

philipsburg residents use poem
as inspiration for revitalization

a new shade of gray



This page: Dale Siegford makes orange taffy with the Sweet Palace's taffy puller while patrons watch from behind the fudge counter. Facing page: A dog strolls up Philipsburg's Broadway on a warm spring morning.



Poetry has many effects. Revitalizing towns isn't usually one of them. But a poem brought about the revitalization of Philipsburg. In the early 1970s, Missoula poet Richard Hugo visited Philipsburg, 30 miles south of Interstate 90 between Drummond and Anaconda. The next morning he wrote *Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg*. It's bleak. Here's an excerpt:

*...You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last bars that did...
two stacks high above the town
two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse
for fifty years that won't fall finally down.
...Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the church bell simply seems
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes? ▶*

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO

‘I’ve been
your age.
You haven’t
been mine.’

Elaine Cross, 90,
responding to younger
people who scold her
for driving to Missoula



The poem niggled at Jerry Sullivan, who moved to town in 1989. The Black Pine Mine had just closed. Two sawmills had preceded it. The closures were the last of a century of boom-and-bust cycles. From the 1860s into the 1890s, the Granite Mountain mines above town led the nation in silver production. The town’s founders laid out a wide main street, Broadway, and built it with brick, not wood. “They thought it would be an important town,” Sullivan, a banker, muses. But silver mines across the West closed amidst the financial Panic of 1893. Thousands of miners left Philipsburg overnight. The town turned to manganese mining and timber, remaining vulnerable to fluctuating markets. The strain showed. Hugo wasn’t wrong.

Still, Sullivan felt, the poet missed the essence of the community. Sullivan was from Butte. The miners he knew are “used to hard times. They don’t give up.” At a conference, Sullivan heard a Chicago banker discuss disinvestment, a term for what happens during hard times when merchants don’t invest in basic upkeep like

signage and washing windows. That’s Philipsburg, Sullivan thought. When he got back, he decided to have a building that his bank owned painted in the style Philipsburg is now famous for, with bright, even gaudy trim. It started a domino effect. Painting “ping-ponged back and forth across the street,” say Diana and Mike Young, owners of Stuff & Such Antiques. “People applied for grants, didn’t get them, and painted anyway.” Then Sullivan and others decided to install old-fashioned lampposts along Broadway. “We called it the Richard Hugo Lighting Project,” Sullivan remembers, “to shine light on the gray.”

Shirley Beck agrees with Sullivan: “If you don’t look like you’re going to do business, you won’t.” In 1992, the former ranch wife and her husband opened a jewelry shop on Broadway, the Sapphire Gallery. But how could they make Philipsburg a destination instead of waiting for the chance visitor? Beck remembers that her own parents never bought candy—except on vacation. “Just 900-some of us lived in Philipsburg. Anyone else here was on vacation. ▶



This page: Liz Silliman stands on the stairs of the Biker Sanctuary. She produced the designs and murals that decorate the inside of the church, top. Discovery Ski Area looms behind Philipsburg. Facing page: Elaine Cross, 90, moved to Philipsburg in 1966. She plays in the local pool league, has acted at the Opera House in town, and has even done stand-up comedy.

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Jerry Sullivan said people aren't going to drive a half-hour off the highway to buy candy. I said, Watch." Beck and her husband restored a cavernous hardware store and christened it the Sweet Palace after an original Philipsburg candy store. Now it's the liveliest shop—and manufacturer—in town, a community flagship.

A cleaned-up Philipsburg and its new economic base, tourism, don't thrill everyone in town. Steve Neal's family is old Philipsburg. He operates Neal Photo, a camera and photographic supplies business, out of a garage-like building across from his house. Stuffed with inventory, the shop defies other merchants' equation of appearance with success—Neal Photo is known nationally for quality and great prices. Neal laments the high price of meals in Philipsburg now and the influx of so many new faces. "The town I grew up in is gone," he says. He isn't the only long-time resident to feel the oddness of being a minority.

Don Spritzer, author of *The Roadside History of Montana*, sympathizes. He grew up in Crested Butte, Colorado, before it was a ski destination. Now, he says, "It's awful. I don't go back." Familiar with Philipsburg from decades of fishing in nearby Rock Creek, Spritzer feels the town isn't a tourist trap—yet. "Four to 12 T-shirt shops is the sign," he says reassuringly. "Philipsburg's a little too high and a little too cold" to become totally desirable, plus neighboring Discovery Basin ski area isn't a major ski resort.

Philipsburg can't help its beautiful location, nestled in mountains, close to Georgetown Lake, a recreationist's dream come true. Working ranches on the Flint Creek bottomlands outside town protect the town—so far—from the development seen at Georgetown Lake. The town oozes with history, including the state's oldest continually operating elementary school, family-owned ranch, jail, and theater (or opera house), plus ghost towns galore.

When asked why Philipsburg thrives, candy maven Beck says, "The batch of characters who live here." Take Elaine Cross. Cross isn't a native—"I was born in North Dakota. I'm the original North Dakota joke"—but she and her husband moved to Philipsburg in 1966. Ninety-year-old Cross has been the Youngs' righthand woman at Stuff & Such Antiques on Broadway for 17 years. She also does stand-up comedy. She conquered stage fright in her late 60s and began acting in local productions, of which there are many thanks to the Opera House. When someone suggested she do an imitation of Minnie Pearl, tall, lean Cross invented "Maxie Pearl, the large economy size." She starts each day with a shot of whisky and keeps busy with friends from golf, pool-playing and church. She drives to Missoula for acupuncture treatments. When younger people admonish her for driving, Cross admonishes

them back. "I've been your age. You haven't been mine."

And there's artist Liz Silliman, who opened a gallery when she moved to Philipsburg eight years ago, but discovered she couldn't sit still. A former mortician, she talked local businesspeople into letting her apply her skill at restructuring and beautifying surfaces to their interior walls. Now, her murals are everywhere, from the local gas station and cafés to her piece de la resistance, the Biker Sanctuary, a hostel recently opened in a former church. There, from comfy couches by the altar-turned-fireplace, guests marvel at medieval-flavored patterns and designs painted floor to ceiling, plus visual tributes to rock 'n' roll and scenes from the life of St. Columbanus, patron saint of motorcyclists. Silliman has jobs lined up and waiting.

"We just kind of click," Silliman says, referring to Philipsburg residents. The community is diverse when it comes to backgrounds and politics. "There's always a stir over the school or hospital or something," says Myrlin Rasmussen, who opened one of Philipsburg's first bed & breakfasts. "But when push comes to shove, people stick together." Events abound, year-round; many are fundraisers. Shirley Beck was preparing for the upcoming "Flag and Flower Fling," which includes a cakewalk and raises \$3,500. Add \$1,000 from a second event, and the year's flower baskets and flags up and down Broadway are paid for. Recently, the community acquired a new ice rink for young residents. Residents talk about their community with pride—or more accurately, with energy, the confidence that comes when people know what they can accomplish together.

Newer arrivals seem to cherish this spirit of community, and simply want to contribute. Lynn Unger moved to Philipsburg from Moscow—Russia, not Idaho—and opened Snookies Mercantile. "We don't want Philipsburg to be Vail," she says. "We just want to keep the lights on." It's mainly high-end gifts, but Snookies also carries basics like underwear and quilting thread. "I can actually buy socks in town now," says antique dealer Diana Young.

Dennis Cox retired to Philipsburg six years ago. He still works, traveling 12 counties for state addiction services, and he and his wife own Philipsburg's Laundromat and car wash. But the former upstate New Yorker's main passion is pizza. For 30 years, he pursued the perfect dough; his eureka coincided with moving to Philipsburg. Now, he is living his dream. On Friday afternoons, his phone starts ringing at 3 and doesn't stop. Every ten-minute slot is taken for one beautiful take-away gourmet pie. *AAA Magazine* ranks Cox's Friday Night Pizza among the best in the West.

"I brought something special, that's traditional where I come from," Cox says. "I got to bring a part of me to Philipsburg." ■

Beth Judy is a freelance writer in Missoula.

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