one swoop, as Pete did every day.

How was I to know that feeling the Palouse meant weightlessness, for those hills are so steep that when you fly them five feet off the ground at 60 miles an hour, the plane’s path creates a temporary lessening of gravity and your stomach won’t stay put.

“That’s enough!” I yelled when I saw my notebook actually float up next to me.

“But I was going to take you under a power line!” Instead, Pete took me up high and leveled off to regain my stomach.

The fertile Palouse country that lies beneath a plaid of brown fellow and pea green is an unusual oasis of farmland straddling the border between southeastern Washington and Idaho (map, page 803). It is not your ordinary hilly farmland either; rather, it is a land where, on the steepest slopes, 30-degree farming goes on.

Jack Morse, whose farm is adjacent to Pete Fountain’s airport, told me, “There are some hills I’ve used my combine on that I almost can’t walk up. They’re nearly as steep as a barn roof.”

Yet Palouse farmers actually till those hills, producing some of the highest wheat yields in the country. Whitman County in Washington has averaged 40 bushels of wheat per acre since 1934, compared to the average U.S. yield in those same years of 20 bushels. In good years, with the average 15 to 25 inches of rain or better, parts of the Palouse yield 100 bushels and as much as 150 in isolated draws. And there has never been a crop failure in its history.

Even fears of crop failure after the eruption of Washington’s Mount St. Helens in May 1980 proved unfounded.* At Gary Morris’s high-technology Gold Creek Ranch, about 260 miles from the volcano, I saw my boots covered with the fine gray talcum of its ash.

“The first thing we noticed after the volcano blew was that the soil seemed melower,” Gary told me, “almost as if the ash had mulched it. Then we had good rains, and when I harvested—instead of 60-bushel wheat, I got 100! The ash had helped retain moisture.”

Gary, in his 50s, is a former Latah County, Idaho, commissioner and school-board member, but he looked just right in his frayed bib overalls. “I consider myself a gyp,” he said as we jolted around his 5,000-acre farm in a pickup. The word comes from “gypsy,” and is a lumberman’s term for an independent operator. He had quilted his spread together from 35 stump farms chiseled out of forest on the fringe of the Palouse.

He drove me up to his secret place, where he comes to think—to get away from his computer, soil studies, and CB radios. From there we got a fine view of his velvety, undulating farm, Moscow Mountain, Steptoe Butte, and the Hoodoo Mountains. “I had a cattleman visit from Montana, and he stood

*The December 1981 GEOGRAPHIC carried Rowe Findley’s report of Mount St. Helens’ aftermath.

Young old-fashioned farmers Jim Day and Beatrice Moore shun modern agricultural technology on a 15-acre farm near Moscow, Idaho. Beatrice uses manual cutters to shear their sheep and Angora goats, then dyes the wool with extracts of goldenrod, sumac, and other native plants to make tapestries.
on one of my hills like this and looked down at some cows I had. 'My gosh,' he said, 'this country is so beautiful these cattle don’t need nothing to eat, they can live on scenery.'"

Leaning on a lone ponderosa pine, Gary said, "The Palouse is special because of its unique farming practices. Kansas has rolling hills, but almost no one farms them."

When homesteaders first came to the region, they mostly settled and farmed in the valleys, but gradually they worked their way uphill, right to the top, as they discovered that the hills were just as fertile as valleys. Unlike midwestern hills, which have thin, easily erodible topsoil, the Palouse hills have as much as four feet of it. However, poor farming practices in the past century have led to serious erosion problems.

"In the 1890s some farmers were able to get the same yields that most of us get now, without any fertilizer or high-yield variety of wheat," Gary said. "Sixty-bushel wheat then and now. You can see why they wanted to call this area around Moscow ‘Paradise.’"

He laughed. "Originally, they called Moscow ‘Hog Heaven’ — which it was, because pigs love all that camas root — but the ladies changed it to the more discreet Paradise.

Then in the 1870s, a man named Samuel Neff settled here and probably named the place Moscow, because he had lived near a community with that name in Pennsylvania. Moscow (pronounced Mos-coh, not Ma’s cow) is Idaho’s Palouse capital, rivaled by Washington’s Pullman eight miles away.

"All the early homesteaders needed to know was how to harvest wheat on a hill," Gary said as he drove me back down. First, stationary threshers were used. They were set on fairly level ground and the wheat was brought to them. Then in the 1930s hydraulic, self-leveling combines were developed.

PROTOTYPES of those hillside combines were tested on the Clyde Farm, nestled a few miles outside Moscow between two hills. A sign on a large white wagon wheel proclaims: "The Clyde Farm Since 1877."

Lola Clyde told me about the day Mount St. Helens blew. "It was Sunday, 2 p.m., and my whole family, four generations of Clydes, were together for a birthday party. The sky got darker and darker, and everyone got worried. Then the ash began to fall like silver rain. It made a hissing sound. I said, ‘This is the way the Palouse was formed in the beginning, and it won’t hurt us now.’" She laughed. "And, lovebird, I was right! The ash made a mess, but it helped increase our crops."

Eighty-one years old, the daughter of the first Presbyterian minister sent to Moscow as a missionary, Lola declared that the Palouse has a history of unusual happenings — and of eccentric people — and she has seen and met most of them.

She knew Frank "Psychiana" Robinson, who advertised that he "actually and literally" talked with God. He ran a mail-order self-help religion in Moscow during the 1930s and ‘40s that promised health and prosperity through positive thinking. With a million sets of lessons mailed out, it may have been the largest mail-order religion in the world.

LOLA ALSO KNEW Frank Brocke, a president of the First Bank of Troy, which started in that little farming town in 1905 and now has 30 million dollars in assets. "Through all that growing, Frank never lost his sense of neighboring," Lola said. "He kept right on giving loans on the basis of a firm handshake, and most people paid them back. Once a man robbed the Bank of Troy, and after he got out of jail came to Frank for a car loan. Everyone else laughed, but Frank gave it to him, saying, ‘This man has paid his dues.’"

Frank Brocke’s kind of old-time Palouse neighboring is still going strong. While I was in the Palouse, a flash flood occurred in the Potlatch River area, endangering the barn and totally wiping out the pigsty, huge garden, and lawn of a recent widow. The highway department didn’t feel it was their job to help her drain the water.

"Tell you what I had here before the flood," Eula Johnson, 78, said as she showed me around her flooded place. "Asparagus, rhubarbs, horseradish. And fruit? I had persimmons, I had quince. Look here, I had nine different kinds of grapes." She stopped in the mud and glared at me, her white hair in tight braids. "First time the land ever been bad to me. Told George — this is my Garden"
A gentle land belies its volcanic underpinnings formed by lava flows ages ago. Later the melting of a glacial dam released the waters of huge Lake Missoula, inset. The resulting flood skirted the Palouse and its undulating hills of wind-deposited silt, basis of the area's bountiful agriculture.

of Eden. I can grow anything here,” her husband, George, had died. “I get so lonely,” she said, “I stand up an ax handle and talk to it. Lawyer said I should sell. Sell? Where am I going? Where am I going? Out on a limb to sing to myself?”

As we walked back to her house, she said, “Hell, I'm not goin' to give up. I'd feel all right if I could just get someone to help out. My husband painted the barn jes' before he died. We've got to save the barn.”

A few days later some people at the Antelope Inn in nearby Kendrick talked it over, rented a pump, and came down and saved the barn. They drained about 40,000 gallons of muddy water into a culvert and charged Eula nothing. They didn't even know her.

Recently I learned that Eula has found someone to help out. This summer she and her new husband, Mike Soto, will be working the farm together.

Eula Johnson and Lola Clyde have lived in the Palouse almost as long as it has existed as a settled area. It wasn't homesteaded until the 1870s. Some families came from the Midwest, like the Clydes, who fled the great
Combines wind their way around the curves of wheat-laden hills (left) during late summer harvest below Steptoe Butte in Washington. To contend with slopes that may have grades of as much as 30 degrees, combines are equipped with self-leveling mechanisms (above). In the fertile soil and ideal climate of the Palouse, wheat varieties that normally grow to heights of 30 inches can reach 60 inches, causing many plants to break over before harvest. Through crossbreeding, U. S. Department of Agriculture agronomist Orville A. Vogel (below), working at Washington State University, developed high-yielding, semidwarf varieties that have produced 100 bushels per acre and better. These varieties have increased yields in the Palouse as much as 50 percent.
grasshopper plague in Kansas. Others were backtracking. The Palouse had been passed over earlier by migrants eager to settle fertile valleys farther west. As those valleys filled up, settlers began moving back east and realized the high rolling hills could be farmed.

Until then, of course, the Palouse belonged to the Indians, a favorite summer gathering place for the Nez Perce, Palouse, and other tribes. They would dig the camas root, which they cooked and formed into cakes, and graze their lovely snowflaked horses on the lush bunchgrass. When the fur traders saw these spotted horses gallop by, according to today's breeders, they would say, "That's a Palousey!" This eventually became "Appaloosa," and that is why today Moscow is the home of the Appaloosa (not Palousey) Horse Club.

Before Indians and settlers the Palouse was long in the making, and, as Lola pointed out, volcanism played a part. It began 15 million years ago when flow upon flow of lava from a series of fissure eruptions leveled the area from the Rockies to the Cascades, creating a basalt plateau. The wind currents from the Pacific Ocean gradually carried sediment across the basalt, piling on it layers of silt, forming loess dunes. The loess is a wind-deposited mixture of silt, clay, and some volcanic ash, 40 to 60 feet deep, the basis of the rich Palouse topsoil.

Between 13,000 and 18,000 years ago some of the greatest floods known in geologic history occurred in this area. A lobe of an ice sheet dammed a river near the Idaho-Montana border, creating Lake Missoula, almost half the volume of Lake Michigan and 2,000 feet deep at the
dam. The ice dam burst, sending 500 cubic miles of water at high velocities down the drainage system of the Columbia River and out across the basalt plateau, stripping away the loess. This process was repeated several times and had happened often before.

These floods made channeled scablands out of a good deal of eastern Washington but left unscathed the higher delta-shaped area of Palouse topography. With those barren scablands to the north and west, the rimland of the Snake River to the south, and the forested foothills of the Clearwater Mountains to the east, the lush Palouse became an entity unto itself, roughly 75 miles across. Its lushness may have given it its name. One view holds that when the French-speaking fur traders came, they found it covered with so much bunchgrass that they named it the pelouse, the lawn. Another explanation, however, is that the name came from that of the main village of the local Indians.

Today, of course, the bunchgrass has been shouldered out by profitable crops—and not just grain. Moscow now calls itself the dry-pea and lentil capital of the world, center of an area producing virtually 100 percent of the United States’ dry peas and lentils. But Moscow would rather brag on its culture than its cultivation. A bumper sticker reads, “The arts make Moscow special.” And with a resident symphony orchestra and a ballet company that tours nationally, they do. The resulting atmosphere has attracted a thriving community of artists and back-to-rural-areas people.

Pullman shares the symphony orchestra with Moscow, and matches that town’s University of Idaho with its Washington State University. How heavily these two towns, the economic hub of the Palouse, are invested in education and culture can be judged from the fact that in their combined 43,000 population, 25,000 are students.

JUST OUTSIDE MOSCOW I stood in a hangar talking to one of the University of Idaho’s successful graduates, Ron Fountain, 36. His father, Pete, the crop duster who had shown me the Palouse for the first time, had proudly taken me to meet him. Now co-owner of a small industrial park on the edge of Moscow, Ron is still heavily involved in crop-dusting.

“I’ll tell you why,” Ron said. “When I was a kid, the Palouse was God’s country, you could walk anywhere. It’s too restricted to do that any more. But I can fly anywhere. Crop-dusting forces me to get up at dawn, the most beautiful time of day. I can see things nobody else sees.”

Pete laughed. “You see the little weevils come out of the peas.” Then he walked out of the hangar, got into his Super Cub, and taxied down the field to his house. “That’s

Double-edged windfall, volcanic ash clouds an alfalfa field near Palouse Falls after the 1980 Mount St. Helens eruption. Despite initial fears of crop loss and problems with clogged machinery, yields for some crops went up dramatically as the ash helped seal in soil moisture.
Dad’s saddle horse,” Ron said, smiling. “He’s lost without it.

“After graduating from the U. of I. in the late ’60s,” Ron said, “I left home for a couple of years, traveled across the country, found everything to be alike, as if everyone had to copy each other—so I came back. People here have character.”

We got into his truck and rode down the landing strip. He pointed out the homes of two of his brothers, Craig, 34, and Steve, 30, and the acreage that another brother, Tim, 26, farms. “It’s kind of unusual for an entire family of five brothers and one sister to settle right next to their parents, and all be in business together, all happily involved in crop-dusting. With the grandchildren now, there’s 22 of us.”

He showed me the industrial park that he had built himself with help from his brothers and friends. “I learned independence from Dad. At my age, he wanted to make his living flying. So he came to the Palouse, bought ten acres, and single-handedly built an
airport. His attitude of 'try it and see' is really the attitude of the Palouse. Here we think big but keep it simple."

That faith in imagination and hard work I found throughout the Palouse, and it has been handed to the young. Randy Smith, 27, his wife, Jamie, 25, and their daughter live on a leased 450-acre farm near Steptoe. Their first harvest was in 1980. They didn't own any equipment when they put in their crop but borrowed a tractor from one neighbor, drills from another, and a cultivator from a third. Randy paid his neighbors back by helping with their harvest and preparing the fields for their next crops.

Some say the Smiths are trying to accomplish the impossible, beginning small farming at a time when the average farm in Whitman County is more than 1,000 acres. "There's a lot of young people would like to farm," Randy said, "but it's harder and harder for them all the time. You see, a lot of farmers in the Palouse don't retire—70 years old and still farming. Maybe 60 percent of
Deeply rooted in the history of their land, Palouse farmers take pride in their handiwork. Lola Clyde, 81 (facing page), bakes pies with apples picked from trees planted in 1878 by her husband’s grandparents on the family farm near Moscow. Frank King (left) came to the Palouse in 1910 at the age of eight when his father homesteaded 160 acres of what was once part of the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation.

Identical twins John and Joe Norrish (left) attended the University of Idaho together, dressed alike, and thought alike in setting up their business of constructing custom homes in the Moscow area.

A town savors its heritage when volunteers pack a ton of sausage for the annual sausage and sauerkraut feed in Unióntown, settled by German immigrants. “It’s like a reunion,” Roy Moneymaker (above) says of the event, which can swell Unióntown’s population from 300 to 1,800.
the farmers are over 50 years old. Not much room for new blood. But it's a good life, and starting out in the Palouse, you don’t have the chance of failure like you do in other places. In 1977 they had a drought here, and they still got 40 bushels an acre.”

What worries Randy is the long haul. “Next 20 years, with fuel prices the way they are, you don’t have 2,000 acres in the Palouse, it will be hard to survive.”

VIC MOORE, a sculptor who lives outside Pullman, owns only four acres, situated in a draw between two Palouse farms. He thinks he'll do fine: “Acre for acre I can beat the Palouse farmers' yield.” He would, however, agree with Randy that “agribiz” is creeping up on the small farmer.

A stocky man, full of energy, with two large tattoos—one of a panther, the other of an eagle—each leaping off an arm, Vic expressed himself in no uncertain terms. “Some people around here think city slickers can’t stand the rigors of rural life,” he said, “but that’s hogwash. I've owned these four acres for 18 years, and I've proved on them that artists can make great farm boys.”

He then proceeded to show me. “For instance”—he pointed to an eight-foot-deep hole in his land—“going to fill that up with topsoil.” He looked slyly up at the neighboring farmer's hill. “I'm just waitin' for a nice chinook wind”—a warming wind from the west—“to come along after a freeze to turn that ground up there to mud.” He grinned. “I can figure every couple of years I'm going to get a lot of soil. You betcha.” Four times within the past ten years he has dug out and spread around as much as eight feet of rich runoff mud.

Erosion is a serious problem in the Palouse. The tilling methods that predominate break up the soil into tiny bits. When the rain comes, it picks up the fine particles, sweeping them downhill and creating a network of rivulets on the slopes.

A more spectacular but less common type of erosion occurs when mud forms and then slides off the steep hills—in extreme cases to the tune of 300 tons per acre. This can happen in a one- or two-month period when, as Vic pointed out, a warm spell thaws the frozen saturated soil.

Gilding along placid waters, the women’s crew of Washington State University works out along the Snake River near the Almota grain terminal. The Cougar Crew once showed its mettle by rowing 375 miles down the Snake and Columbia Rivers as part of a fund-raising drive.

Fast on their feet, the University of Idaho women’s rugby team, who call themselves the Dusty Lentils in honor of the crop that flourishes in the region, try to cut off a determined runner from the Snake River Club team.

Interstate sports rivalries are keen, especially between the two universities, separated by only eight miles.
Each year as much as a third of the ten million tons of soil lost in the deep Palouse finds its way into streams and rivers.

The topsoil of the Palouse, an irreplaceable natural resource, took thousands of years to create; an incautious farmer can lose much of it in an hour. Without careful farming, the topsoil of the Palouse could vanish in the next hundred years.

Progressive farmers like Gary Morris at Gold Creek Ranch use several methods to prevent topsoil from running off. Gary uses a "no-till drill" developed specifically for the Palouse by Mort Swanson, a local farmer whose son now markets the drill nationally. Barely disturbing the topsoil, the drill cuts narrow grooves in the ground, so that there is less loose soil for water to wash away. It also leaves last year's crop stubble, which anchors the soil and acts as a mulch. Gary bolsters the effect of the drill by designing terraces to catch water and run it around hills on a contour, so that a conduit is formed, forcing runoff to flow into areas where it won't cause an erosion problem.

Endless swelling hills, no trees, no mountains, no hedgerows—nothing breaks up the wave upon wave of wheat. Because fences are no longer needed (there are few animals), you cannot tell where one farm ends and another begins. Only the farmers remember.

If you're driving below the crests, where most of the roads run, there often is no sun, only silence and the wind. It is an eerie experience, and you can easily lose your bearings. Through this terrain Col. Edward Steptoe led his U. S. Army troops. In 1858 they were surrounded and trapped by young warriors of the Spokane, Palouse, Coeur d'Alene, and Yakima tribes.

Steptoe was harried by the rolling land, and had to continually maneuver to keep on high ground. Although Steptoe Butte bears his name, the battle was actually fought on a hill 15 miles away at Rosalia. Colonel Steptoe and his men finally ran out of ammunition, left their equipment behind, and retreated at night, aided by the Nez Percés.

Helen McGeevy, 81, regards the Nez Percés with affection. Her family homesteaded by the rimland of the Snake River in the southern Palouse, and she lives nearby to this day, in the little farming town of Cotton. We drove to Wawawai Bay County Park and climbed a hill to have a look at the Snake. Helen said, "When I was growing up, the Nez Percés would come along Union Flat Creek looking for camas and then camp here at Wawawai."

I looked for traces of the Indian encampment and saw instead Boyer Park and the
Sweeping contours of fields near Dusty, Washington, provide a dramatic backdrop for Appaloosa horses ridden by Ben Krom and Kelley Marler, who run separate breeding stables. Prized for its stamina and gentle disposition.
the breed was introduced to Mexico by the Spanish and later spread northward. Because of its use by Indians in the Palouse region, the distinctively marked horse became known as “a Palousey,” from which the modern name evolved.

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Lower Granite Dam. The area is now part of an inland waterway that links the Palouse to Portland and other international ports, whence Palouse wheat goes to Japan, Korea, India, and Egypt.

But Helen was seeing it as it used to be, before the valley was flooded. "The Nez Perces came here every year to graze their Appaloosas and fish for salmon in the Snake. They stayed most of the summer, fishing and smoking their catch. Came right by our farm.

"When I was five, during the harvest of 1906, a Nez Perce knocked on our door. It was 5:30 a.m.; the family had just sat down to breakfast. The Indian couldn't speak English, but he signed—kept pointing to his chest, then our cow. My father finally understood. Needed milk for the paupose—the mother was dry.

"My dad asked my mother to get the milk; then he noticed two hungry-looking little boys on the back of the squaw's horse. The Nez Perce father signed that they could wait, but my dad wouldn't give him the milk till the boys got fed. Mother gave them sandwiches and cookies.

"The next year about the same time in August, my dad found a salmon on the back stoop. He asked all the neighbors, but no one knew a thing about it. Then at the next harvest the same thing happened, and my dad understood. It was the Nez Perce. As long as we lived there, we always got a salmon at the same time each year."

LIKE HELEN, Henry Fitch, former mill worker, gyppo logger, politician, and dedicated stump farmer, had long memories, but not long enough to suit him. Henry's father bounced west from Iowa, tried several places, and finally settled here with his family when Henry was just a boy. Yet, when I met him last year, Henry maintained, "I haven't been in the Palouse long enough."

"When did you come?"
"Nineteen eleven."

At 77, Henry was still handsome, with kind eyes and smile, barely a wrinkle on his face. He showed me around his 307-acre farm, then invited me to lunch at his home, set peacefully among ponderosa pines above the Palouse River. His wife, Grace, served a delicious beef stew.

While we were eating, Murray Benjamin, Henry's 80-year-old friend from the Potlatch lumber mill, came to visit. Murray used to test samples at the mill; Henry, who started at the mill at 14, became a foreman.

"We were jes' greenhorns. Didn't know any better than to work," Murray said.

"Just pine savages from I-dee-ho," Henry agreed. "We put everything we had into it."

"A foreman said about the two of us, 'If I had a full crew of those two boys, I'd be out of a job.'"

I COULD HEAR the Potlatch mill whistle blow; lunchtime was over. Still I listened to two old men talking of gyppo logging, of how Henry worked 26 years and never applied for his pension from the mill: "Never would be a public nuisance."

They recalled how the Wobblies, the leftist Industrial Workers of the World, tried to organize the mill about 1917. Henry was listening to long-ago voices: "One more meeting and the mill will close," the boss said. So Potlatch workers accepted another union, the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen." Henry stared off. "I can't get over the gift of seeing into things, and how they came to be." All the while Grace stood over him slowly combing his hair with her fingers.

Henry was an understatement, like the landscape of the Palouse itself. A few months later he died. I could easily have missed meeting him. And that's true of the Palouse too. I could have missed it until I learned from Henry Fitch and his neighbors—Eula and the strangers who helped her beat the mud, Frank Brocke, who gave the very man who robbed his bank a loan—"the gift of seeing into things," which in the Palouse means neighboring.

A thin powder of early snow accents furrows holding the promise of a fruitful spring: seedlings of hardy winter wheat. Palouse soil—40 to 60 feet deep—absorbs the gentle rains and snows that bring an average of 20 inches of precipitation a year, a perennial blessing on a land richly endowed.