

THE HEART OF WINNETT:  
RURAL SCHOOLS FACE TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION CHALLENGES

by  
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Debra ‘Debbie’ Hadley, who taught countless kids in rural western Kansas at Dighton USD 482 in her lifetime. She serves as inspiration for this project and for living inquisitively and compassionately.

Without her guidance and example, many of her students, including myself, wouldn’t be where they are today. Because of excellent, dedicated teachers, young people have the best chance of success in whatever endeavors they choose to pursue, and without them, communities suffer; rural places particularly feel the weight because schools are at the center of rural communities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. BACKGROUND.....                           | 1  |
| FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHY.....                     | 1  |
| ARTIST STATEMENT.....                        | 1  |
| FILM LOGLINE.....                            | 2  |
| FILM SYNOPSIS.....                           | 2  |
| CREW STATEMENT.....                          | 2  |
| 2. CONNECTION TO MATERIAL.....               | 3  |
| 3. RESEARCH TOPIC AND ARTISTIC APPROACH..... | 5  |
| 3.1 RESEARCH TOPIC.....                      | 5  |
| 3.2 ARTISTIC APPROACH.....                   | 8  |
| 4. THEORIZING YOUR FILM.....                 | 11 |
| 5. DISSEMINATION.....                        | 14 |
| 5.1 FINANCIAL INFORMATION.....               | 14 |
| 5.2 DISTRIBUTION.....                        | 15 |
| REFERENCES CITED.....                        | 16 |

## LIST OF TABLES

| Table                                                         | Page |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 1. Table 1. Film budget for <i>The Heart of Winnett</i> ..... | 14   |

## ABSTRACT

There is a critical teacher shortage in America, and it is most acute in U.S. rural communities. The three teachers profiled in this film teach at Winnett School in Winnett, MT, with a K-12 enrollment of less than 100 students in one building; these teachers exhibit what it means to be truly dedicated to their students, their profession, and their community despite facing challenges unique to rural educators.

There's the K-12 shop teacher, Adam Tholt, who has been teaching for more than two decades in Winnett; Nicole Tholt, the 3rd/4th grade teacher and Adam's wife; and Haley Kiehl, the 5th/6th grade teacher who has held various roles at the school over the last decade. The film chronicles their observations and attempts to bring to light some of the issues rural teachers face on a day-to-day basis.

This document expands on the elements pertaining to *The Heart of Winnett*, including the filmmaker's background and connection to the topic, research, the artistic approach, theoretical elements, and dissemination information, including a budget and distribution plan.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND

#### Filmmaker Biography

Marit Ehmke is a filmmaker and farmer who grew up on a wheat farm in remote western Kansas. She earned a B.S. in Journalism: News and Information from the University of Kansas with distinction as a member of the Kappa Tau Alpha journalism honor society. While at KU, she had the opportunity to explore radio, print, and video media. After graduation in 2013, she worked as a copy editor and contributing photographer at the Lawrence Journal-World newspaper. Marit moved to Bozeman, MT, in 2015 to work at the Bozeman Daily Chronicle as a layout designer and contributing writer/photographer.

Marit joined the Science and Natural History Filmmaking MFA program in 2020 with a focus on rural life and agriculture. A film she made about aspen tree biology called ‘The Grove’ played at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in 2021. Through the program, she has had the opportunity to work at Montana PBS on a team, making educational videos about Montana for the K-12 audience. She also helps her parents farm and is excited to make films about western Kansas, including a film about the plight of the Ogallala Aquifer in the region.

#### Artist Statement

I am drawn to remote, rural places — open, binary, so expansive you might be swallowed up in it. These places often offer clarity of experience where what is sometimes lost in other environments becomes plain. When I am most moved to create, it’s in the spirit of highlighting subjects or aspects of our lives that don’t get as much attention. I love documenting the tiny

pieces that make up a whole, and I love for the story to be one less common to put together. Truly, it is what we pay attention to that we care about, and I care about the quiet, remote places and people that are home to me.

### Film Logline

Three teachers thrive in a remote school district in central Montana despite challenges unique to rural places, where it is often hard to draw and keep educators.

### Film Synopsis

This film profiles three teachers in Winnett, Montana, a rural town in central Montana. Mr. Tholt is the K-12 shop teacher, his wife, Nicole Tholt, is the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher, and Mrs. Kiehl is the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher. This documentary follows their lives as teachers and attempts to show how they love what they do and are dedicated to their community.

### Crew Statement

Marit Ehmke served as producer, cinematographer, editor, interviewer, and sound designer. Lex Harold served as drone videographer.

## CHAPTER TWO

## CONNECTION TO MATERIAL

I decided to make this film because my middle school English teacher, Debbie Hadley in Dighton, KS, suggested it as an idea that inspired me down this path. We were catching up on the phone when I was looking for thesis film topics, and she said, “Well, Marit! What about the teacher shortage epidemic in rural schools?”

I’m from a tiny town in western Kansas (about 800 people), only a little larger than Winnett. It seems that most rural places are struggling to hire and retain teachers lately, even more than most schools nationally, which is why I want to bring attention to this crisis.

After that conversation, I cold-called a bunch of Class C school administrators in Montana to see if it was as bad here as it was in Kansas at the time, and sure enough, the teacher shortage was called “crisis” and “epidemic” again and again. I ended up emailing a ton of schools, and the name Winnett was familiar from another cohort member making a film up that way. When two teachers emailed back from Winnett, I knew I had found my story of a place.

Since then, I’ve worked to develop relationships at this school, and every time I stay in town, I fully immerse myself with the locals. I play pool and grab food at the local bar. The grocery store owner and my Air BnB guy, know me by name. And more importantly, the kids, teachers, and administrators have welcomed me and become familiar with me. I love Winnett; it’s good people and a beautiful landscape. It’s a community known for hunting and outdoor recreation, and I’ve come to know it as a place similar to my hometown. The community cares about each other and is proud of their school and the kids who attend.

I decided to focus less on the struggle to find and keep teachers and instead focus more on thriving teachers in rural settings. That led me to profile these three educators. I realize this film doesn't always address serious questions like why we don't value and treat rural teachers better. The main thing I am worried about taking this tact is that instead of coming away from watching this recognizing that we need to pay and treat teachers better, some might go away with the feeling that to be a good teacher, you just need to have an inordinate amount of patience for being undervalued and underrepresented.

This past year, Debbie Hadley died, and this film is dedicated to her: an educator, an inspiration, and truly a saint if I ever met one. When I'm struggling for motivation or feel like I have messed up in some way from which I can't recover, I try to imagine what Ms. Hadley would tell me as a middle-schooler. She still has an enormous influence on my life. There are kids in this film who feel that way about these three excellent, caring teachers. Rural places like this and like where I'm from don't often get highlighted. These kinds of stories are often untold and go largely unseen. My film creates an opportunity to share important stories of rural schools.

When I emailed the principal of Winnett School, Terry Harris, she forwarded my email asking for teachers who may want to be involved in making a documentary about teaching in rural places, and Adam Tholt got back to me first, as well as Haley Kiehl, and eventually, Nicole Tholt joined the group. I went up to Winnett several times to meet with, film, and interview the subjects. My prior visits informed the interview questions, as well as feedback provided by my thesis chair. The second round of interviews accounted for most of what was used in the film, aiming more toward the importance of rural schools, and the answers get more at why any potential audience member should care about what's happening in these kinds of places.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH TOPIC AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

#### Section 3.1: Research

In researching for this film, I interviewed dozens of Class C administrators over the phone after emailing district superintendents and principals from a database I found online on the Office of Public Instruction website. I discovered there is a critical teacher shortage in Montana, like most states, and it's especially acute in rural areas. Schools are having to get creative to boost recruitment and retention, but with limited funding resources, it can be very challenging. Some schools had teachers from other countries on visiting visas teaching; some had several teachers under the emergency licensure program, and of course, the COVID 19 pandemic certainly made what was difficult even harder for a variety of reasons.

One study published in Sage Journal measured teacher job vacancies and instances of underqualified teachers by looking at news reports, Department of Education data, and publicly available information on teacher shortages for every U.S. state found that "there are at least 39,700 vacant positions along with at least 288,000 positions being held by underqualified teachers, both of which are conservative estimates of the extent of teacher shortages nationally." The article also states, "If we extrapolate the vacancy rate (i.e., on a per-student basis) to states where we were unable to find data, the national vacancy count is closer to 57,600." (Nguyen, T. D., Lam, C. B., & Bruno, P.)

Through researching this topic and editing the film, it was useful to share statistics illustrating the teacher shortage crisis in Montana and nationally to provide context. The percentage of K-12 public schools in the U.S. that face challenges hiring educators (86 percent for the 2023-2024 school year) was cited from the National Center for Education Statistics (Delarosa). This problem is widespread in America; Winnett is not an exception to the rule. The 853 teacher job vacancies in Montana statistic, originally found on the Office of Public Instruction job board, came from an August 2024 article in the Montana Free Press about the teacher shortage issue in the state (Sakariassen). I cross-referenced the number listed in the article with the OPI job posting page, and it appears to be correct. In a Montana State University Extension service presentation, I found 83 percent of vacancies were in rural Montana places (CRRE Overview - Center for Research on Rural Education | Montana State University). Winnett is average for school vacancies and not unusually hard-hit, but as a rural school, it's an example of a school that faces more challenges filling those vacancies.

The teacher shortage issue appears to be at a crisis point with no end in sight. Interestingly, the COVID pandemic came up often in conversations I had with administrators, and this period seems to have exacerbated the problem significantly for various reasons, including the difficulty of teaching remotely. Among potential solutions to hiring and keeping teachers, according to at least one of my subjects, would be for the funding model for schools, particularly rural schools, to be different and improved. Teacher wages are not what they should be, and that is true of most places in the U.S. According to an article in the Montana Free Press, Montana public school funding comes from a mix of sources, with state funding (around 40%), local property taxes (about 36%), and federal sources (roughly 19%) contributing to the overall

K-12 budget. (Dietrich, Eric, and Alex Sakariassen.) With the budget and implementation tools of the Department of Education coming under fire in recent months, this may change where state and local governments will need to step up the money they allocate for educational purposes.

The need for significantly increased funding in education is great in many areas like teacher salaries and technology, and likely difficult to do without raising taxes on federal, state or local levels – teacher pay being among the most critical areas that could benefit. If private funding of schools becomes common, there may be an increase in charter schools. While teacher pay varies from state to state, one article on the topic suggests that the rounded national average of \$65,000 should increase 31 percent to a median \$85,000 salary. (Will, Madeline) I am unaware what the teachers in this film are paid, but from all accounts, it would be par for the course in the state. The part in the film where Nicole Tholt speaks about funding is powerful because education resources are threatened with recent federal cuts on top of an already challenging situation.

Teaching is a dynamic, difficult, and demanding profession. I find it remarkable to find people willing to teach for less pay than what it's worth, especially in places that are commonly less appealing to live because of being so remote. This is why I chose to focus on teachers who are dedicated community members and who thrive despite the challenges. As someone whose life was changed by such an educator, the issue is close to my heart; good teachers are a vital part of any community. A teacher's influence has an even greater potential to affect the trajectory of rural communities since it is not uncommon for students to stay or return to where they grew up.

### Section 3.2: ARTISTIC APPROACH

Since the area around Winnett is so vast, I wanted to emphasize the scale with selective drone footage at the beginning and the end of the film, tying the whole piece together.

Fortunately, I had excellent help with getting drone footage from Lex Harold, a fellow filmmaker I worked with at MTPBS, along with a few shots I took myself. I felt it was important to show that this is a very rural place far removed from cities and population centers to bring the viewer into the stark experience. Aesthetically, the parts of the film shot with a camera were taken in S-Cinetone on a Sony FX3 and color-graded to enhance blues, reds, and yellows because I've always been drawn to primary colors, and primary colors also remind me of school. The film *Harlan County, USA* also inspired the emphasis on primary colors in the grading.

There are many b-roll shots that were filmed in longer takes, because that's how I tend to film to begin with, but also because I felt the sweeping, expansive landscape called for longer takes because of the dramatic bluffs, and it's a little town like an island on a sea of prairie.

Some takes inside the school took longer to film to make sure the right kind of action was in the shot. For instance, filming welding scenes in the shop class or machinery working in the shop, I wanted to make sure I got sparks flying to make a long enough shot to edit with sparks going or laser cutting throughout. It also took several attempts to get good action in the classroom with all the kids not looking at the camera, for example.

The sound design choices of wind and insects were meant to be as close as possible to what was heard in the actual environment when natural sound was not used, like in the

introductory drone footage, for example. Wind is a big factor in the area, and it took some research to find the right kind of wind to balance insect and bird sounds.

The interviews with the teachers were filmed in their classrooms because I wanted them to be comfortable in their environment, and I wanted that environment to inform the audience more about the teachers in a richer context than a conference room, for example. To build on the interviews if I were to make an extended cut of this film, I would try adding more participatory elements. A big part of why I made this film is my connection to it, so weaving that into the larger story could be interesting. As for the structuring of the film, I wanted the teachers to be profiles, little vignettes within one overarching story; in hindsight, intercutting the interviews and b-roll footage may have been an interesting cut, but while making the film, it made sense to me to have them be more like brief portraits.

A key inspiration for the film came from the MontanaPBS Impact news show. I happened to see a segment on PBS NewsHour that featured their coverage of what's being done to combat the teacher shortage in Montana, and it was well done. The reporter, Stan Parker, filmed at Havre High, and what I took away from the piece was how well he filmed people in the school's ecosystem, from students and teachers to staff and administrators. The way the sequences were cut seamlessly, and I appreciated how well the piece flowed. In my own filmmaking process, I tried to carry that same seamless quality with varying degrees of success; because it was three vignettes, the structure was naturally different, but within those vignettes, I hope the effect carries. I specifically modeled the drone to inside-the-school shot sequence after this piece to give a sense of depth and place to the story; I also tried to emulate the interview setup within a classroom setting – placing the teacher in the environment that is their domain and where they

feel comfortable. *The Heart of Winnett* starts with drone footage of the bluffs to bring visual context, then the town and then the school.

One important element of the film toward the end is the use of title cards for statistics about the teacher shortage in the U.S. and Montana, which was inspired by the film *Nanook of the North*. While the film itself is largely problematic and has little cultural nuance combined with heavy use of colonial stereotypes, I found the title card tool helpful in making this film, since I did not feel like narrating was a good fit. Title cards are so integral to my film that I had them at the beginning at first, but the introduction became too long, so they were moved closer to the ending to punctuate the story.

The film *Sweetgrass* also influenced the making of this documentary, both visually/aesthetically and in the approach to gathering footage. Filmed in rural Montana, many of the landscapes and longer shots inspired my own filmmaking in *The Heart of Winnett*. I also appreciated the use of natural sound in *Sweetgrass* like wind, sheep baying, and cowboys cussing. In my sound design, some of the sounds I got from a sound library, but for most of the film, the sound the audience hears is the natural sound of the environment. Themes of transition and change from *Sweetgrass* were something I aspired to make in my film using footage collected from different seasons throughout the year, most notably autumn. The portrait of rural Montana portrayed in the film *Sweetgrass* is vast, breathtaking, and visceral; I hope that the portrayal of Winnett and the surrounding areas, especially from the drone shots, is similar. I deliberated wirelessly micing the teachers, as was done in *Sweetgrass*; the attempt to do this did not technically work out, so I used the shotgun mic audio from the camera instead, but the thought process to use wireless mics came from how *Sweetgrass* was filmed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THEORIZING THE FILM

Regarding the documentary pedigree of *The Heart of Winnett*, the theoretical influences with the most impact would have to be direct cinema and a blend of the qualities of observational and participatory modes of filmmaking, as described by Bill Nichols.

Through making several films for school and videos for Montana PBS, I have been most comfortable behind the camera with as little obvious involvement as possible; it could be due to my shier nature and the principles hard-wired from journalism school of neutrality and impartiality. This lines up with my understanding of direct cinema to capture reality as it unfolds with minimal intervention by the filmmaker. Getting to the heart of the matter was crucial to me.

Save for the interviews with the teachers, the filming around Winnett, at the fair, and the school was done observationally, with me attempting to blend into the background as much as possible. I didn't want people looking directly at the camera in most cases for b-roll shots because I wanted the film to have a slice-of-life type of feel, as if the viewer were at the fair looking at livestock projects themselves, for instance. In this respect, a good portion of the film could be considered observational. I have favored long takes as a cinematographer and editor with a light touch in post-production to alter any footage. As it pertains to other conventions, I decided against using voice-over narration, though I did include some sound effects and music.

“All of the forms of control that a poetic or expository filmmaker might exercise over the staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene became sacrificed to observing lived experience spontaneously. Honoring this spirit of observation in post-production editing

as well as during shooting resulted in films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews.” (Nichols, 110)

An example of a primarily observational film that influenced my work would be *Grey Gardens* (1975), filmed by the Maysles brothers. Their treatment of the subjects letting their lives play out is what I aspired to make; I love letting life and a scene develop in front of the camera as opposed to obvious manipulation and participation. In theory class, we discussed whether the presence of a camera alone counts as an influence on reality, and of course, I would agree that it is to varying degrees, but I mean more performative/active involvement – that is something I do not feel comfortable doing at this stage in my filmmaking career. (There is a scene in *Grey Gardens* where one of the brothers is reflected to the viewer in a mirror, and I almost included a shot like that I have of myself filming a glass door at Winnett School.)

While I would describe the b-roll type of footage in *The Heart of Winnett* as filmed almost exclusively observational except for a shot that made it into the cut of two girls and their pigs at the fair, the film would not be what it is or even structured the same way without the critical interviews granted by the subjects. In this respect, the film has participatory elements; however, the viewer never sees/hears me as the interviewer or filmmaker in the footage. Traditional participatory work usually includes the filmmaker on screen, but throughout the making of this film, I chose not to include myself on camera, mostly because I did not want to detract from the message or the subjects. I do see that it might have added something to the storytelling as well if I had chosen a more participatory route in addition to the interviews.

Since I wanted to avoid using voice-over narration to tell the teachers' stories and wanted those stories to be in their voices, I decided interviews were the best way to go. I did not want to be on camera or have my voice asking questions off-camera, but this aspect of the film is still what I would consider participatory, similar to *Chronicle of a Summer* in that the interviews determine the structure of the story, only I'm behind the camera and less actively involved. In *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), many people are asked questions, but *The Heart of Winnett* is focused on three people. What I took from that film would be the conversational, casual nature of the interviews, though my questions were cut out in the edit. I wanted the subjects to be comfortable instead of having a clinical, formal feeling to the interviews. In their accounts, I wanted to combine what they say to weave together a narrative that illustrates a composite. "Filmmakers make use of the interview to bring different accounts together in a single story. The voice of the filmmaker emerges from the weave of contributing voices and the material brought in to support what they say." (Nichols, 122)

The two modes of documentary that most inspired this piece (observation/participatory) are often considered to have contradictory aspects; by combining these two modes, I hope that *The Heart of Winnett* builds on traditional documentary storytelling. The tender treatment of framing in *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* inspired the cinematography in this film. This documentary, while shot in a primarily observational manner, clearly has a stance that teachers are undervalued and underrepresented. I want this film to illustrate that dedicated educators are vital, cherished members of rural communities and that supporting educators is important.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## DISSEMINATION

Section 5.1: Financial InformationTable A1. Budget for *The Heart of Winnett* film.

## Altiplano, LLP

The Heart of Winnett  
Budget

| Acct # | Description                     | QTY | Rate     | Unit<br>Days | Subtotal      | Total                |
|--------|---------------------------------|-----|----------|--------------|---------------|----------------------|
| 101.00 | <b>Personnel</b>                |     |          |              |               |                      |
| 101.01 | Producer/Director/Principal     | 1   | 3,500.00 | Flat         | 3,500.00      |                      |
| 101.02 | Drone videography               | 1   | 200.00   | 1            | 200.00        |                      |
|        | <b>Personnel Subtotal</b>       |     |          |              |               | <b>3,700.00</b>      |
| 102.00 | <b>Equipment/Facilities</b>     |     |          |              |               |                      |
| 102.01 | Camera                          | 1   | 100.00   | 7            | 700.00        |                      |
| 102.02 | Lighting Package                | 1   | 100.00   | 1            | 100.00        |                      |
|        | <b>Equipment/Subtotal</b>       |     |          |              |               | <b>800.00</b>        |
| 104.00 | <b>Post Production</b>          |     |          | hours        |               |                      |
| 104.01 | Text animation                  | 1   | 50.00    | Allow        | 50.00         |                      |
|        | <b>Post Production Subtotal</b> |     |          |              |               | <b>50.00</b>         |
| 105.00 | <b>Travel</b>                   |     |          |              |               |                      |
| 105.96 | Gas                             | 1   | 600.00   | 1            | <u>600.00</u> |                      |
|        | <b>Travel Subtotal</b>          |     |          |              |               | <b><u>600.00</u></b> |
|        | <b>Grand Total</b>              |     |          |              |               | <b>\$5,150.00</b>    |

Section 5.2: Distribution

I will be submitting this film to the Bozeman Documentary Film Festival 2025, as well as other festivals where it seems applicable, like the Tallgrass Film Festival in Wichita, Kansas, and the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Nikki Vradenburg of MTPBS also said that she may want to show it in education circles to places like Office of Public Instruction and the National Education Association.

I will send this film to Paul Heitt-Reine, the content director at Montana PBS, and I have confirmed that there is interest in broadcasting it. I do not foresee any conflicts of interest since it was funded by me or liability issues since I have signed waivers that Montana PBS would find, so my projection is positive that this film would be able to air on the network at some point as a filler slot. Smokey Hills Public Television would also be a good place to float this film, which will also be hosted on my personal website ([www.maritehmke.com](http://www.maritehmke.com)) and on my Vimeo and YouTube accounts.

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