

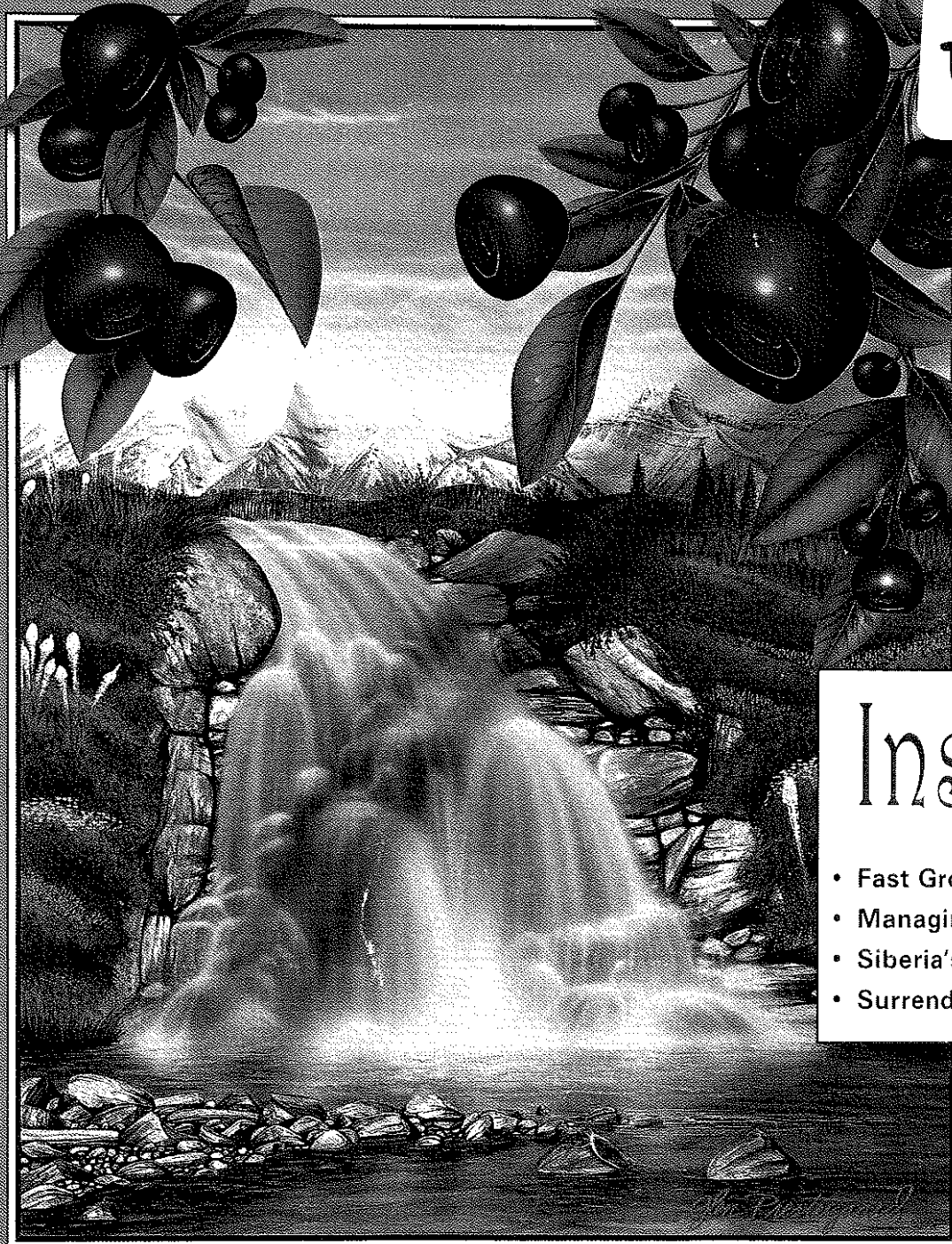
MONTANA Business Quarterly

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Montana's Huckleberry Industry

B2.2.6



Inside:

- Fast Growing Counties
- Managing Gen X
- Siberia's "Treasure State"
- Surrendered Licenses



Congrats!

Bureau Board member Elouise Cobell recently won a \$310,000 fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. This "genius grant" was awarded for her work in organizing the tribally owned Blackfeet National Bank and her leadership on other projects. Cobell was one of 23 artists, scientists, educators, and scholars to win this prestigious award.

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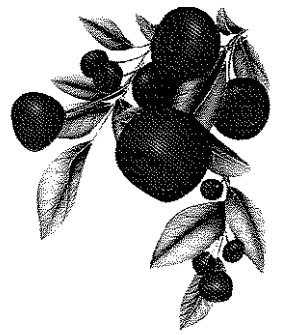


Cover illustration by artist Glen Prestegaard, commissioned by the Huckleberry People, Missoula, MT.

Correction: Overzealous editing of the Spring 1997 MBQ resulted in an error. The second sentence of Alan Baquet's Agricultural Forecast (page 20) should read Montana's agriculture industry "accounts for over 30 percent of the state's basic employment, labor income, and gross sales." We apologize for the misunderstanding and thank the alert reader who brought it to our attention.



Huckleberry picker in the 1930s.



Montana's Huckleberry Industry

by Shannon H. Jahrig, Daniel P. Wichman,
Charles E. Keegan III, and Rebecca Richards

Big Sky Country, the home of cowboys, fly fishermen, and Grizzly bears—and more recently of accused Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and various antigovernment militia groups—has another claim to fame: the Montana huckleberry.

Plump, juicy, and bluish-black in color, huckleberries grow mostly in western Montana and northern Idaho and have become quite the craze.

"Huckleberries have something of a cult following," writes a reviewer for an online magazine, *The Net-Net*. The popularity of huckleberry jams and jellies has led Montana huckleberry manufacturers to cook up some new products—syrup, honey, chocolate, salad dressing, beer and, the latest, huckleberry barbecue sauce. Huckleberry-scented soaps and lotions sell by the truckload. Huckleberry-decorated pot holders, dishtowels, and posters are quickly snatched off the shelves.

Eat them, drink them, spread them over your body, hang them on the wall—these berries have gained worldwide recognition over the past few years.

In fact, Montana's huckleberry industry has grown 55 percent since 1990. In a survey of Montana's 14 major huckleberry manufacturers, The University of Montana Bureau of Business and Economic Research found that in 1990, huckleberry sales were \$980,000. By 1996, sales had grown to \$1.528 million.

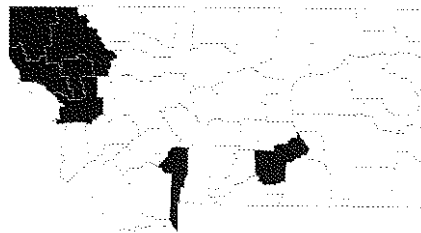
Local huckleberry manufacturers figure there are several reasons for this growth. Partly responsible is the Department of Commerce's "Made in Montana" program, which promotes the state, as well as its products.

"The program works to elevate Montana products," says Rebecca Baumann, a trade specialist at the department. "People think of Montana as a good, clean, interesting place. They are eager to see the 'Made in Montana' sticker. It enhances sales."

Also appealing is the novelty of the huckleberry. It's a unique commodity, only available in a small part of the world. Nostalgia also plays a role, at least with baby boomers, who have memories of

Grandma making preserves and serving her specialty with homemade bread. This generation buys jam because it reminds them of their childhood, says Pamela Gates Siess, whose family has been in the huckleberry business for almost fifty years.

Figure 1
Counties with Major
Huckleberry Manufacturers



The new generation doesn't have the same memories, though. "Grandma's not making jam anymore, she's out playing golf," Siess says. To capture this market, manufacturers must use a different technique. For example, Generation Xers (post Baby Boomers) are into things "wild and natural"—a category huckleberries easily fall into—and if products are marketed for this quality, they may have a better chance for success, she says. Anyway, producers theorize that once someone from any

generation acquires a taste, they're hooked.

The "Made in Montana" program coincides with Montana's increased visibility in the media. Montana's wild rivers and rugged landscape have been showcased in major movies like *A River Runs Through It* and *River Wild*.

The state has become a movie star retreat with celebrities like Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, Mel Gibson, Andie MacDowell, Dennis Quaid, Glenn Close, Michael Keaton, and Brooke Shields buying up sizable chunks of land. Montana-made wackos like accused Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and the Freemen have brought the state some notoriety too.

Meanwhile, most people know Montana for Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks, Flathead Lake, and the Madison River, and for backpacking, hunting, and fishing. Tourists continue to visit the state and often want to take back a unique Montana item like huckleberries.

*"Eat them, drink them,
spread them over your
body, hang them on the
wall—these berries have
gained worldwide recogni-
tion over the past few
years."*



Table 1
Sales Value of Huckleberry Products by Montana
Huckleberry Product Manufacturers, 1996

	<u>Value</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Jams, jellies, preserves	\$ 846,550	55%
Chocolates, candies	\$ 297,850	19%
Syrups, toppings, honey	\$ 227,520	15%
Ice cream	\$ 39,960	3%
Baked goods	\$ 9,120	1%
Beverages, raw berries, vinegar and lotions	\$ <u>107,000</u>	<u>7%</u>
Total huckleberry product sales	\$1,528,000	100%

Table 2
Sales of Huckleberry Products by Market Region,
Montana 1996¹

	<u>Sales</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Local sales ²	\$ 465,780	30%
Inland region ³	\$ 559,170	37%
Other sales regions ⁴	\$ <u>503,050</u>	<u>33%</u>
Total sales	\$1,528,000	100%

¹Market regions reflect the point of sale of huckleberry products and not necessarily the final destination.

²Local sales are within or nearby the community where the facility exists.

³Inland region sales are those outside the local area but within the region of Idaho, Montana, and the Spokane, WA area.

⁴Other sales regions are outside the local and inland region areas.

Table 3
Marketing Channels for Huckleberry Products
Manufactured in Montana, 1996

	<u>Percent of Sales</u>
Sales controlled by manufacturers	50%
Sales controlled by other distributors	<u>50%</u>
Total sales	100%

Table 4
Source of Berries Received by Montana's
Huckleberry Product Manufacturers in 1996

	<u>Pounds of Berries</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Berries harvested in Northwest Montana	49,950	85%
Berries harvested in North Idaho	<u>9,100</u>	<u>15%</u>
Total berries received for processing	59,050	100%

Just about any Montana gift shop carries an array of huckleberry products. NBC anchor David Brinkley, actor Beau Bridges, and Lea Thompson from the TV show *Caroline in the City* all sampled Montana huckleberries while visiting the Trading Post in St. Ignatius, Montana. Tour buses with passengers from Austria, France, Germany, Japan, and New Zealand stop by the Trading Post's huckleberry kitchen on their way to Glacier Park. Tourists often leave with mail order forms so they can send huckleberry gifts to friends and family throughout the world. The increasing practice of selling by mail order may help explain some of the phenomenal growth in the industry since 1990.

Montana's huckleberry industry has been around in some shape or form since the 1930s—from Grandma canning berries and storing them in the cellar to large commercial operations, according to a study of huckleberry pickers conducted by The University of Montana-Missoula Department of Sociology.

When the economy collapsed during the Great Depression of the 1930s and there were few jobs, people went into a berry frenzy, picking huckleberries by the bushel for canneries in the Bitterroot and Flathead Valleys. After World War II, the huckleberry industry more or less came to a halt. Better jobs like logging, construction, and dam building were available. Before the war, huckleberries sold for 50 cents a gallon. By the early 1980s when the modern industry really took off, the berries brought \$3 per gallon. By 1996, the price had risen to between \$15 and \$20 per gallon.

While the economic situation in the 1990s may not resemble that of the 1930s, both periods can be characterized as huckleberry heydays. During the Depression, people had lost jobs and needed to find other kinds of work. Huckleberries were a source of income. Because of sawmill closures and related job layoffs during the 1990s, Montanans—particularly those in Lincoln and Sanders counties—have tried to supplement their income by picking huckleberries and selling their products at fruit stands. This sideline business has given people one more option for staying in Montana, even though they no longer have full-time forest industry jobs.

Eva Gates Homemade Preserves of Bigfork is the oldest huckleberry business in the state. It began in 1949 when Pamela Gates Siess' Grandma Eva cooked up a few batches of huckleberries and her Grandpa peddled the preserves to local stores. Montana now has 14 major huckleberry manufacturers who use nearly 12,000 gallons (or 60,000 pounds) of huckleberries per year for a variety of products including jams, jellies and preserves; chocolates and candies; syrups, toppings, and blended honey; ice cream; baked goods; and beverages, raw berries, vinegar, and lotions (Table 1). Manufacturers mostly rely on local pickers to supply quality berries and are completely dependent on Mother Nature to supply the right weather conditions. They sell their products to local, regional, and international markets and most have plans for expanding in the future. They are generally optimistic about the future of the huckleberry industry, though some have concerns about land management issues and permitting regulations (see sidebar). The Bureau of Business and Economic Research recently completed a census of Montana's huckleberry manufacturers for 1996. Here is what the Bureau found.



Above: Pamela Gates Siess in the middle with her daughter on the left and sister on the right. Top left: Eva Gates Homemade Preserves kitchen and store. Bottom left: Worker puts labels on jars.

The Census

For the census, the Bureau attempted to contact all major commercial huckleberry product manufacturers in Montana, but not the many informal manufacturers such as restaurants and ice cream parlors that may incorporate huckleberries in some of their primary products. The major manufacturers were asked to provide information on products manufactured, sales value, market areas, volume of berries processed, geographic source of berries, and employment involved in manufacturing huckleberries.

The census identified 14 major commercial huckleberry manufacturers operating in 1996. These firms were located in seven Montana counties, concentrated in western and northwestern Montana (Figure 1). Flathead County had the largest concentration with six manufacturers, followed by Lincoln County with three.

Firms provided information for three market areas: *local, regional, and other sales regions*. Thirty percent of the sales were *local*, or within 50 miles of their facility; 37 percent were *regional*, or outside their local area, but included other places in Montana and Idaho, and the Spokane, Washington area; and 33 percent were *other regions* outside local and regional market areas, including some sales in other countries (Table 2).

The census found that Montana huckleberry manufacturers control about half of their sales distribution by selling from their own retail outlet, through bazaars and trade shows, or by mail order; the other half is handled by other retailers (Table 3).

About 85 percent of the huckleberries were harvested in six Montana counties: Flathead, Lake, Lincoln, Mineral, Missoula, and Sanders. Virtually all of the remaining 15 percent came from northern Idaho (Table 4).

Montana's huckleberry manufacturers depend heavily on independent berry pickers to supply them with enough berries. About half of the manufacturers rely on the same core of pickers year after year because they've developed a good working relationship and have more control over berry quality. The other half of Montana manufacturers don't rely on the same berry pickers every year, but buy from whoever brings in the berries. Not surprisingly,

pickers supplying the manufacturers generally live near the berry source in western and northwestern Montana communities like Libby, Troy, Eureka, Kalispell, Hungry Horse, Bigfork, St. Ignatius, and Missoula.

When asked what qualities or conditions they seek, nearly all manufacturers mentioned cleanliness, freshness, plumpness, ripeness, and size. Some manufacturers stipulated that berries had to be handpicked, rather than picked with mechanical devices that often damage the berries.

Following is a closer look at several Montana huckleberry products businesses.

Eva Gates Homemade Preserves, Bigfork

From the time she was a little girl, Pamela Gates Siess always knew she would eventually take over the business her grandmother built in 1949. In 1985, she did.

Siess grew up watching her Grandma Eva make preserves from strawberries, raspberries, black caps, and huckleberries and sell them out of her garage. Over the years, Siess learned all about the preserve business, and when her mother decided to retire as manager, she was ready to take her turn.

Grandma Eva's idea for the business started in the kitchen and it just took off, Siess says. One year the strawberry patch produced more berries than the family could use so Eva made preserves. Her husband immediately saw the potential for a business. So he loaded up the car and traveled all over the state selling Eva's goods.

"There was a huge demand for the native berries," Siess says. "And my Grandma's was the only company making preserves."

Customers wanted the preserves for themselves, as well as for gifts for friends and families. A year later, in 1950, Eva started selling products via mail. Today, mail order is still the biggest portion of the business.

For many years, Eva Gates Homemade Preserves was the only such business in the state. Eva's kitchen, located one mile north of Bigfork, had absolutely no competition until the late 1970s when huckleberry businesses started springing up.



In 1979, the kitchen moved into Bigfork because the family needed more space. Today, it's in the front part of the shop, and visitors can watch the cooks stirring up pots of huckleberries.

Since 1990, the huckleberry-manufacturing firm has grown almost 40 percent. The increasing popularity of these big, purple berries has certainly helped, and so has tourism. Bigfork traditionally drew tourists who perused the art galleries and novelty shops of Electric Avenue, but in early 1990s the city saw a huge influx of new visitors, as well as people moving to the area. Business definitely picked up because of this steady stream of tourists and newcomers.

The Bigfork company's business has not slowed because of other competitors. However, Siess has some concerns about places that start up and fold in a short time. Sometimes the reason these businesses fail is that their products are not high quality, she says. Poor quality goods could prejudice potential customers against huckleberries.

"If somebody comes to Montana and takes a bite of a huckleberry product and says 'oh my God this is the worst thing I ever tasted' we've lost a prospective customer," Siess says. "They'll never try huckleberries again."

Eva Gates' now employs about 12 workers during peak season (summer) and processes close to 11,000 pounds of huckleberries per year. Siess relies on local pickers for berry supply. In fact, a family from Libby has picked berries for the Gates throughout four generations.

Several issues might cloud Siess' bright outlook for the future of the huckleberry industry. First, the cost of items like jars continues to rise because of the distance from suppliers, some located in cities as far as Denver and Spokane. Second, berries are also being harvested by out-of-state pickers and shipped out-of-state for sales and processing—leaving Montana huckleberry firms out of the loop. And, of course, the business is dependent on Mother Nature. Bad weather means few berries.

Despite these concerns, Siess plans to keep manufacturing

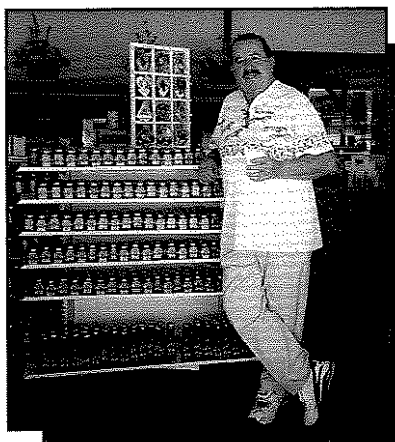
huckleberry products. Eventually, she will pass the business on to her daughter—the great granddaughter of Eva Gates.

Doug Allard's Trading Post, St. Ignatius

Doug Allard isn't giving away any secret recipes. But imprinted on every jar is this clue: "Cooked slowly in an open kettle from an old family recipe for better flavor." A little vague, but visitors to the Trading Post's kitchen will testify that whatever the recipe, it's tasty.

Located just off of Highway 93 on the way to Flathead Lake and Glacier National Park, the Trading Post draws a glitzy crowd. Movie stars, TV news anchors, and international tourists often stop in for a taste of jelly or a huckleberry ice cream on the patio next to the kitchen. Tourists are a big part of the business, but the Trading Post also sells huckleberry products to local grocery stores, gift shops, and bed and breakfasts.

In 1996, the kitchen processed 2,000 pounds of huckleberries—a banner year. However, the kitchen is a relatively new addition to The Trading Post. Owner Doug Allard, a member of the Flathead Confeder-



Doug Allard

ated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, opened a souvenir store in 1973. Over the years, the post has expanded to include a gas station/convenience store, a motel, and an Indian museum. Decorated with an enormous stuffed bear and several varieties of mounted animals, Doug Allard's store specializes in Indian products—moccasins, dolls, jewelry, rugs, and art work.

The huckleberry portion of the business has only been around for four years, and Jeanine Allard (Trading Post manager and Doug's daughter) says berry product sales keep growing every year. The store used to carry Eva Gate's preserves and syrups, but with the increasing demand for huckleberries, they decided to manufacture berry products themselves.

And these huckleberry products are extra special because they are "Made in Montana," and made by Indians on the Indian reservation. Pretty hard for tourists to resist.

Problem Areas or Concerns Expressed by Montana Huckleberry Products Manufacturers

- 1) Regulations imposed by public agencies including:
 - Permitting process for pickers
 - Restrictions on amounts of berries picked
 - Restrictions on mechanical pickers
- 2) Closure of roads by public and private timberland managers will limit access to huckleberry picking sites.
- 3) Huckleberries harvested by out-of-state pickers and shipped out-of state for sales and processing.
- 4) Huckleberries flourish in forested areas opened by timber harvest and/or fire. Dramatic reductions in timber harvest, as well as past practices of aggressive fire suppression, may reduce berry production.



The Great Northern Brewing Company, Whitefish

Not all huckleberry products come in jars, some come in beer mugs. Last year, patrons of this Whitefish brewery drank 624 barrels of huckleberry beer, which takes about 78 gallons of huckleberry juice to make.

In business for one year, the Great Northern Brewing Company brews five different kinds of beer: Black Star Premium, Black Star Black Lager, Big Fog Amber Lager, Wheatfish Hefeweizen, and Wild Huckleberry Wheat Lager.

With the growing demand for fruit beers, such as raspberry, apricot, peach, and cherry, the brewery decided to specialize in something unique to Montana—huckleberry beer.

Montana huckleberries make good beer because they aren't too sweet, according to brewery manager Kate Greenlee. While the brewery's clientele includes locals as well as tourists, it's usually tourists who request huckleberry beer, she says.

"People figure 'Hey, I'm in Montana, I better try huckleberry beer,'" Greenlee says. "It's a novelty, something they've never tried before."

Helen's Candies, Libby

Why has the huckleberry industry grown 55 percent since 1990? Dave Gaustad, owner of Helen's Candies in Libby has a few ideas. Declines in the timber industry, particularly in Libby, have caused job losses. Because of the depressed economy, every "Tom, Dick, and Harry" has decided to get into the huckleberry industry to try to supplement their income.

Gaustad, who has owned the business with his wife Kendra for the past 7 years, says another reason for the industry's growth is that Montana is becoming better known through the "Made in Montana" program, more tourists, and movies like Meryl Streep's *River Wild*, which was filmed in Libby several years ago.

At Helen's Candies—named after Helen Bundrock, one of the industry's pioneers and previous owner of the Gaustads' shop—huckleberry chocolates are the specialty. They also sell jams and syrups.

Although Helen's gets some tourists, most of their business consists of wholesale deals with northwest retailers. Mail order sales are also thriving right now and Christmas is a big season for the Libby huckleberry manufacturer.

Helen's employs up to 11 part-time workers and last year processed 2,000 pounds of huckleberries.

Bunny's Country Kitchen, Eureka

Bunny, of Bunny's Country Kitchen, is a one-woman show. Located in the far northwest corner of the state with a population of about 1,200, Eureka has been the home of Bunny Franklin and her huckleberry business for the past seven years. Last year she cooked

Montana's Major Huckleberry Product Manufacturers

Eva Gates Homemade Preserves, Bigfork, Montana, (406)837-4356.

Montana Juice Company, Billings, Montana, (406)254-1849.

Viki's Montana Classics, Bigfork, Montana, (406)837-5545.

JoNae's Chocolates, Bozeman, Montana, (406)585-9818.

Bunny's Country Kitchen, Eureka, Montana, (406)889-3911.

Honeyberry Farms, Hungry Horse, Montana, (406)387-5078.

Huckleberry Haven, Hungry Horse, Montana, (406)387-5731.

Huckleberry Patch, Hungry Horse, Montana (406)387-5670.

Bear Creek Fisheries, Libby, Montana, (406)293-6498.

Helen's Candies, Libby, Montana, (406)293-4687.

The Huckleberry People, Missoula, Montana, (406)721-6024.

Doug Allard's Trading Post, St. Ignatius, Montana, (406)745-2951.

Larchwood Farms, Trout Creek, Montana, (406)827-4943.

The Great Northern Brewing Company, Whitefish, Montana, (406)863-1000.

up about 750 pounds of huckleberries to sell at craft shows, grocery stores, and gift shops.

Bunny loves to make preserves and loves being her own boss. Her biggest challenge is keeping up with the competition and trying to get retailers to stock her Country Kitchen product.

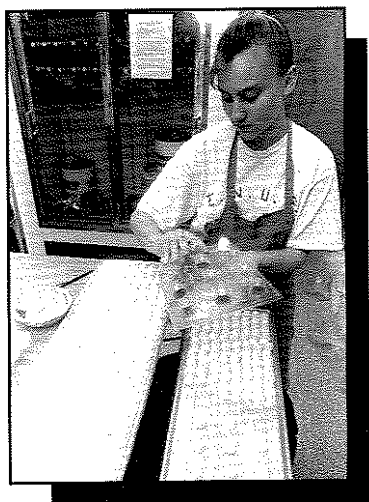
Husband Stephen notes that while Bunny can't compete with the volume of some of the other manufacturers, she makes up for it in quality.

"Look at the label, check the ingredients," Stephen says. "Bunny doesn't use any fillers."

The labels on some of her products trumpet the same notion: "Bunny's Berry Best."






The Richardson family has been supplying Montana gift shops with huckleberry jam for almost twenty years, but since 1990 the company's sales have grown about 75 percent. Diversification of products, major marketing efforts, and the change from a hobby to a serious business enterprise are the reasons for the increase, says Richardson,



Top: Lisa Richardson, marketing director/part owner of The Huckleberry People. Above and right: workers making chocolate and pouring jam into jars.

Photos on this page by Todd Goodrich, University Communications.



The Huckleberry People, Missoula

It took only 3 minutes on the QVC Home Shopping Network to sell 1,600 huckleberry gift boxes, more than some shops would sell in a year. Definitely a good day's work for Lisa Richardson, marketing director and part-owner of The Huckleberry People.

Most of the people who called in their credit card numbers to buy the gift boxes were from the East Coast and had never heard of huckleberries, Richardson says. It was sheer novelty that sold the Montana gift boxes. The Huckleberry People, along with twenty other Montana businesses selected by QVC, were featured on the home shopping television station.

Though their products don't typically move this quickly, sales are increasing steadily for the Missoula manufacturers.

Five years ago, Lisa and her brother Rusty took over the family business. For their parents, selling huckleberry products was a hobby. For Lisa and Rusty, it's a way to be able to stay in Montana and make a decent living—no small feat in a state with limited job opportunities and lower-than-average salaries.

The Richardson family has been supplying Montana gift shops with huckleberry jam for almost twenty years, but since 1990 the company's sales have grown about 75 percent. Diversification of products, major marketing efforts, and the change from a hobby to a serious business enterprise are the reasons for the increase, says Richardson, whose company buys between 10,000-25,000 pounds of huckleberries per year, the largest quantity bought by any manufacturer in the state.

After a two-year stint with the Republican National Party in Washington D.C., Richardson, a University of Montana graduate, was ready to come home where people were more relaxed and less "self-important." Richardson, who has a bachelor's degree in accounting and a master's in finance, now handles all marketing and product design, while her brother handles sales. They oversee 30 full-and part-time employees.

The siblings' first move was to expand the product line and reach out to markets beyond Montana. The Huckleberry People invested heavily in chocolate, creating a new line of white and dark chocolate products. The company's most recent creation is "Cowboy Chocolate," a line that includes a cowboy candy bar, cowboy bark (as in bark from a tree), and old-fashioned mixed candy.

Inventing new and different products is the key to success, Richardson believes, especially for wholesalers like The Huckleberry

People who don't have their own store nor the tourist traffic of Eva Gates and the Trading Post.

Packaging and marketing of the product are also critical. Richardson designs special labels for the company's jam and jelly jars. For example, all products going to Glacier or Yellowstone have the park's name on the jar because tourists buy these items for souvenirs from their trip. She has recently designed a label for products now available at Wheat Montana, a flour mill and bakery/restaurant located off the highway near Three Forks, Montana and on the way to Yellowstone Park. Tourists stop at Wheat Montana to try the bread and tour the mill. Now they can eat their homemade bread with The Huckleberry People's jam.

Smart marketing like this has certainly been responsible for some of The Huckleberry People's growth. When products complement each other it only makes sense to work together, says Richardson. In addition to Wheat Montana, she collaborates with High Country Beef Jerky, a rapidly growing company in Lincoln, Montana, on marketing and advertising campaigns. And she is always looking for new marketing opportunities.

Running her own company sometimes means 16-hour days, Richardson says. But, there are definitely perks, like bringing her three-month old baby to work with her once in awhile. Most importantly, she can have a good income, a growing business, and a quality lifestyle in Montana. □

Research data for this article came from the BBER survey, one year of interviewing pickers, processors, and forest service personnel, and a recently completed community survey of residents in Lincoln and Sanders counties regarding their resource use, including huckleberries.

Rebecca Richards will present additional findings about the huckleberry industry in Toronto at the Rural Sociological Society Annual Meeting. This project was funded by the USDA McIntire-Stennis Cooperative Forestry and the National Science Foundation MONTS programs.

Shannon H. Jahrig is publications director at the Bureau of Business and Economic Research, The University of Montana-Missoula; Daniel P. Wichman is a Bureau research specialist; Charles E. Keegan III is the Bureau director of forest industry research. Rebecca Richards is an assistant professor of sociology at UM.
