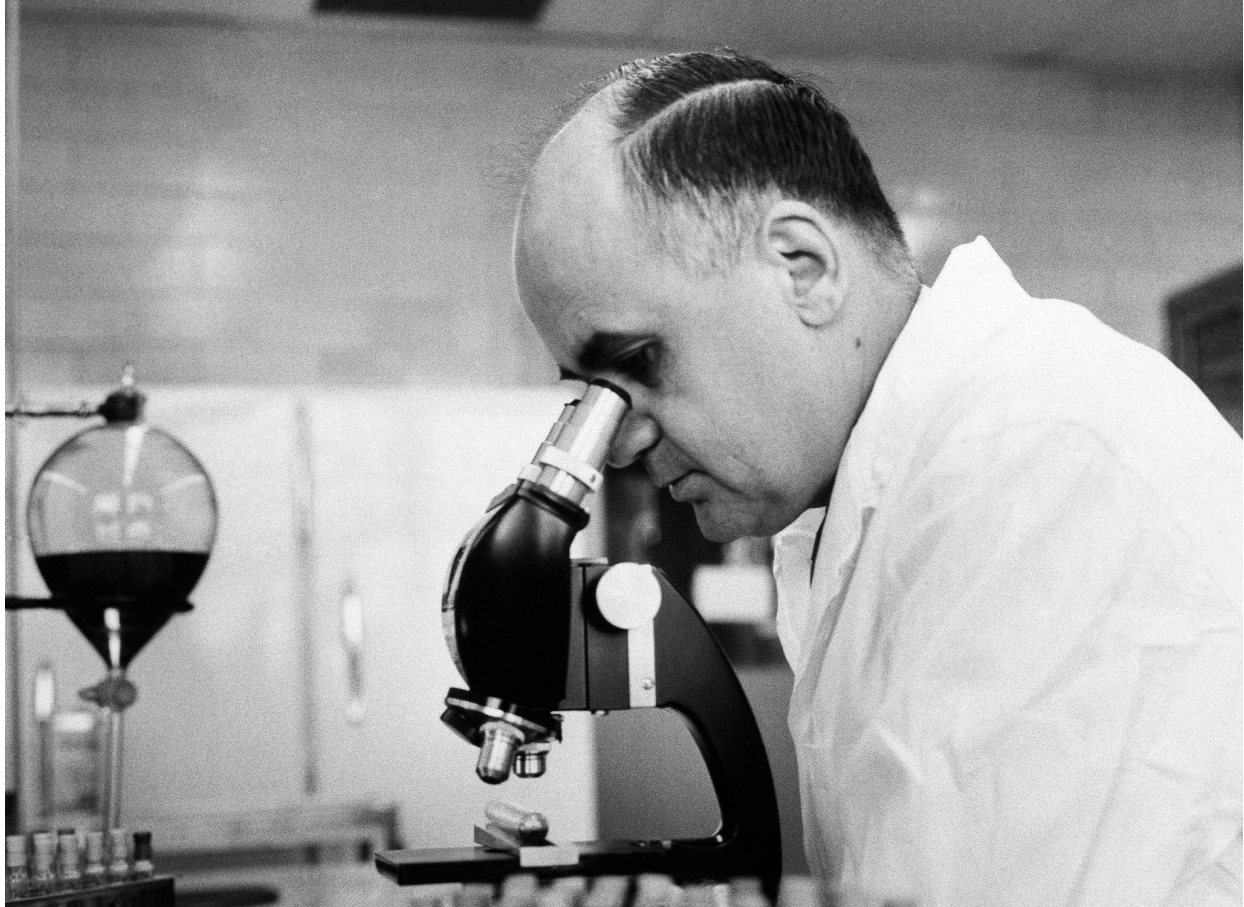


SARAH VOWELL (/COLUMN/SARAH-VOWELL)

A University of, by and for the People



Maurice Hilleman in 1963. Associated Press



By Sarah Vowell

Feb. 15, 2018

BOZEMAN, Mont. — In 1937, Maurice Hilleman had a job lined up as the assistant manager of the J. C. Penney in Miles City. In Depression-era Montana, Penney's was top-notch employment, especially to a senior at Custer County

High who grew up raising chickens on the outskirts of town.

But Hilleman's older brother pointed out there was that college in Bozeman and suggested Maurice should at least try to get a scholarship. He did, finished first in his class and went on to a graduate program in microbiology at the University of Chicago. Of the 14 standard recommended vaccines — including those for measles, mumps, meningitis, pneumonia and both hepatitis A and B — Hilleman developed eight of them (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/12/us/maurice-hilleman-master-in-creating-vaccines-dies-at-85.html>). In a century soaked in genocide, his work saved millions of lives, including, potentially, yours and mine. J. C. Penney's loss was humanity's gain.

Hilleman's college in Bozeman, Montana State University, turns 125 this month. It is one of the government-supported land-grant colleges established by the Morrill Act, which Abraham Lincoln signed into law in 1862 to educate the children of farm and factory workers, "the sons of toil." A statue of Lincoln sculpted by the alumnus Jim Dolan is to be unveiled on campus on Friday for the anniversary.

Like Hilleman, I might not have attended college but for M.S.U. It was what I could afford. And I've come to appreciate the E pluribus unum implications of having been thrown together with 10,000 Mormons, Crow, Future Farmers of America and flower children's children whose only shared experience was that we all graduated from high school within a 400-mile radius of Great Falls. No surprise, Oprah Winfrey and Johnny Carson attended land-grant colleges in Tennessee and Nebraska — you do learn how to talk to anyone.

Frances Senska, my friend and role model in how to live the life of a dignified misfit (<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-frances-senska-13078#transcript>), started teaching art at Montana State in 1946 after serving in the Navy during World War II. She was a down-to-earth modernist, like an Eames chair upholstered in sod. And she liked to tell the story about how she and her students decided to start a ceramics class. One of them, Pete, knew a guy whose vehicle had just gotten stuck someplace. After getting

directions, Frances and Pete headed up Bear Canyon with shovels to dig the inaugural batch of clay. Pete was Peter Voulkos (<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/peter-voulkos-5183>), the Bozeman-born son of Greek immigrants who became the most innovative ceramic sculptor of the 20th century.



The campus of Montana State University in 2017.
Rachel Leathe/Bozeman Daily Chronicle, via Associated Press

Would Voulkos's work be in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art if he had not studied with Frances at M.S.U.? Would I be asking that question if I and everyone around me had not gotten measles shots courtesy of Maurice Hilleman?

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Waded Cruzado, the president of M.S.U., graduated from the land-grant university in her native Puerto Rico. For her inauguration in 2010, M.S.U. convinced the National Archives to send the original copy of the Morrill Act with Lincoln's signature to Montana so the faculty and students could genuflect before it and enjoy a rare moment of excitement about the federal government. She told me she is haunted by the what-ifs of Hilleman's biography. She wonders, "How many Hillemans are out there?"

In 2016, M.S.U. established a program called the Hilleman Scholars. It provides scholarships for Montana high school graduates who are eligible for Pell grants, meaning they come from lower-income households. They are required to write an essay about Maurice Hilleman and provide a recommendation from an adult who verifies their potential, work ethic and grit.

There's a Hilleman Scholars map of Montana with a star for every student's hometown, like clay deposits ready to be dug up and hauled to Bozeman. There's a star for Bailey from Brockton, a town of 255 within the boundaries of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. That's about a nine-hour drive from Sheltah, Max and Hunter's star in Missoula, a city of 72,000 humans and seven Starbucks. That's roughly the equivalent geographical and cultural distance between Brooklyn and the mining towns of West Virginia.

There was an uptick in rural Hilleman Scholars in 2017 after the university's agricultural extension agents, who get to know agrarian youngsters advising 4-H clubs, got involved in recruitment. The program's application asks candidates to enumerate their chores so as to explain uneven report cards.

Erik Kalsta, a fourth-generation cattle and sheep rancher in the Big Hole Valley who attended M.S.U. in the 1980s and plans to send his daughter there this fall, told me he was often pulled out of school as a boy. “I was raised under a simple but fierce dictum: The animals come first, fed and watered before you get breakfast,” he said “Round-the- clock care during calving and lambing, and when the cattle go to summer pasture with a rider, then all focus goes to growing and harvesting their food for the winter.”

According to my dad, Pat, who worked as a machinist in M.S.U.’s mechanical engineering department for 26 years: “A farmer’s kid is probably going to be a better engineer than an engineer’s kid. The engineer’s kid is given a problem and sees a piece of paper. The farmer’s kid sees a problem and thinks back to that time the bridge washed out.” Josh Carter, a (<http://www.montana.edu/news/16538/msu-s-josh-carter-wins-rhodes-scholarship>) 2017 Rhodes scholar (<http://www.montana.edu/news/16538/msu-s-josh-carter-wins-rhodes-scholarship>) from M.S.U., double-majored in mechanical engineering and microbiology; he grew up on a South Dakota potato farm. Hilleman incubated the viruses for his vaccines in chicken eggs, a medium he was familiar with from his Great Plains boyhood.

If I had to predict the M.S.U. graduate who might be my generation’s Maurice Hilleman, which is to say the most effective at fighting our greatest common enemy — death — it would be a classmate who did not major in microbiology but rather graduated with a B.A. from the same art department as Peter Voulkos.

Leilani Schweitzer, the progeny of German homesteaders in Denton, was always a Fabergé-level good egg. Then the worst thing that can happen to anyone happened to her when her 20-month-old son, Gabriel, died at Stanford’s children’s hospital. A kind nurse intended to disable one alarm that was preventing the boy and his mother from getting any sleep and unwittingly turned off the alarms on all of Gabriel’s monitors.

After this fatal mistake, Leilani told me that she spent years doggedly sending the hospital suggestions for what might help other people. “I didn’t do it with any intention of it turning into anything,” she said. “I just wanted something good to come from something terrible.” The hospital eventually hired her to be a liaison among lawyers, physicians and families. She has become the leading advocate of medical transparency in a country where medical errors are arguably (https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/05/03/476636183/death-certificates-undercount-toll-of-medical-errors)the third leading cause of death.

Her mission is to teach the medical establishment what she learned in her M.S.U. design classes: how to draw three-point perspectives. “Essentially,” she said at a presentation, “this process bends space and time, allowing us to see an object from three perspectives with a single drawing. This is what we need to do to fully comprehend our health care environment. We need to see multiple views” — from doctors, nurses, patients, administrators and volunteers — “at one time.” Only then, she said, will health care providers understand problems fully enough to “find true, long-term solutions.”

Here’s a problem. Every 10 years since 1948, Montanans vote on the 6-mill levy, a property tax to keep tuition low at the state universities, including M.S.U. It has always passed, but support keeps dwindling, to about 56 percent 10 years ago from around 64 percent in 1988. According to a Pew survey last year, 58 percent of conservatives believe (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/20/republicans-skeptical-of-colleges-impact-on-u-s-but-most-see-benefits-for-workforce-preparation/) universities have a negative impact on America, a crucial consideration in majority-Republican Montana.

This November, for the first time in seven decades, the 6-mill levy might not pass. In the meantime, while my neighbors in the party of Lincoln mull whether or not to undermine his noblest legacy in the state of Montana, I plan on stopping by the M.S.U. campus on its 125th anniversary, to witness that new Lincoln statue being unveiled.

Sarah Vowell (<http://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Sarah-Vowell/1558688>) is the author, most recently, of “Lafayette in the Somewhat United States” (<http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Lafayette-in-the-Somewhat-United-States/Sarah-Vowell/9781442391093>) and a contributing opinion writer.

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