



Moving on in Milltown

Dam removal lets rivers flow, but will life change in this tiny Montana town?

BY BETH JUDY



Documentary photos of the interior and exterior of Milltown Dam by Kristi Hagar | Courtesy of NorthWestern Energy

The painting tricks you, like art by M. C. Escher or Bev Doolittle. At first glance, Monte Dolack's *Witness to Change* depicts a river slipping tranquil and free past river stones, scrub and mountains. Then you see it. In the middle distance, a building spanning the river, shimmering and ghostly, there and not there.

The Clark Fork Coalition, a Missoula-based conservation group, commissioned the painting to commemorate a historic event: removal of the 100-year-old Milltown Dam, its graceful brick powerhouse, and the reservoir behind the two. The complex sat at the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers, four miles east of Missoula, where the dam generated a small amount of electricity for the area. It also collected toxic waste washing downstream from Butte's mines, and in 1981, poisonous arsenic and other heavy metals were discovered in the drinking water of Milltown, the tiny town around the dam. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declared the area a Superfund site. More than 10 years of studies and negotiations about cleaning up the groundwater ensued among governmental entities, concerned groups and the responsible parties, Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) and NorthWestern Energy. By 1995, all were close to a plan.

But in February 1996, nature shed new light on the problem. An ice jam 10 feet high, and as many miles long, moved down the Blackfoot River toward the old wood and concrete dam. Ice jams occur when temperatures warm. The river swelled, freeing great blocks of ice to act like battering rams. Dam operators stopped the jam a mile away with a big release of water over the ▶

dam. The following spring, fish were scarce in the lower reaches of the river. The released water had contained contaminated sediments—including copper, which kills fish. And, officials worried, it all could happen again.

Russ Forba, Milltown Superfund project manager for the EPA, remembers additional factors in what became the decision to remove the Milltown Dam. Federally, the bull trout was listed as a threatened species; the dam interfered with its spawning. Feasibility studies showed that by removing a third of the area's 6.6 million cubic yards of contaminated sediments as well as the dam and reservoir, the groundwater would clean up in four to 10 years. "The problem with Milltown is it's in a floodplain," says Forba. Immersed in water and without oxygen, arsenic moves freely into groundwater. "Taking it out of the floodplain solves the problem." A final factor in the decision was the support of Judy Martz, who served as Montana's governor at the time. "A Republican Western governor coming out for dam removal was remarkable," says Diana Hammer, EPA's Milltown spokesperson. The idea gathered force.

The Milltown Dam story is full of remarkable convergences. "We're talking about a confluence, after all," reminds Hammer. The array of agencies, nongovernmental groups and private companies that have come together to remove the dam, restore the river and its natural environment, and redevelop Milltown—"the 3 Rs," as EPA terms it—is astonishing. The count involves 20 fingers and doesn't even stop there. Keith Large, project manager with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, explains, "There are a lot of unusual aspects to this project—like bridge mitigation." Five bridges—two interstate, one state highway, one railroad, and one pedestrian—cross the river at Milltown. The four built in the static waters of a reservoir needed shoring up or

replacing since flow conditions are about to change. This work alone has involved at least 10 agencies, among them, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and Montana's Department of Transportation, Natural Resource Damage Program, and Historic Preservation Office. Montana Rail Link and citizen groups also had roles.

"There were so many parties with competing interests," says Forba, the EPA boss. "It's been interesting, deciding which come first. But throughout the process, we've talked it through and figured it out." In fact, gathered recently to tell the project's story, Forba, Hammer and Large talked animatedly, often over each other; they were excited, almost giddy. In part, that seems to be due to the project's complexity, what they've had to overcome. The work's \$100 million price tag is also enough to make heads spin. But in the end they, like most people involved in the project, seem excited simply because it's finally happening. "The studies, decision making, and planning took 20-some years," Hammer says. "Now construction's going fast. It's a big day."

This spring, at a contaminated "Sediment Accumulation Area," Envirocon workers moved dirt with loaders and dump trucks. Envirocon is the Missoula-based remediation firm ARCO hired to remove sediments and the dam. Beside the swiftly flowing Clark Fork, a string of 45 rail cars were loaded with fresh sediment, which steamed in the frosty air. That night, the cars would travel east 100 miles, and an empty string would be there in the morning—trips repeated seven days a week. At Opportunity, east of Anaconda, the dirt is spread on former smelter settling ponds owned by ARCO. There's enough organic matter in the sediments, the EPA claims, for vegetation to grow, which will help control dust at the already contaminated site.

Other Envirocon workers at the sediment site were

Dam removal grabs the attention of buyers hungry for free-flowing waterfront property

In January of 2008, proponents of the Milltown Dam Superfund cleanup saw years of negotiations and controversy rewarded as demolition began on the powerhouse, marking the first step of the dam's removal. Amidst the controversy, the citizens of Milltown are struggling to come to terms with their changing community.

Four miles east of Missoula, Milltown is a community of less than 150 people, many of whom can trace their Milltown roots back three generations. The Environmental Protection Agency Information Office that moved into the neighborhood seems out of place amongst the vinyl-sided, two-story houses that surround the streets of Milltown's only paved thoroughfare.

A few blocks away from the new EPA office, there is another addition to the neighborhood. The huge garbage container that sits in Mel and Fran Wartenbee's front yard was put there to collect debris from highway construction. The garbage container is not the only unwelcome addition for the Wartenbees. Development plans meant that Highway 200 was relocated into their yard.

The Highway 200 bridge that crosses the Blackfoot River near Milltown had to be removed and is in the process of being rebuilt

moving water. For at least a year, a giant rock-lined bypass channel will hold the Clark Fork while Envirocon digs out its old, contaminated bed, and the state's Natural Resource Damage Program prepares a new one. In February, Envirocon knocked down the powerhouse (with various pieces of it salvaged or sold). In March, for the first time in a century, officials expected the Blackfoot and Clark Fork to mingle freely, though the ultimate location of their confluence will shift. Designs for all of this had to encompass seasonal changes like spring runoff and flooding.

Highways and railroad lines separate the sediment removal area from the towns of Milltown and Bonner, and carrying sediment by train cuts down on truck traffic. Still, this spring, intensive Superfund bridge work made Milltown look like an open-heart patient with a pack of surgeons in his chest. A temporary bridge took Highway 200 traffic swooping down toward the river and back up. Dirt, trucks, workers, and machines were everywhere. "I'm glad they're cleaning up the pollution," says Misti Barnes, a checker at the Milltown Market, "but it's a pain in the neck and a real mess."

Looking back at what they and their community have been through and continue to experience, Milltown residents Judy and Gary Matson grow quiet. They moved there in 1967 while Gary got a degree in zoology at the University of Montana. Why Milltown? "The rent was \$65 a month," Gary remembers. They grew to love the town. "It was idyllic. Nothing ever happened," he says. The Matsons raised a family and started a business in Milltown—one of two histology labs in the country that ages animal teeth for government game agencies around the world.

Both Matsons have been active in the Superfund process since the beginning, pouring time into understanding

what's happening, helping make decisions and being community liaisons. Theirs was also one of about 50 wells the EPA deepened or replaced. The reservoir kept water levels in the area artificially high; EPA drew down the reservoir when they began work, and levels dropped. "(We) woke up one Sunday and there was no water for coffee," Judy Matson remembers; for a week, they hooked up to a neighbor's spigot with a hose. "It was an inconvenience," Gary shrugs, "but our well is even better now." That's how the couple looks at most of what is happening in Milltown: an inconvenience, but things will be better.

'The power of the area to be created is almost overwhelming. People will be able to experience nature, hear the story of the river that was dammed and now is not.'

Gary Matson

It's a leap of faith. The Matsons express respect and even affection for individuals and groups involved with the cleanup—whom they've known, after all, for 25 years now. They believe in the project's science and engineering. Still, it hasn't been easy. The dam and reservoir were centers of Milltown life. "Almost none of us are happy the dam is gone," the Matsons say. The long years of discussion and

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to accommodate the soon-to-be free flowing river. This resulted in the highway being relocated onto a temporary bridge that encroached into the Wartenbee's yard. The destruction of a part of their carefully manicured yard has left Fran Wartenbee feeling frustrated and helpless. "We have taken a lot of pain and heartache," Fran says. "We have had everything taken from us. All our hard work, it is like it never mattered to anybody."

Until recently, Milltown had been a secret of sorts, hidden somewhere between the adjacent communities of Bonner and West Riverside. Now, inevitably, Milltown has been discovered by real estate developers who are buying up land on the river. No formal plans for building have been revealed but residents are wary of the potential for new growth. They fear for the further loss of the little privacy they have left.

"Our community has changed so much in the last year. There are so many new people," says Fran Wartenbee. "This is home to us—it was home—it doesn't feel like home any

more. We would like to move, if we got a good offer so we could."

Bev Cheff, the Milltown postmaster, is not happy about the changes in her community but is reconciled to the removal of the dam. "Because the majority of the people want it, we are going to have to deal with it. They tried to accommodate us the best they can," says Cheff. "We all have to make sacrifices for a while."

But many residents are not as willing to accept the consequences. Duane Dufresne was born and raised in Milltown. He feels that developers don't understand that what they see as progress doesn't necessarily mesh with residents' values and priorities.

"They think it's going to return the river to the way Lewis and Clark saw it when they came through," says Dufresne. "The worst part of it for me is that they keep coming around telling us they are going to improve the quality of our lives. I feel like they are insulting the way we live. I like the way our lives are."

decision-making strained friendships in the community.


Even before Superfund, Milltown had woes. Ever since the Anaconda Co. sold it in 1976, the nearby Bonner lumber mill has downscaled through a series of owners and today is closed, at least temporarily. And then there's the future. Missoula's population is bursting at the seams, but Milltown has mostly avoided the spillover. That may change once the town is cleaned up and it fronts a free-flowing river. "It's almost too much for a small community like ours to deal with," Gary Matson says. Yet the excitement and potential have won out. A natural area with trails and interpretive signs is planned to replace the sediment removal area and other areas of the project. Gary Matson hopes Milltown residents will get behind the effort. "The power of the area to be created is almost overwhelming," he says. "People will be able to experience nature, hear the story of the river that was dammed and now is not." Judy Matson envisions herself in the not-so-distant future pulling weeds next to a free-flowing river, making room for native plants that state agencies are already collecting. She rejoices that dam removal spurred recording of local oral histories which might otherwise have just faded away, and says even old-timers "are embracing the idea (that) it's OK to change." For Judy, the new pedestrian bridge epitomizes both low points and high points for Milltown. Through the efforts

of citizens and agencies, pieces of the historic bridge—a casualty of dam removal—will be incorporated into a bridge that's better for the river.

"The confluence is a magical place," she says. "It always has been. Things seem to happen there at the right time." Dolack's painting, she adds, is "a healing thing." It looks both forward and back; there is richness in both directions. A dam fades away, and a river resumes the quiet business of life. **M**



Beth Judy lives in Missoula. She also writes and voices *The Plant Detective* on Montana Public Radio.



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