

THE NATION

of the kind of boys that Flanagan meant to help. The town's population has fallen from around 900 in the early '50s to under 700 last year.

Father Wegner responded to Buffett's story by explaining: "This is a business. No business ever stops trying to save for unknown contingencies. If we go into the retarded business, we'll need the money." That is true enough; caring for retarded children costs considerably more than the \$6,000 per boy the town now spends each year. In fact, providing such care is one of the new directions that Boys Town may take in a belated effort to catch up with the times. Recently its 17-member board voted to seek outside professional counsel in charting Boys Town's future. It is perhaps only a small step, but Buffett claims it is the boldest policy move the Boys Town directorship has made in the 24 years since Flanagan's death.

and partake of it as effortlessly as they drink their bourbon.

This populist verve was abundantly evident in the way Montanans overhauled their creaky, 82-year-old state constitution. That laborious, 28,000-word document had been written—or more precisely, foisted upon the people—largely by mining interests, who hobbled the processes of government while exempting their own properties from taxation. But it was not until 1970 that the heel-dragging legislature, under pressure from reform-minded citizens, called for a new charter. Appropriately, members of that legislature, as well as all other elected Montana officials, were not invited to participate actively. This was to be a people's crusade.

And it was. The election of delegates to the constitutional convention brought together 100 of the best people of grass-roots Montana. There were

legalize homosexuality and prostitution.

What they all seemed to understand implicitly was that in Montana, no less than in California or New York, ordinary people feel that they have lost touch with their own government. Said Delegate Daphne Bugbee, an architect from Missoula: "We want our government to serve us, to be where we can look at it, feel it, touch it and know it."

Even Break. As finally approved after 54 working days, Montana's new charter is a model document. Despite the individual political differences of the writers, it has a nonpartisan, populist character. Mercifully, it is only 12,000 words long, and it sparkles with flashes of human concern from the beginning: "We the people of Montana, grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of our mountains, the vastness of our rolling plains, and desiring to improve the quality of life . . ."

The "Declaration of Rights" rings with progressive principles, declaring the citizens' right to privacy, to a clean environment, to equality regardless of age or race or sex. The legislature is made both more powerful and more responsible to the people. Moreover, it will now be more representative. Under the old system, many rural counties were grouped with larger urban counties; with city voters in the majority in those districts, the rural counties could scarcely carry a candidate into office. Now it will be one man, one vote: new lines will be drawn to create single-member districts that will give the countryside an even break.

Short Circuit. Under the old charter, the public service commission was dominated by the power companies it was supposed to regulate; the public got short-circuited. Now provision is made for an ombudsman, a consumer counsel who will represent the public in utility-rate cases. In the past, a single state board of education tried to run both the public schools and the six-unit university system; the new constitution creates separate boards and gives the regents full control—without political interference—over the universities. Montana also limped along with a tight constitutional limit on property taxes, which imposed great inequities in school-district financing; it was so restrictive that the state ranked last in the U.S. in the amount of aid it could give to local governments. Now the limit is removed, enabling the legislature to distribute the tax burden fairly.

It still remains for the electorate to vote on the new constitution on June 6. Home again, the delegates have taken it upon themselves to convince their constituents of the virtues of the people's new compact with the state. Helena Delegate George Harper, a Methodist minister, is preaching "Praise the Lord and pass the Constitution." It may require a lot of convincing, because nobody can tell what those cussed individualists will do at the polls.



DELEGATES DISCUSSING PROPOSALS AT CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION IN HELENA

MONTANA

Fresh Chance Gulch

Montanans have just rewritten their state constitution. San Francisco Bureau Chief Jesse Birnbaum observed the process and the participants and sent this report:

Critic Leslie Fiedler called it an "inhumanly virginal landscape," shuddered at the "atrocious magnificence of the mountains, the illimitable brute fact of the prairies." He was right. Montana is elusive, too vast to comprehend. It almost seems indecent for a land so big to have a population so small: 701,000 people in all, or five to every square mile of atrocious magnificence. Each resident reflects the Montana character: a cussed inconsistency that some people call rugged individualism. It is a trait bestowed by birthright ("You're not a Montanan until you've weathered 40 winters," the saying goes) and steeped in frontier nostalgia. Montanans are closet cowboys in haunting pursuit of the roundup, even while struggling with realities. Democrats vote Republican, Republicans vote Democrat. The naive are suspicious, the shrewd trusting. Together they brew 100-proof populism

ranchers, farmers, businessmen, three professors, five ministers, 24 attorneys, a beekeeper, a retired FBI agent. Nineteen were women, most of them housewives and educators. The oldest delegate was Lucille Speer, 73, a retired librarian; the youngest was a graduate student, Mae Nan Robinson, 24. What they all had in common was virtually complete ignorance of the art of constitution writing and a somewhat unfounded self-assurance.

Touch It. Undaunted, the delegates gathered in January in the former mining town of Last Chance Gulch, now better known as Helena, the state capital. Committees were formed. A squad of recent college graduates began turning out 2,368 pages of scholarly reports on human rights, welfare, education, taxation, legislative government, environment. Ordinary citizens and experts alike voiced their concerns before the committees. From the countryside came 1,500 letters filled with suggestions. The delegates studied, argued, hammered out their proposals, and hard work it was. "We had to educate ourselves and write a constitution at the same time," recalls Robert Kelleher of Billings, an imaginative attorney who fought in vain to change the government to the parliamentary system and