



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## Housekeeping

by Marilynne Robinson



# Table of Contents

## Housekeeping

About the Book.....	3
About the Author .....	4
Historical and Literary Context .....	6
Other Works/Adaptations .....	8
Discussion Questions.....	10
Additional Resources.....	11
Credits.....	12

“I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes.”

### Preface

Even avid readers will be hard pressed to find another novel quite like Marilynne Robinson's luminous *Housekeeping*. Set in the remote, imaginary town of Fingerbone, Idaho, it presents the precarious and eccentric lives of three generations of Foster family women. *Housekeeping* chronicles the deaths, abandonments, and insecurities that beset the Fosters so vividly that it is often heartbreaking, but the novel also radiates a mysterious joy and tender humor commensurate with Ruth's childlike capacity for the sheer wonder of being alive.



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A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

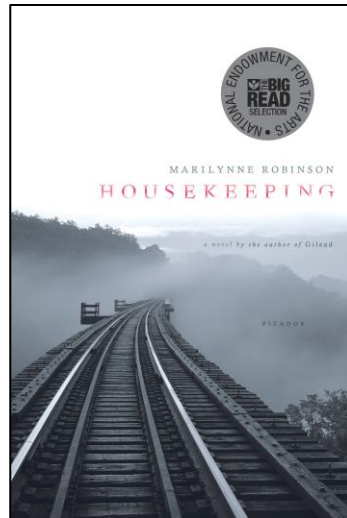
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



# About the Book

## Introduction to the Book

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) tells the story of Ruthie, a quiet, friendless girl living in a remote Idaho town called Fingerbone. The train that travels into the cold mountains of Fingerbone crosses a lake that has claimed the lives of Ruthie's grandfather by accident and her mother by suicide, leaving Ruthie and her younger sister Lucille with their grandmother, Sylvia Foster.



When Sylvia passes away, her two sisters-in-law move to Fingerbone to take care of the girls. Though pleasant and dutiful, Misses Lily and Nona Foster enjoy their solitude. After the first hard winter, they leave Ruthie and Lucille in the hands of a younger guardian, the girls' aunt Sylvie, who returns home after sixteen years.

Sylvie, their mother's younger sister, is a boxcar drifter content with her itinerant lifestyle, but she commits to staying in Fingerbone to keep house and raise the girls. She has little experience with either and becomes like a "mermaid in a ship's cabin." Most days, she wanders to the lake by the train tracks and drifts in a stolen rowboat. In a house soon covered in soot and cobwebs, cans and newspapers, she feeds the girls from jelly jars and plates made from detergent boxes.

Ruthie takes it all in stride, but her sister, Lucille, sees the other children in town and wants no part of Sylvie's world. Whereas the sisters are inseparable through much of their young lives, they begin to grow apart in their teenage years. Lucille matures into a prissy woman who swings her hips and sews her own dresses; Ruthie remains a tall, gangly child with a buzzard's hunch and a distaste for school. Soon their lives, like the house and the town and their dark family history, get lost in the tangled overgrowth of loneliness and neglect. The family ties that have kept them together can hold them no more.

In language as lyrical and lush as the landscapes it describes, Robinson tells a haunting story of the permanence of loss and the transitory nature of love. She reminds us that, despite the fragility of human relationships, our desires to hold onto them are what make us whole.

## Major Characters in the Book

### Edmund Foster

Although this patriarch is already dead when the novel begins, his decision to settle in the lonesome northwest town of Fingerbone haunts the lives of all the women who survive him. The victim of an eerie nighttime train derailment, his unexpected death forces his wife to raise their three daughters alone.

### Sylvia Foster

Sylvia continues to live in her Fingerbone house, with no thought of flight after her husband's death. She raises her children Molly, Helen, and Sylvie with neither complaint nor affection, the same way she cares for Helen's daughters, Ruthie and Lucille, until her own lonely death at 76.

### Lily and Nona Foster

Poor and set in their ways, Sylvia's two elderly sisters-in-law move from Spokane to Fingerbone to take care of Ruthie and Lucille after Sylvia's death. As their nerves and habits don't lend themselves to foster-mothering, they are delighted when a note from Sylvie arrives from Montana.

### Helen Foster Stone

Years before the novel's action, Helen flees Fingerbone with Reginald Stone, and Sylvia never accepts her daughter's Nevada wedding as legitimate. After almost eight years away, Helen suddenly returns from Seattle and leaves her daughters, Ruthie and Lucille, on Sylvia's porch before driving herself off a cliff and into the same lake that claimed her father's life.

### Sylvie Fisher

Helen's younger sister is a tall, gentle thirty-five-year-old woman who evades questions about her marriage. Although she has spent her adult life as a drifter, she returns to Fingerbone to take care of her nieces. Childless and childlike, Sylvie's inability to keep house doesn't interfere with her attachment to Ruthie and Lucille. But Fingerbone's sheriff doesn't agree, and, all the while, the bridge across the lake beckons.

### Ruthie

The opening words of *Housekeeping*—"My name is Ruth"—is almost the only time the novel's narrator isn't called Ruthie. A solitary and sensitive child, Ruthie becomes a tall, gangly young woman who admits that she has "never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming."

### Lucille

Ruthie's red-haired younger sister is embarrassed by Sylvie's eccentric habits and longs to go to Boston just "because it

# About the Author

isn't Fingerbone." By the novel's end, she is perhaps the loneliest character of all.

## Marilynne Robinson (b. 1943)

As one might imagine from reading her work, Marilynne Robinson is passionately tied to the dramatic northwest landscape of her childhood. She was born in Sandpoint, Idaho, where her family had lived for four generations: her grandparents were farmers and ranchers; her father was in the lumber industry. Robinson recalls hearing the whistles of passing trains, though "nothing ever seemed to stop" at the railroad junction in town.



Marilynne Robinson (Copyright Nancy Crampton)

She spent many hours at the edge of Sandpoint's large, cold, beautiful lake. Robinson's two sets of grandparents lived at opposite ends of the bridge that crossed the lake, which claimed the life of her mother's brother in a sailing accident before Robinson was born.

After graduating high school in nearby Coeur d'Alene, Robinson followed her brother to Brown University in Rhode Island, where she studied with the writer John Hawkes and nurtured her interest in nineteenth-century American literature and creative writing. She graduated in 1966, and from there went on to earn a PhD in English from the University of Washington in Seattle.

Once she completed her dissertation on Shakespeare, she was ready to begin work on *Housekeeping*, her first novel. She wrote much of it while teaching in France and, after that, in Massachusetts. She gave a draft of the novel to her friend and fellow writer John Clayton, who passed it on to an agent without her knowledge. "If he hadn't done that," says Robinson, "I'm not at all sure that I would ever have submitted it for publication." It was published in 1980 to widespread critical acclaim, winning the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel.

Since *Housekeeping*, Robinson has written many essays and book reviews in journals such as *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, was published in 2004. It won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

Robinson has served as visiting professor and writer-in-residence at several colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. In 1991, she joined the faculty of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She currently resides in Iowa, where she teaches and writes.

## An Interview with Marilynne Robinson

*On January 9, 2008, Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Marilynne Robinson at her home in Iowa City. Excerpts from their conversation follow.*

**Dan Stone:** What was your childhood like in Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene?

**Marilynne Robinson:** Sandpoint, at that time, had a more remote feeling than Coeur d'Alene, at least from my point of view. Both sets of my grandparents lived in Sandpoint, at the opposite ends of the bridge that crossed the lake which became *Housekeeping's* Fingerbone in my imagination. The most dramatic moments of my childhood all come from Sandpoint.

**DS:** Are those mostly memories or experiences of the outdoors?

**MR:** Yes, the landscape more than anything else. The lake is very impressive. It's very large and cold. It's like the local spirit of the place, and we spent a lot of time just hovering on the edges of it, looking at it and dipping into it.

**DS:** In *Housekeeping*, the accident with the train is especially poignant. Was there also the sense of mystery and loss associated with the lake?

**MR:** Before I was born, my mother's brother died in an accident, in a sailboat that was swept against a rock. That was a very great loss to my mother's family. I think my family stayed in northern Idaho because of the lake, because it was very beautiful. It's never been the easiest place in the world to live, you know. It's hard to describe, but it was as if they found something irrefutable, something they couldn't turn their backs on.

**DS:** Is there significance to the name "Fingerbone"? There is one reference in the novel to a Native American tribe called the Fingerbone tribe.

**MR:** In Idaho, Pend Oreille means "earbob," then there's the Nez Perce and Flathead—all the Indian names in that part of the country seem to refer to fragments of a body in one way or another. When I was a very small child, my father was changing a tire and he dropped the tire iron on the frozen ground. It bounced from end to end, and it made three equal sounds, three equal syllables. I remember being struck

by this. The ground was so cold that there was no diminishing of the impact. Fingerbone sounds to me like three equal syllables, along with a feeling of coldness and hardness.

**DS:** Was the line "Like a long legged fly upon the stream, his mind moves upon silence"—from Yeats's poem "Long-legged Fly"—in your mind when you were working on this novel?

**MR:** Yes. Remember, I didn't write the novel with the expectation it would be published. I studied English literature in graduate school, so Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson were on my mind. I've often thought that Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* could be called *Housekeeping*.

**DS:** *Housekeeping* is such a lyrical book, particularly during some of Ruth's internal musings. Do you write out loud?

**MR:** I hear a voice that I would say is not my voice. When I read *Housekeeping* out loud, I hear it over again in my mind. I'm very interested in the musicality of language. I spend a lot of time just listening to Bach, just to hear how a sentence falls in a certain sense. So that's what I do: I hear what I write, but I don't speak it out loud. I hear it in my mind.

# Historical and Literary Context

## The Life and Times of Marilynne Robinson

### 1940s

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- 1941: Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, December 7.
- 1943: Marilynne Robinson is born in Sandpoint, Idaho, on November 26.
- 1945: World War II ends.
- 1947: Commercial television available to the public.

### 1950s

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- 1953: Dwight D. Eisenhower inaugurated U.S. President, ushering in a period of economic prosperity.
- 1954: In *Brown v. Board of Education*, school segregation is ruled unconstitutional.
- Robinson attends high school in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

### 1960s

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- 1963: President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.
- 1964: Gulf of Tonkin Resolution officially embroils U.S. in Vietnam.
- 1966: Robinson graduates from Brown University and goes on to earn her PhD.

### 1970s

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- 1972: A fire at Sunshine Mine in Kellogg, Idaho takes ninety-one lives.
- 1972: Congress dedicates John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway, which connects Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks in Wyoming.
- Robinson works on *Housekeeping* with little thought of publication.

### 1980s

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- 1980: *Housekeeping* is published and wins the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel.
- 1980: Mount St. Helens in Washington erupts, covering northern Idaho with volcanic ash.
- 1989: Robinson's *Mother Country* is published.

### 1990s

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- 1990: Idaho celebrates the centennial of its statehood on July 3.
- 1991: Robinson joins the faculty of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.
- 1998: *The Death of Adam*, Robinson's book of ten eclectic essays, is published.

### 2000s

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- Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, is published in 2004; receives the Pulitzer Prize in 2005.

## The Western Railroads

As the industrial revolution changed the American economy and fences and railroads crisscrossed the western frontier, a new way of life emerged. Train travel opened up the West for people looking for a new job, a new start, or a new adventure. For many of the small outpost towns in the Northwest, trains were one of the few ways to get beyond the city limits.

The Northern Pacific Railway traversed Marilynne Robinson's hometown of Sandpoint, winding its way from Minnesota toward the Pacific Ocean. The towns along its route in Idaho were rarely a destination, but always a place for moving through. Although *Housekeeping's* Fingerbone is fictional, the railroad bridge is not; it was built in 1905 to replace the original, built in 1882. The bridge connects Sandpoint to Venton, Idaho, across an 8,000-foot-wide expanse of the Pend Oreille River.

By the 1930s, the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression caused a great migration out of the Plains states and into the groves and vineyards of California, as chronicled in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). An itinerant population also began moving through the country, making temporary homes on railroad cars and park benches. Among them, terms were codified to identify someone's status on the rails. According to Ben Reitman, a physician who worked with the poor in Chicago in the early twentieth century, "a hobo was someone who traveled and worked, a tramp was someone who traveled but didn't work, and a bum was someone who didn't travel and didn't work."

The image of the tramp has been an archetype of American fiction from Jack London to Jack Kerouac, a romanticized rebel who casts off responsibility for the freedom of the road, learning hard lessons about himself and society along

the way. In *Housekeeping*, Robinson's Sylvie doesn't fit the mold. Here is a tramp come home, responsible now for mothering two young girls, keeping up appearances around town, and keeping house. This interweaving of restlessness into domestication and domestication into restlessness is ultimately untenable. The girls and Sylvie must choose between a rumbling wanderlust and a place called home.

# Other Works/Adaptations

## Robinson and Her Other Works

Critics and fans alike have made much over the fact that more than two decades passed between Marilynne Robinson's first two novels: *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004). But during that long interim, Robinson wrote two works of nonfiction, *Mother Country* (1989) and *The Death of Adam* (1998), in addition to many essays and book reviews for various magazines and journals.

Robinson began writing *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution*, a finalist for the National Book Award, while on a teaching fellowship at the University of Kent in England. She had learned of a nuclear facility called Sellafield, located on the Cumbrian coast. Sellafield not only produced nuclear energy, but it yearly piped enormous amounts of radioactive waste into the Irish Sea. Nearly two percent of children in the village closest to the plant were dying of leukemia, but environmental groups and the media stood by. However, Robinson's central focus in *Mother Country* is not on the crime itself. Instead, her aim was to draw attention to a culture that would so passively allow its own destruction and to a state that would consciously sacrifice its own people to turn a profit.

Robinson's collection of ten critical essays, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, ranges from Darwinism to John Calvin, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to American Protestantism. In it she explores the devastating effect of modern philosophy on humanity and passionately argues for a restored morality, where humanity is no longer reconciled to routine genocide and worsening poverty.

*Gilead*, Robinson's epistolary second novel, is set in 1956 in the plains of western Iowa. The narrator, Reverend John Ames, is an aging Congregationalist minister who keeps a journal for his young son—fathered late in life—who will have to grow up without him. Robinson imagined the novel as "an old man at a desk writing to a child who's playing on the floor beside him, but writing as if to him as an adult." Because the father will not be alive to speak to his adult son directly, he pens a series of letters to convey the stories of his own father and grandfather. Ames describes the sacred bond between father and son and the eternal human struggle to learn how to forgive and how to love.

Through his journal entries, Ames bequeaths his son a father and a lineage and, in so doing, a moral vision: "There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient." Herself a practicing Congregationalist, Robinson has said, "The assumption behind any theology that I've ever been familiar with is that there is a profound beauty in being, simply in itself."

Robinson took a sabbatical from teaching at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in the fall of 2007 to complete her third novel, *Home* (2008). *Home* shares its setting and some characters with *Gilead*. The children of John Ames's closest friend, Reverend Robert Boughton, return to the town of Gilead to care for their dying father. As with her previous novels, Robinson's silky writing and fully wrought characters create a story that's both artistically elegant and emotionally meaningful.

## Works by Marilynne Robinson

- *Housekeeping*, 1980 (novel)
- *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution*, 1989 (non-fiction)
- *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, 1998 (non-fiction)
- *Gilead*, 2004 (novel)
- *Home*, 2008 (novel)
- *Lila*, 2014 (novel)
- *The Givenness of Things*, 2015 (essays)

## Housekeeping at the Movies

The novel *Housekeeping* doesn't exactly scream major motion picture. It's not a screaming sort of book, which makes the mere existence of a 1987 film version improbable enough, and the picture's fidelity to the novel and sly wit a small miracle. If anything, the Scottish writer-director Bill Forsyth loves the book too much—pouring long descriptive passages into voice-over—and doesn't trust himself quite enough.

Inheriting a role originally destined for Diane Keaton, Christine Lahti slips into Sylvie with all the ruffled ease of Sylvie herself shrugging into her ever-present overcoat. If Lahti appears perhaps overly fresh-faced for a woman who's spent years dodging "bulls," or railroad detectives, she more than makes up for it with her perfectly calibrated obliviousness to polite society. Her Sylvie is a woman out of step. Where most actresses might have played her a bit slow, just slightly behind whatever conversation she's in, Lahti gives her an eager quickness, as if she already knows what ridiculous thing you're going to say, and can't understand why you'd want to.

Shot in British Columbia—with a railroad bridge flush against the sky like a second horizon—Forsyth's respectful, bemused film of *Housekeeping* just goes to show that a ravishing setting and original characters can trump a not conspicuously cinematic story any day. The picture hums



with economical grace notes, from a nighttime train seen solely in the fire-lit glow it registers on Sylvie's face to the comic bump and clink of china, floating ankle-deep in a flooded house.

*Housekeeping* is a product of British Columbia in more ways than one, since it dates from the English producer David Puttnam's brief, doomed reign atop Columbia Pictures. Puttnam's old colleague Forsyth falters only in his casting of the young sisters, who let the film sag when Lahti's away. But *Housekeeping* makes a fine double bill with any of Forsyth's other sweet comedies, including but not limited to his masterpiece, *Local Hero* (1983). Then again, better to show them one at a time, with this odd gem off by itself, a film apart.

# Discussion Questions

1. Why might Marilynne Robinson have titled her first novel *Housekeeping*? What does housekeeping mean in the context of the novel?
2. Since *Housekeeping* is narrated by Ruth, everything we know is filtered through her perspective. Do you believe she is a reliable narrator? How might the story be different if told from another character's point of view?
3. Robinson thinks of the novel as set in the 1950s. What indications are there of this?
4. How does the town of Fingerbone shape the novel's characters? How does the house itself affect Ruthie and Lucille? Consider the influence of your own hometown and childhood home on the person you've become.
5. What similarities exist among the three generations of Foster women? What kind of generational patterns can you identify in your own family?
6. After Nona and Lily leave, Ruthie has frequent nightmares that she and Lucille are taken away from Sylvie. How do these—and her other dreams of trains and bridges—foreshadow the future?
7. In the beginning of Chapter 6, Ruthie muses, "Perhaps we all awaited a resurrection." What does she mean by this, and how does this suggest a theme of the novel?
8. How do Sylvie's housekeeping habits compare those of her mother and the great-aunts? How do Lucille's personal habits compare with Ruthie's?
9. Robinson says that when writing *Housekeeping*, water was on her mind as "a very good metaphor for consciousness, for the artificial accidental surface of consciousness and then everything behind and beyond it." How does this apply to the novel, especially with respect to Sylvie?
10. Why does Lucille leave the house to live in her home economics teacher's spare bedroom?
11. If you were the child-welfare officer or sheriff, what would you have done with Ruthie and Lucille? How would you defend your decision?
12. At the end of the novel, why do Sylvie and Ruthie take such an extreme step?

# Additional Resources

## Books that Include Essays by Marilynne Robinson

- Abernethy, Bob, and William Bole. *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007.
- Thornton, John F., and Susan B. Varenne, eds. John Calvin: *Steward of God's Covenant: Selected Writings*. Preface by Marilynne Robinson. New York: Vintage, 2006.

## If you enjoyed *Housekeeping*, you might enjoy:

- Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, 1918
- Evan S. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge*, 1959
- Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*, 1996
- Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927

## If you want to read books that influenced the writing of *Housekeeping*, you might enjoy:

- Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, 1847
- Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, 1851
- Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, 1854
- William Butler Yeats's *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, 2008

## Websites

- [Bonner County Historical Society](http://www.bonnercountyhistory.org/)  
This site contains articles and stories about Bonner County, Idaho, including the town of Sandpoint.  
<http://www.bonnercountyhistory.org/>
- [Sandpoint Magazine](http://www.sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/sms01/centennial.htm)  
"100 Years of Memories." The site contains oral interviews with Sandpoint, Idaho, residents on topics of local history from 1901 to the present day.  
<http://www.sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/sms01/centennial.htm>
- [Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest](http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/index.html)  
Information and curriculum packets on Pacific Northwest history, culture, and literature, including an essay, "My Western Roots," by Marilynne Robinson, are included on this website.  
<http://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/index.html>
- [Darius Kinsey Photographs](http://content.lib.washington.edu/clarkkinseyweb/index.html)  
A collection of selected images by Darius Kinsey, the most important photographer of logging in the Pacific Northwest. The University of Washington Libraries' collection illustrates logging and lumbering from the turn of the century until the 1940s.  
<http://content.lib.washington.edu/clarkkinseyweb/index.html>
- [A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson](http://thebarking.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/robinson.pdf)  
Includes an interview with Marilynne Robinson conducted by Sarah Flynn, Thomas King, and Adam O'Connor Rodriguez on April 24, 2006.  
<http://thebarking.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/robinson.pdf>

# Credits

## Works Cited

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*Housekeeping*. New York: Picador Books, 1980.

Interview with Dan Stone for The Big Read. January 9, 2008

*The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. New York: Mariner Books, 1998.

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Kimball, Roger. "John Calvin Got a Bad Rap." *The New York Times*, February 7, 1999.

Owens, Jill. "The Epistolary Marilynne Robinson." [Website: http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/the-epistolary-marilynne-robinson-2-by-jill/](http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/the-epistolary-marilynne-robinson-2-by-jill/)

Plaster, Billie Jean, ed. "100 Years of Memories." *Sandpoint Magazine*. Summer 2001. [Website: http://sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/sms01/centennial.htm](http://sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/sms01/centennial.htm)

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