

Chapter 21

The company and the town

The Hungry Horse Dam legacy of a craft-oriented workforce fit in well with the Flathead Valley culture of self-reliance and do-it-yourself independence. Residents with generations of local history behind them had survived tough winters with no work and the Flathead's weak economy. They could hunt and fish for food, build their own hardscrabble homes, keep their rigs running and get by. Newcomers who came to the Flathead to work on the dam and chose to stay appreciated that culture and were a good fit. Columbia Falls' timber industry provided the seed for a growing blue collar community, which suited many of the aluminum workers. At the Anaconda Aluminum Co. smelter just outside town, many of the workers took their jobs to heart, looking for ways to improve operations and help the plant prosper. But aluminum smelting was not like milling lumber – workers could see a saw blade rip through logs, but they couldn't see what was going on inside a reduction pot. It involved chemistry and electricity – a little more like baking a cake or brewing beer, but a hundred times more dangerous.

In mid-February 1955, a survey of the 1,000 applications for work at the new AAC plant showed that 700 came from men living within 20 miles of the plant. ¹ Job training for production workers began March 1. About 30 superintendents and foremen with prior experience in aluminum smelting handled the training, including James F. Smith, production superintendent, Ed Woster, potlines superintendent, and Don McMaster, casting superintendent. Most of the 450 jobs at the plant were expected to be semi-skilled, including 300 general laborers, potmen, tappers, crane operators, pot relining men, utility men, casting room men, firemen, electric truck operators and crucible liner men. An additional 70 workers would be employed in the maintenance department under Carl Lundborg as electricians, mechanics, welders, pipefitters, carpenters and other craftsmen. ²

Blue collar inventors

Teaching workers the repetitive tasks they might face in a typical shift at the AAC plant was not enough. The company also needed to increase the skill level of its numerous craft-based workers who needed to expand their knowledge from construction to maintenance and repair – anticipating problems, troubleshooting and fixing things. An apprenticeship program at the Columbia Falls High School started on Oct. 4, 1956, with classes in basic electricity, math and blueprint reading. The program was set up under the auspices of the federal Bureau of Apprenticeship. Committees and standards for the

program were set up for electricians, millwrights, ironworkers, pipefitters and machinists.³ By January 1957, the apprenticeship program was in its fifth month, and 65 workers met every Thursday night in the high school for classes in basic electricity, blueprint reading and basic and advanced math. Instructors were Ray Nunnally and Ed Peterson from the plant; William Stallings and Ralph Barnaby, school teachers from Columbia Falls; and William McClaren, a school teacher from Kalispell.⁴

A spring 1957 survey of 691 workers at the plant found plant employees spent about 15,000 man-hours of their own time in classroom training during the past school year. The first training program at the plant in the spring of 1955 was intended to teach new supervisors the responsibilities of each department. By June 1957, a total of 18 workers participated in apprenticeship programs in electrical, millwright, ironworker, pipefitter, mason, carpentry and machinist crafts. Most of the training was done on-the-job, but classroom instruction was required. The apprenticeship program was developed during five-hour conferences held weekly between managers, supervisors and workers. Technical training was limited to training for the quantometer machine in the plant's laboratory building. Employees also attended classes at the Columbia Falls High School, where 70 workers were enrolled in welding classes.⁵

Individual workers went beyond the company programs in an attempt to better themselves. In June 1962, Perry H. Keller, a pin puller at the plant, became the first plant employee to complete a school course under the company's Tuition Aid Plan. Keller completed a correspondence course in metallurgical engineering technology. The company's plan provided money for schooling in cases where the courses were seen to benefit the plant. Eight employees were involved in the plan.⁶ In September 1962, Ervin E. Pfeiffer completed a four-year training course at the plant to become a high-voltage system substation operator. The training program involved more than 6,000 hours of on-the-job training and 2,000 hours of course study. Pfeiffer had been employed at the plant since March 14, 1957, most of that time in the rectifier substation facility.⁷ In October 1963, Charles O. Gale, a metallurgical engineering student who worked one summer at the AAC plant, received a scholarship from the Anaconda Company to attend the Montana School of Mines in Butte. His father, Robert Gale Jr., graduated from the Montana School of Mines in 1934 and later became an Anaconda mining engineer.⁸

Self-improvement could mean getting a better position in the same department, leaving the plant for new jobs or moving up the ladder. On June 3, 1965, two hourly workers at the plant were promoted to salaried positions. Don Thurston became the preventive maintenance foreman. Thurston was a self-employed millwright who went to work at the Reynolds smelter in Longview, Wash., before coming to the Flathead Valley on June 13, 1955, to work as a pitch truck operator in the paste plant. In July 1955, he became a

lead man for mechanical maintenance in the field maintenance department. Evan G. Speer was promoted to foreman of the paste plant. He began working at the AAC plant on March 13, 1957, as a laborer in the potlines.⁹ Meanwhile, the company supported education on a broader scale across the state. In October 1961, the Anaconda Company announced it would continue to sponsor its Scientific Achievement Program for students attending Montana public or private schools in grades 7 through 12. The company offered \$975 in college scholarship prize money for high school winners, and a \$50 U.S. Savings Bond to the junior high school winner. More than 28,000 people visited the Scientific Achievement exhibits at the Great Falls fair in 1961.¹⁰

Examples of the Columbia Falls blue-collar ethic and workers' interest in fixing production problems can be found in the AAC plant's Suggestion Awards Program. The plant presented its first suggestion awards to four workers in February 1958. Menno Miller received \$21 for suggesting stop and go lights at the plant's truck scales to prevent vehicles from moving while the scales were measuring weights. G.W. LaPierre, a maintenance foreman, received \$15 for suggesting a way to operate anode jacks mechanically. Lester G. Rhodes received \$10 for suggesting a way to prevent air-locking in pumps. Ben Bowerman received \$14 for suggesting a bulletin board where workers could post production problems that all plant workers could see and help solve.¹¹ In March 1958, three more workers received awards. Forrest Nelson, a potman, received \$23 for suggesting a way to improve the mobility of a burner cleaner. Jack Thompson, a potman, received \$23 for a similar suggestion. Peter Helmut, a siphon cleaner, received \$16 for suggesting legs for tapping crucibles so they could be stored more easily.¹² In late May 1958, six workers received \$450 for a single suggestion. All six men worked on a crew that assembled carbon blocks for cathode pot bottoms. The suggested change saved money, time, manpower and materials. Since the suggestion program began in January 1958, a total of 285 suggestions were received, of which 40 were put on trial and 18 had been approved for payment in the award program.¹³ In late July 1958, Alex Nicholls, a lead man in the electrical maintenance department, received \$200 for suggesting that concrete blocks be used as buss bar spacers in the basement of the potrooms rather than hardwood because the concrete would last four times longer, or 16 years, when subjected to occasional hot metal spillage.¹⁴

Some suggestions were not simple and required a serious investment of time and money by the company to implement. By fall 1958, the AAC plant was spending \$130,000 each year replacing 2,000 worn-out anode pins. Each of the plant's 240 Soderberg anodes used 50 steel pins to connect the DC buss bars to the carbon block making up most of the anode. Recognizing the need to save money, Kent Newman, the plant's mechanical superintendent, searched for an alternative to buying replacement pins at a cost of \$65 apiece. The first approach was to have the plant's machine shop

saw off the burned-off tip and butt-weld a new tip on. This proved costly and time-consuming. One man could only repair two pins per day, not including machining. Newman's search led to the Pacific Chain Co. of Portland, Ore., which had developed an automated process for submerged arc welding two-inch anchor chain during World War II. Successful tests were made on 5 1/8-inch material to confirm the process would work for anode pins. AAC spent \$26,000 to have a welding machine set up in October 1959, and the machine went into operation in January 1960. After some breaking-in, the machine was able to repair 2,400 pins through 1960 at a cost of only \$35 per pin.¹⁵

In late February 1959, five workers were recognized with suggestion awards. Bill Reid received \$33 for suggesting control gates in elevators at the paste plant to improve uniformity in cathode paste production. Ed Hellman, a substation operator, received \$20 for suggesting installing control switches on the operator control panel for the emergency-power diesel buss duct. Fred Kost, Marvin Wagner and Charles Yost each received \$18.75 for suggestions dealing with blowing down boilers, preventing damage to the carbon linings of new pots when pouring in hot metal, and protecting battery cables.¹⁶ In March 1959, the plant paid \$200 to Tony Amundson for suggesting that the company purchase gasoline by competitive bid. As of March 9, 1959, the suggestion plan program had paid out \$512 that year.¹⁷ March 1959 saw a flood of suggestions with a record 46 new ideas submitted and 19 cash awards totaling \$1,081. In the latest round of awards, Wally Westphal received \$25 for an idea about milling casting molds. Checks for \$18.75 went to Kenneth Hanson, Leonard Secord and Lee E. Kelsey for ideas relating to casting, jib crane maintenance and pot skimmers.¹⁸ By the end of the first six months of 1959, AAC had paid out \$2,564. Six pot-rebuild workers together received \$450 for their suggested improvement. The program received 184 new ideas ranging from improved record-keeping methods and better ways to strip and re-wax floors to modifications for existing equipment and new ways to machine metal.¹⁹

The Suggestion Award Program continued into the 1960s, as the aluminum market picked up and AAC expanded smelting capacity with three more potlines. In 1962, ironworkers Jack Strickland and Jim Ellman discovered a new way to weld in S-riser bars to newly-built cathodes without having to drop the entire potline from the high-voltage power grid. Each time a potline load was dropped, aluminum production ceased in 240 reduction pots. The problem facing welders was the strong magnetic fields produced by the 100,000 amps of DC current running through the buss bars that the S-riser bars were welded to. Strickland and Ellman discovered that an iron ring could be clamped onto the S-riser bar next to the location of the weld to reduce the effect of the magnetic current.²⁰ In 1966, as plans were underway to add new potlines to the AAC plant, Gene Orem, the plant's mechanical material coordinator, helped to redesign the plant's cathode shells. Each of the plant's 360 pots from its three potlines at the time was rebuilt every

three years, according to a schedule. The new design, which was expected to save the company \$28,338 for construction of 240 rebuilt pots, was incorporated into the pots for the new potlines. ²¹

Increasing payroll diversity

Workers and managers put their heads together to handle another plant problem – maintaining a summertime work force when plant workers wanted time off. In 1958, AAC began its program of hiring sons and daughters of AAC employees for temporary summertime work. ²² The summer hiring program grew in popularity and was adopted by other local industries. In summer 1966, a total of 43 college students worked at the AAC plant and about 30 worked at the Plum Creek lumber mill. ²³ In June 1969, about 60 sons of AAC employees ranging from 18 to 21 years old were hired on as summer help with a base pay of about \$2.97 per hour. Total employment at the plant, including the new rod mill, was expected to top 1,000 by mid-June. Summer work for young adults was hard to find at the Plum Creek mill, where 386 men were employed along with 27 college students. The weak demand in the lumber market hurt the local lumber mills. ²⁴

The legal status of these temporary workers, however, was not well established when the program started. The matter came up on May 9, 1966, when a National Labor Relations Board trial examiner in Washington, D.C. issued his decision in the matter of the termination of Darrel Choate, a college student and summertime employee at the AAC plant. According to Choate's complaint, nine days before his termination by the company, a bid sheet was posted for a job opening as a dayshift pot control man. After Choate bid for the job, he was told it was against company policy for summer employees to bid for jobs. Choate disagreed and refused to scratch his name from the list. As explained later, the company didn't want to waste time training summer students who would not be around long enough to make productive use of the training. Max Deaton, representing the plant's Aluminum Workers Trades Council, reported in a National Labor Relations Board document that he had never been notified by the company of any such policy. The board's trial examiner ruled in Choate's favor, ordering that the company "make whole Darrel Choate for any loss of pay he may have suffered because of his discharge, and offer him full reinstatement to his former or equivalent position of employment." ²⁵

Hiring workers' children in the summer was one thing; hiring their spouses was another. In June 1978, the Anaconda Company reached an agreement with the Montana Human Rights Commission regarding the company's policy about hiring spouses and relatives of employees at the AAC plant. From May 1976 through September 1977, company policy disqualified applicants for employment who were married to a current employee. In cases where two employees were later married, one of the two would have to leave the

company. One case involved Cheryl Trinastich of Columbia Falls, who was asked to resign and subsequently filed a lawsuit with the state. In September 1977, the company suspended its spousal employment policy pending a court decision on its legality. In a June 1978 agreement, the company was obligated to pay damages totaling \$17,000 for three related cases before the Human Rights Commission, return the people to work that had been forced to leave and reopen applications for spouses who had been denied a chance for work. In a seeming contradiction to its general policy regarding relatives, AAC regularly hired college students during the summer time who were sons and daughters of current employees, the Hungry Horse News noted.²⁶

The scarcity of female workers at the AAC plant reflected both the culture of the time and the nature of the work – difficult and dangerous. Edith Mason was the first woman hired at the AAC plant. She started as a janitress in 1955, cleaning offices for AAC managers in the Nord Building in Columbia Falls. She was promoted over the years and finished her career managing office services. She worked for AAC for 30 years. Mason and her first husband Leo Schulte came to the Flathead from North Dakota in 1946 so he could work as a carpenter at the Hungry Horse Dam.²⁷ In a 2005 interview, Mason said she was the first janitress hired at the plant – just two days after it opened. Her sister had been offered the job but turned it down. It was Mason’s first job, but her husband only worked seasonally in construction and they needed the extra income. In 1980, she posed for a photograph of plant employees with 25 years seniority and was the only female. Mason said she spent time after retirement serving as president of the Anaconda Aluminum Company-Atlantic Richfield Company Flathead Retiree Club.²⁸ Mason died at the Montana Veterans Home on June 15, 2014. She was 95 years old. In her obituary, she said she was “always so thankful for the job and benefits that she earned at AAC” and that “she was very proud of her time” working there.²⁹

Changing times were evident by November 1980 during expansion and extensive remodeling at the AAC plant – the work included building restrooms for female workers. Construction supervisor Bob Emerson commented on the changes saying, “We’re spending a lot of time building restrooms, especially for women. We never needed them before.”³⁰ In March 1980, the Hungry Horse News ran a feature article on Diane Mooney, a female pot operator at the plant. Prior to 1976, only men worked at this job, but women like Mooney, breadwinners in their family, needed to take the best-paying job they could find in town. “It’s a good job for a woman with no special skills – if you don’t mind getting dirty,” she explained. Mooney described how she began working as a jackslipper but quickly found she couldn’t handle the weight of the 35-pound pneumatic impact wrench while standing on top of a hot anode. As a pot operator, she still had to call for help when her overhead crust-breaker got stuck to the pot shell by magnetism. She was in charge of 20 pots and was expected to put out anode-effect lights with a

wood pole. "Sometimes it gets a little hairy," she told the newspaper. "I remodeled my pants the other day – burned them. It's bad on clothes." Mooney thought the presence of women on the potlines had little effect on the men working at the plant. "They act the same as if there were no women," she explained. "I had to get used to the way they talked." Most of the men would help her if she asked. "A very small number are obnoxious, but they're obnoxious to both males and females," she said.³¹

Federal equal opportunity laws had forced changes in the working conditions at the AAC plant in 1976. The plant installed new restrooms and a change house for female workers. For nearly a quarter century, the plant had hired only male workers at the plant, but the jobs were among the highest paying in the area. Susie DeShaw became a pot tender at the plant in August 1988 after it became the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. CFAC had 10 hourly and 39 salaried female employees out of a total of 705 employees. DeShaw was responsible for maintaining 30 reduction pots. "The day I started it was 164 degrees in there," she explained. "There were times when I didn't think I would make it. But they give you 45 days and they train you on everything. I like the job I've got, even if it's one of the hardest jobs." The job was tough, but plant culture had changed. "Everybody's been real, real friendly," she said. "If you carry your own, they're just as happy to work with you as a man. You just have to go in there realizing you have to work your butt off. You work with the men and work as hard as the men." DeShaw pointed out that some jobs were just too physical for women to perform, and women had not filled every job category at the plant.³² By April 1991, DeShaw had been at the plant for three years and was still overseeing 30 reduction pots. Difficulties inside the plant was only half the story – Columbia Falls had enough 24-hour stores to make shopping available for dayshift workers, but daycare was expensive, she said.³³

In 1978, Barbara Anderson left her job at the Hungry Horse News, where she had worked for 11 years, and took a job as a chemical technician at the AAC plant laboratory. She had only a high school education and said in 1998 that "she was scared to death." The lab had 30 workers when she started, but lab employment fell to less than half that by 1998. Anderson said her main job was as an industrial hygienist, conducting "fit tests" to ensure workers' respirators operated according to federal OSHA regulations and checking monitors to ensure there was a safe working environment. The monitors sampled for chlorine, hydrogen sulfite and other air-borne particles, she said. Anderson said she kept a large supply of razors handy for workers to shave before being fitted for a respirator.³⁴ Anderson started at the plant doing shift work but moved up to day shift. She said she performed 850 fit tests in 1997 and also tested aluminum for purity. In 1998, senior chemist Betty Perigo described Anderson as a valued employee and always willing to learn.³⁵

Connie Fisher began working at the AAC plant's rod mill in October 1977. She had grown up in a large family in rural Columbia Falls, attended Deer Park School, graduated from Columbia Falls High School and took secretarial training at Flathead Valley Community College. "My roots here are very deep," she said in April 1997. After the rod mill, Fisher put her secretarial skills to work at the Field Management office. "I got out into the plant," she said in a 1997 interview. "That was very, very good for me." She eventually worked her way up to the position of administrative assistant to the company's vice president, Larry Tate. But when she first came to the plant, "I really had no intention of staying," she said. "Now I have to say I don't think I could have picked a better place." CFAC employed about 600 workers in 1997 – local residents who weathered good and bad times. "There have been some really wonderful things and some very sad things through the years," she said. "The plant survives because it's an institution here. There are many of us who are hoping this place will be here for our children."³⁶ To get ahead, workers needed to be willing to school themselves. "Working here has been very educational," Fisher said. "You have to be willing to learn new things." She spoke about the ups and downs at the plant over the past 20 years. One difficult challenge was keeping up with technology. "We are always trying to modernize, but technology changes daily," she said. "It's a challenge to keep up."³⁷

On April 25, 1996, the Hungry Horse News ran a feature on Lynette Laisy, a female electrician at the CFAC plant. Laisy had an electrical engineering degree from Montana State University where she was an outstanding student and had been nominated for both Student of the Year and Senior of the Year. She had been on the job for about nine months, and the predominantly male work force was used to her, she said. "At first they treated me like I was special," she said. "But now I'm just another electrician." Laisy said women were scrutinized and tested more than men in the electrical trade. "This is very much a male-dominated field," she said. "A woman always has to prove herself."³⁸ Sometimes that meant proving a case in court. In November 1996, it was reported that Nancy Bingaman had filed a lawsuit in state district court alleging CFAC had discriminated against her on the basis of gender. Bingaman started working for CFAC in 1985 and had worked as a weighmaster until the job was taken over by a male employee who was also paid more than her. The Montana Human Rights Commission turned down her complaint, saying it was not supported by the evidence. She was seeking back pay for the difference between wages, future pay and damages.³⁹ Flathead County District Court Judge Katherine Curtis dismissed Bingaman's lawsuit on Dec. 31, 1997.⁴⁰

In another case brought against CFAC, Christie Jolly alleged discrimination on the basis of gender and age. Jolly, who worked in the plant's accounting department, alleged that the company had converted her job to a part-time position during downsizing in 2008

and 2009 and retained a younger male employee with less experience, seniority and capability as a full-time employee. On Nov. 22, 2011, Terry Spear, a hearing officer for the Montana Human Rights Bureau, ruled in favor of CFAC after looking at the presented evidence and concluding that Jolly did not have clear proof of discrimination. When Jolly was hired in 1995, she had a bachelor's degree in accounting and was a CPA. She was CFAC's financial controller until 2002. Robert Vixie, an assistant controller at the Vanalco plant in Vancouver, Wash., became the new financial controller at CFAC in October 2003, and Jolly became assistant controller under Vixie in May 2004. The third full-time employee in CFAC's accounting department was Joy Tarpley. With the company facing tough economic conditions at the time and reducing workers across the plant, the three financial workers found themselves working longer hours.⁴¹

On top of that, Jolly and Tarpley found Vixie to be a difficult supervisor, a position the hearing officer agreed with in his ruling. "Obviously, it was difficult to work for Vixie," Spear said in his conclusion. In early 2007, Vixie hired another worker in the accounting department named Josh Holloway who had a degree in music with a minor in accounting and business, but who had better computer skills than Jolly. On Dec. 23, 2008, with the plant operating at 25% capacity, CFAC announced it was going to completely shut down the smelter. CFAC backed off slightly in January 2009 as it continued negotiating with the Bonneville Power Administration for better power rates. With orders to cut the accounting staff by 50%, Vixie chose to keep Holloway rather than Tarpley because of his skill set. CFAC Vice President and General Manager Charles Reali, who came to CFAC from Vanalco in November 2007, approved of Vixie's suggestion. Vixie also suggested having himself and Jolly work halftime in the senior accounting positions. Reali accepted that idea, too. Both ended up working slightly more than halftime until they were laid off in February 2010 because of the reduced workload. At one point in 2009, Spear noted in his ruling, Vixie asked Jolly if she would be interested in taking over all of CFAC's accounting work as a private contractor and asked her to prepare a budget for that kind of work based on her current salary.⁴²

Keeping up with the times

As society changed, the plant adapted its personnel policy to provide a safe and productive working environment. On Dec. 23, 1997, CFAC Plant Manager Larry Tate and Aluminum Workers Trades Council President Terry Smith signed a letter addressed to all CFAC employees announcing the company planned to implement a drug and alcohol abuse control program effective March 1, 1998. Communication and training in the program would take place in January and February 1998. Random testing was not proposed. Instead, drug or alcohol tests would be required during pre-employment screening; for post-accident investigations where the accident involved death, personal

injury or property damage in excess of \$1,500; whenever CFAC had reason to suspect that an employee was under the influence of drugs or alcohol; and as a condition for allowing an employee to return to work after having earlier tested positive for drugs or alcohol. The company also provided an employee assistance program that included counseling services by professionals to help employees with drug or alcohol problems.⁴³

In July 2007, Mike Johnson, an electrical meter technician at CFAC, tested positive for marijuana. According to court documents, CFAC gave him a chance in August to return to the plant if he passed a drug test, but Johnson declined and was fired after 25 years at the plant. Johnson filed a wrongful discharge lawsuit claiming he legally used marijuana according to the 2004 Montana Medical Marijuana Act, which had passed as a citizen's initiative with a 62 percent vote.⁴⁴ On April 2, 2009, the Montana Supreme Court dismissed Johnson's appeal in his wrongful discharge suit. The Supreme Court said the act specifically provides that it does not require employers "to accommodate the medical use of marijuana in any workplace." Supporters of the act criticized the court's ruling, saying the act clearly said that medical marijuana patients cannot be "penalized in any manner or be denied any right or privilege."⁴⁵

With numerous computers scattered around the huge smelter plant, many of them connected to the Internet, CFAC considered policies to prevent employees from improperly using the computer equipment. SurfControl, an Internet security software company, reported on efforts by CFAC's computer manager Mike Waltman to limit misuse of company computers in August 1999. About 175 of the company's 600 employees used plant computers as part of their job. Problems included lower productivity as workers played Solitaire, non-business use of the Internet that might slow down the company's network, and use of Internet connected computers for personal business, e-mailing and visiting sexually-explicit sites. After catching employees attempting to run side businesses using plant computers, CFAC instituted a policy stating that computers belonged to the company and could not be used for non-business work. To head off potential public controversy, the company first revised a company policy barring staff from visiting websites with sexually explicit content, limiting the size of e-mail or chat room exchanges, and asserting the privacy needs of other employees. In 1998, Waltman turned to SurfControl for software that could monitor network traffic and create easy-to-read reports to management. After installation, the software flagged several CFAC workers who had repeatedly visited sexually-explicit websites. The workers were warned and reportedly never repeated the offense.⁴⁶

Maintaining worker productivity

Union-company relations were generally good from the time the plant started producing metal in August 1955. By November of that year, the plant hit its goal of producing 60,000 tons per year. Through 1956, the plant produced slightly more than its rated capacity for aluminum and set a record for absenteeism at below 1% in September.⁴⁷ A letter mailed to all the AAC supervisors and foremen on May 31, 1957, provided figures on absenteeism at the plant. There was less than one man-shift absence per 100 shifts worked for the past 12 months, which was considered outstanding compared to the national average for industry of 5.5%.⁴⁸ That figure continued to improve. By Dec. 6, 1957, the plant had a 0.51% absenteeism rate, which far outpaced the 5.4% national average. The plant had the lowest absentee rate of all industrial operations in Montana. There was a low turnover rate as well.⁴⁹ On Nov. 11 and 12, 1959, feature articles about the AAC plant in *American Metal Market* reported on the company's success. "The Columbia Falls plant is the nucleus of Anaconda's wide-spread aluminum operations," the article said. "Without it, the company would have to go out on the open market to buy the ingot it needs to keep its mills and fabricating facilities turning out sheet, wire and cable, foil, containers and other products." AAC had \$140 million worth of integrated facilities, with the exception of alumina, from primary pig to end products. The Columbia Falls plant was described as small by national standards but highly efficient. Credit was given by management to the 600 plant workers for their hard work and good safety record. The articles reported on the extensive training given to workers, from initial orientation to job training, technical training, skill improvement, apprenticeship training and supervisory training.⁵⁰

In a Jan. 21, 1965, talk to the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce about expansion plans for the aluminum plant, AAC General Manager James Smith, praised the plant workers for their low absenteeism rate despite the hazards of winter storms. He also praised the workers for their many refinements in processing that made the plant competitive in both costs and quality. Payroll in 1964 totaled \$4.2 million, in addition to \$2.9 million in construction payroll.⁵¹ The plant celebrated its 10th anniversary in August 1965, which also marked completion of a third pot line. In his speech to a crowd gathered at the plant, Gov. Tim Babcock pointed to the fact that 60% of the original workforce was still on the job, that no production time had been lost due to labor-management disputes, and that the plant had paid \$6 million in property taxes to the county since the plant began operating in 1955.⁵² On Sept. 24, 1965, two days after negotiations began for a new labor contract, Aluminum Workers Trades Council President Max Deaton described the meetings with management as a "wholesome atmosphere." Management shared the opinion.⁵³

In a December 1965 talk to the Whitefish Rotary Club, James Smith listed ways that the company worked to improve employee-employer relations, including orientation for new workers, training, fostering a spirit to work efficiently, taking suggestions for improvement in operations, promoting safe work practices, keeping employees well informed, and taking suggestions about recreational facilities. He said that while negotiations with the union for a new labor contract were difficult, it was important to use that time to further promote good relations with the workers.⁵⁴ When there were exceptions, the company acted. In February 1972, a National Labor Relations Board trial examiner in San Francisco ruled in favor of AAC in its dismissal of two men – a shop steward and a man involved in hearing grievances. Charges made by the company included absenteeism, insubordination, refusal to work, and direct and flagrant disregard for instructions of supervisors.⁵⁵ Good worker morale could create a safer working environment. Between August 1980 and June 1981, the AAC plant set a world record with 1,970,000 man-hours without a lost-time accident. “When you take into consideration that the plant operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and there are dozens of different heavy-duty job classifications, then almost two million worker hours without a lost-time accident borders on the miraculous,” Plant Manager Bob Sneddon said. “However, the company is acutely aware of the high caliber of the Columbia Falls work force, and the achievement belongs to them and their dedication to safe working habits.”⁵⁶

The plant’s union leaders worked with management to keep the reduction pots running in Columbia Falls, but they also kept an eye on events elsewhere. On May 26, 1983, the United Steelworkers went on strike at the AAC sister plant in Sebree, Ky. The smelter plant had been operating at about 62% capacity. With 580 hourly workers out on strike, management at Sebree opted to continue running the plant with salaried workers. Twenty salaried workers from the Columbia Falls plant traveled to Sebree to help fill positions.⁵⁷ Three months later, on Aug. 15, contract negotiations began between the Aluminum Workers Trades Council and management at the Columbia Falls plant. The plant’s labor contract was set to expire on Sept. 15, 1983, and the new contract would last three years.⁵⁸ On Aug. 22, nearly 600 Steelworkers returned to work at the Sebree smelter after being on strike for nearly three months. The plant was in the process of restarting one of its idled potlines.⁵⁹ On Sept. 15, hourly workers at the Columbia Falls plant voted to ratify a new labor contract by a margin of 2 to 1. The new contract called for a freeze on wages and restricted cost-of-living increases. The vote encouraged management at the plant to restart Potline 4.⁶⁰ The Aluminum Workers Trades Council played host to the annual Northwest Conference of Aluminum Councils on May 26 and 27, 1988, with 50 to 60 top union officials from across Montana and the U.S. gathering in Columbia Falls to discuss topics ranging from safety to wages.⁶¹

Not a company town

Wages, health benefits, vacation time and safe working conditions were the main concerns of the AAC plant workers. But in the early years, Anaconda wanted to provide another perk – a recreational facility in downtown Columbia Falls. Just before Christmas 1955, AAC Plant Manager H.G. Satterthwaite announced that construction of an AAC Employees Club would begin in spring 1956. The Anaconda Company had built employees clubs in other Montana cities for its workers and spouses.⁶² Further plans for the 116-foot by 149-foot clubhouse were announced in January 1956. The building would be a tapestry red brick structure with aluminum trim and include six bowling alleys, a 42-foot by 72-foot assembly room with a stage, a 26-foot by 40-foot reading room lounge, a soft drink bar and kitchen facilities for banquets.⁶³ Construction bids were taken in March. With employees clubs already operating in Butte, Great Falls and Anaconda, the Anaconda Company expected to invest about \$250,000 in the Columbia Falls club.⁶⁴ An open house for the AAC Employees Club was held on Dec. 30, 1956. After that, the club would be closed to the public except on special occasions. The club was promoted as the finest in the Anaconda organization.⁶⁵

A decade and a half later, the clubhouse's future was in doubt. The subject of the AAC Employees Club came up at a meeting of the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce in January 1970. Believing that "corporation-built and operated employees clubs generally seem a part of the past," Columbia Falls Mayor Roger Elliot wrote to AAC Plant Manager Charles Taylor requesting that the company donate the club building to the city for use as a new city hall.⁶⁶ By June 1971, progress was being made in the possible donation of the clubhouse to the city. AAC had obtained appraisals that estimated the property to be worth about half a million dollars. According to a Hungry Horse News editorial, "The Anaconda Company recognizes that company-owned and operated employees clubs generally are a part of the past."⁶⁷ From the moment the club had opened, it was a busy place with as many as 68 bowling teams, afternoon bridge and pinochle games, square dancing, movie showings, banquets and Christmas parties. In the beginning, the club was open only to AAC employees, but over the years the rules became more relaxed. AAC said it would keep the bowling trophies and some photographs but all the rest of the furnishings and equipment would go with the building.⁶⁸

On June 30, 1971, the Anaconda Aluminum Co. sold the AAC Employees Club to the city for one dollar. Present at the ceremony were Lloyd Aldrich, mayor of Columbia Falls, William H. Benton, executive vice-president of AAC, Charles Taylor, AAC plant manager, and members of the Columbia Falls city council.⁶⁹ Aldrich had worked as a potman at the Reynolds Metals Co. smelter in Longview, Wash., before leaving to fight in Italy and Okinawa during World War II. After the war, he returned to Longview where he became

an electrician. Aldrich brought his family to Columbia Falls in 1955 when he went to work at the AAC plant. By March 1963, as an assistant line foreman at the AAC plant, he announced his intention to seek re-election as a member of the Columbia Falls City Council.⁷⁰ Aldrich, as president of the Columbia Falls City Council, filed to run as mayor in February 1965.⁷¹ He served two terms as mayor. As a young man, Aldrich had worked in Glacier National Park as a power plant operator at the Many Glacier Hotel and during construction at the Lake McDonald Lodge. He also briefly worked in the silver mines of Wallace, Idaho.⁷²

Aldrich accepted the quit claim deed on behalf of Columbia Falls. The Anaconda Company believed the Flathead Valley had developed enough that it was no longer necessary for AAC to provide social and recreational facilities for its employees as it had in 1956. The clubhouse was an unnecessary monthly expense for the company, according to Benton. The city hoped to obtain federal funding to help remodel the building into a new city hall and public library. The bowling alley equipment would be sold and the resulting 40-by-90 foot room could become a new public library. A Hungry Horse News editorial pointed out that the facility could have been sold to a private interest for a considerable sum, and that the AAC's tax write-off amounted to little since the company had lost money in the weak aluminum market all year long.⁷³ In a July 9, 1971, editorial the newspaper noted that some locals believed the bowling alleys should be maintained for a new youth center, and some wanted the big banquet hall maintained for public meetings. The editorial also noted that the club accounted for \$2,525 in taxes in 1970, money that would no longer be coming into the city and county governments.⁷⁴

The 17,500-square-foot clubhouse was expected to become the new city hall and public library. The existing public library was too small to serve the needs of the community. It originated as the construction office for the Foley Construction Co. when the AAC plant was built in 1953 to 1955. The construction office was moved from the plant site to a location near the junior high school, where volunteers remodeled the offices into a public library. Orion B. Koppang was promoted from the plant's first aid man to manager of the new AAC Employees Club from 1956 until it closed June 30, 1970. He had managed the local Elks Club in 1950 and 1951, and then worked as an office manager during construction of the Hungry Horse Dam. He became a first aid attendant for AAC when the aluminum plant opened in 1955.⁷⁵ On April 8, 1973, two years after the clubhouse was donated to the community, an open house was held in the new public library to celebrate its completion.⁷⁶ Meanwhile directly across the street from the new City Hall's main entrance, the Kelly Building was acquired by the Aluminum Workers Local 320 on Nov. 30, 1975, for its new headquarters. The building also housed the AAC Employees Federal Credit Union, along with a dentist and two chiropractors.⁷⁷

The role of AAC plant workers in the civic affairs of Columbia Falls – from top management on down to laborers – grew out of the town’s blue collar ethic and some early decisions by Anaconda management. In 1952, when the plant’s construction began, there was talk that company housing would be built for management in Whitefish near the lake and golf course. Instead the company purchased 38 acres of land from the Hoerner brothers near the high school for residential development. According to an account by Hungry Horse News publisher Mel Ruder, the wife of one manager was heard to comment that she didn’t want to live off on top of a hill with other Anaconda Company people, as was the case in Great Falls – she wanted to become part of the community. By 1959, Roy Lindsey, a potlines supervisor, was the recently elected mayor of Columbia Falls; Klaas DeWit, a warehouse supervisor, had completed a term as a popular president of the Lions Club; Bob Sneddon, an engineer, was chairman of the District 6 school board; Al Shay, a company employee, was the president of the City-County Planning Board; and Kent Newman, another company employee, was vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce. Other company employees were leaders in the PTA, church groups and sports clubs. All this activity raised eyebrows of some locals who worried that “now they are running things.” Mel Ruder disagreed with that opinion, although he believed the company lacked public relations “know how” and made things appear worse than they were.⁷⁸

A feature article about the AAC smelter appeared in the May 1959 issue of the “Anaconda Aluminum Courier,” published by the AAC headquarters in Louisville, Ky. The article described natural and geographical features of the area, along with details about plant operations and personnel. “The Columbia Falls Plant also hit the civic affairs jackpot recently when Roy Lindsey, assistant potline superintendent, was elected mayor of Columbia Falls, and his fellow employees Ollie Knudson and Orion Koppang, were elected Councilmen,” the article reported. “Additionally, Bob Sneddon is currently president of the School Board of District 6, and George Hanson has completed a term as Councilman.”⁷⁹ Following the April 5, 1965, city elections, five out of six city councilmen were employees or former AAC plant employees. They included Bernell W. Hedrick, a former service foreman at Kaiser Aluminum who came to the AAC plant in 1955 and was an assistant potline foreman; William H. Sands, a former Ronan, Mont., police chief and construction worker on the Hungry Horse Dam who was hired as an electrician at the AAC plant in 1956 and retired in March 1964; Roy F. Babcock, a bookkeeper for the Ralph M. Parsons construction company that build Potline 3; Lee W. Smith, a chemical engineer and superintendent at the AAC plant; and Leonard Secord, a 10-year veteran at the AAC plant as a welder and a member of the Columbia Falls Voluntary Fire Department.⁸⁰ In May 1967, the Kalispell Board of Realtors presented AAC Plant Manager Ed Woster with an award plaque in honor of the company’s “continuous efforts to create a more favorable climate for community expansion, civic improvement

and growth and prosperity of the area.”⁸¹ And in September 1984, Dan Smith, a security guard at the AAC plant, received a community service award from ARCO Metals. Chosen from all employees at all ARCO Metals facilities, Smith was the deputy fire marshal and a public education officer for the Columbia Falls City Fire Department, a member of the Flathead County arson investigation team and the president of the Columbia Falls Ambulance Association.⁸²

The plant and the economy

Impacts to the local community ranged from social and political to the economic, beginning with employment. In March 1956, Clinton Merritt, manager of the Montana Employment Service in Kalispell, reported significant improvements had been made in the winter unemployment situation in the Flathead. In 1949, the valley’s economy hit a low with 2,778 workers unemployed in winter, amounting to about one wage earner out of three. Many of the unemployed were construction workers at the Hungry Horse Dam or lumber mill and logging workers. In 1956, the Flathead Valley saw only 1,275 unemployed workers – less than half as many, which was still considered high due to the long and severe winter conditions. Merritt attributed the drop in unemployment to the new AAC plant and new kinds of equipment used for logging.⁸³

In spring 1957, a survey of 691 workers at the AAC plant showed 280 lived in Columbia Falls; 68 outside of Columbia Falls; 167 in or near Kalispell; 77 in or near Whitefish; 33 in Martin City; 22 in Hungry Horse; 13 in Bigfork; 12 in Somers; nine in Coram; eight in Creston; one in Trego; and one in Marion.⁸⁴ On Nov. 4, a 37-passenger bus began transporting workers to the plant from Kalispell and Whitefish. Fares were set at 80 cents round-trip from Kalispell, 50 cents round-trip from Whitefish and 35 cents round-trip from Columbia Falls. Any resident of the valley could ride the bus, not just AAC workers.⁸⁵ Little had changed demographically by July 12, 1963, when a mail-in survey of AAC employees was conducted. About 54% of the workers lived in Columbia Falls or nearby; about 27% lived in Kalispell or nearby; about 12% lived in Whitefish or nearby; about 4% lived in Hungry Horse, Martin City or Coram; and about 3% lived in Bigfork or Somers. Total payroll for the plant’s 550 to 600 employees was about \$3.8 million per year.⁸⁶ In December 1975, a survey showed that 61% of the 752 AAC workers lived within the Columbia Falls mailing address region – inside the city limits and in nearby rural areas.⁸⁷

Economic impacts included direct and indirect contributions. In 1980, the aluminum plant posted the largest annual payroll in the Flathead at more than \$30 million in wages, salaries and benefits. In addition, the company spent \$8 million a year on purchases in Northwestern Montana. The plant employed 1,350 workers, of which 603 lived in Columbia Falls, 434 in or near Kalispell, 187 in the Whitefish area and 126 in

other communities.⁸⁸ By April 1985, the AAC plant employed 1,006 workers, which translated into 4,363 workers and family members, including 2,490 children of workers. A total of 390 of the families lived in Columbia Falls; 272 families lived in Kalispell; 100 families lived in Whitefish; and 32 families lived in Bigfork. About 580 families indicated in a survey that they would be forced to move out of the area if the AAC plant closed, and 156 families indicated they might lose their homes or major possessions. It was estimated that for each AAC plant employee, about 2.9 workers in the Flathead County were directly or indirectly tied to operation of the plant.⁸⁹

By the early 1980s, Anaconda's copper plants in Butte, Anaconda and Great Falls were facing closure, leaving thousands of workers scrambling for jobs to support their families. To capture some of the local history of the mill towns, a two-year oral history study titled "Small Town Montana" was announced in October 1983. Sponsored by the Montana Historical Society and funded by the Montana Legislature, the project chose 12 communities in Montana for the study. Columbia Falls was chosen because of its population size, its early history as a major logging center and the size of its industrial economic base.⁹⁰ By March 1984, copies of the 17 tapes of interviews conducted in Columbia Falls by Laurie Mercier of the Montana Historical Society became available at the Columbia Falls Library. Included in the project were interviews with Hungry Horse News publisher Mel Ruder, city councilor and plant worker Robert Waltmire, Columbia Falls Mayor Colleen Allison and AAC Plant Manager Robert Sneddon.⁹¹ Mercier brought a presentation of the statewide history project to Columbia Falls in October 1986. The project, called "Metal Manufacturing in Montana: Industry and Community," had already investigated the communities of Black Eagle near Great Falls, as well as Anaconda and East Helena. Mercier intended to interview about 25 people in Columbia Falls. The two-year project was estimated to cost \$80,000 and was funded by a coal severance tax grant for cultural and aesthetic programs that was awarded by the 49th Montana State Legislature.⁹²

"The industry's presence in Montana was marked by substantial payrolls, imposing buildings, towering smokestacks, costly and specialized equipment, and the creation of entire communities," Mercier said. None of these communities were company towns, where residents were obliged to purchase essentials at a company store or live in company housing, but the communities were nonetheless shaped by their employers. This influence extended from employment and tax revenues to its institutions and popular forms of local entertainment and recreation, where sports teams were named the Anodes or the Smelterites. Veteran smeltermen learned their trades by on-the-job experience, not by special education or training, and their pride and self-esteem hinged on this difference. "A special camaraderie developed between workers who understood the same technical language and knew how to make metal," Mercier said. "The

fellowship spilled over into the bars and bowling alleys where workers congregated 'after shift.'" ⁹³

The pulse of the communities was in synch with the plant, from shift schedules and holiday schedules to downturns such as layoffs and newfound prosperity gained by labor contracts or bonuses, Mercier said. Families' futures relied on the health of the companies, and plants were a comforting sight when running successfully at full capacity. As a result, residents were usually reluctant to criticize plant management or plant pollution problems. After World War II, certain demographic changes took place. More women left their homes to work in stores and offices to supplement their husbands' smelter income. The extra income sometimes meant that children didn't need to look to the plant for work and could consider further education, Mercier said. Often, the smelter plants offered summertime work for college students. The plants created blue-collar towns, which required large numbers of semi-skilled or skilled labor but little demand for professionals and managers. As a result, many in the business communities either came from working-class families or had a close affinity with them. Although some residents sensed the presence of class lines, overall a working-class culture dominated the communities. ⁹⁴

According to Mercier, some residents saw the companies' roles in their communities as a mixture of "benevolence, paternalism and intimidation." Besides providing jobs, the companies contributed to civil projects such as sewers, water systems or schools, and promoted recreation by building parks, skating rinks or clubhouses and by sponsoring baseball teams, bowling leagues, picnics and Fourth of July fireworks displays. But workers resented the companies intruding into their private lives. Sometimes foremen were instructed not to socialize with the workers. Unions represented the communities' united opposition to the companies, but strikes were not a major factor in Columbia Falls compared to other Montana smelter communities, Mercier said. When the Anaconda Company came to Columbia Falls to build its new aluminum plant, it attempted to avoid establishing a segregated company section in the town by scattering management housing. Despite the company's efforts, residents recognized that many of the AAC plant managers' new homes were on the east side of town. "It was very obvious the hierarchy of the homes," William Dakin of Coram said in a Dec. 12, 1986, interview. "The more status you had, the bigger the house. It was that simple." ⁹⁵ A traveling exhibit of photographs and oral histories on the industrial towns of Montana was shown at the Columbia Falls public library in July 1987. Called "The Stack Dominated Our Lives: Metals Manufacturing in Four Montana Communities," the exhibit included photographs taken by Mel Ruder and the oral histories made by Mercier as part of her "Small Town Montana" oral history project in 1983. Included in the oral histories were

interviews with former aluminum plant employees Ed Hula and Vic Cordier, among others.⁹⁶

In January 2001, the Montana Job Service of Kalispell conducted a survey of CFAC workers scheduled for layoff during the West Coast Energy Crisis. They included 94 with a mailing address in Columbia Falls, 22 in Whitefish, 79 in Kalispell, five in Bigfork, three in Lakeside, three in Eureka, one in Somers, eight in the Middle Fork Canyon area, and one in Kila. By job title, they included pot laborer 109, mechanic 11, clerical three, supervisor/manager 24, professional 19, millwright six, trades seven, electrician 11, technicians seven, computer five, maintenance nine and machine operator six. By length of employment at CFAC, they included 1-5 years 93, 5-10 years 27 and more than 10 years 95. By age, they included 18-24 years seven, 25-35 years 58, 35-50 years 111, over 50 years 38. The respondents included 193 males and 23 females. Fifty of those surveyed were veterans and 163 were not. Four out of 214 respondents were handicapped. Sixty-three were single and 151 were married. Twenty-eight were parents in a one-parent family; 131 were parents in a two-parent family; 189 were heads of household and seven were not; 86 said their spouses were employed and 123 said their spouses were not employed; and altogether the respondents claimed 254 dependants under 18 years. When asked about the highest grade they had attained, 12 had less than 12 years education; 151 were high school graduates; 29 had 13-15 years schooling; 16 were college graduates and three had post college education; 16 had a GED and 178 did not; 120 had attended college or a vo-tech school and 86 had not; 58 had received a degree or certificate and 144 had not; 15 had completed an apprenticeship program and 199 had not; 172 were interested in attending a community college or vo-tech center for less than two years and 37 were not; 97 were interested in attending a college or university for more than two years and 112 were not; and 191 were interested in short-term skills training and 21 were not.⁹⁷

Clubs, picnics and sports

On Aug. 16, 1963, Mel Ruder published an editorial in the Hungry Horse News praising expansion plans for the aluminum plant outside Columbia Falls. "At this time, we'd also like to recognize that Anaconda Aluminum Co. and its employees are good neighbors. It is noteworthy how active AAC men are in Columbia Falls Lions, Jaycees, the Chamber of Commerce, Rocky Mountain Sportsmen, church groups and as scout leaders and baseball coaches," Ruder wrote. "We are also aware of how careful AAC management is in this situation of being the largest Flathead industry. They don't throw their weight around."⁹⁸ Two years later, as the AAC plant prepared to celebrate its 10th anniversary, the newspaper commented on the plant's employees. "Men of Anaconda Aluminum Co. and their families are excellent neighbors. They bowl, golf, hunt, fish, belong to service

clubs, work as members of the city council and school board, guide safety hunter programs, coach Babe Ruth and Pee Wee ball clubs, lead cub scouts, bolster churches. They get along splendidly as good neighbors here in the Flathead.”⁹⁹

Good relations with the community coincided with good relations between workers, including on holidays. On Dec. 20, 1958, the Aluminotes, the plant’s 28-member male chorus, presented their first concert at the AAC Employees Club in Columbia Falls, singing holiday songs and favorite Christmas carols.¹⁰⁰ On Dec. 19, 1959, a crowd of 1,100 employees squeezed into the AAC Employees Club for the annual Christmas party. Approximately 800 children placed orders with Santa and received candy and Crackerjacks. After a buffet dinner, the Aluminotes sang favorite Christmas carols, which was followed by a dance.¹⁰¹ On Dec. 15, 1962, a total of 1,175 dinners were served and more than 800 children received presents from Santa Claus at the annual Family Christmas Party at the AAC Employees Club.¹⁰² On Dec. 16, 1968, more than 700 children met with Santa Claus at the club.¹⁰³

But the aluminum reduction pots could not be turned off for the holidays. Earl Dicks, a potline laborer, told the newspaper he expected to work two 12-hour shifts at the plant on Dec. 24 and 25, 1991. Dicks explained that a special camaraderie existed between potline workers, especially during the holidays. Workers brought in trays of baked goods and took turns relieving each other so the workers could sit down and enjoy some Christmas goodies. “You couldn’t find a better bunch of people to be with on Christmas,” Dicks said. He likened the experience to a Christmas he spent in 1969 in Vietnam when his platoon was left isolated on top of a hill short on supplies and managed to scrape together a Christmas celebration. Art Ott, another shift worker at the plant, had an additional holiday problem – his wife Vickie worked shifts as a dispatcher for the Columbia Falls Police Department. Having two shift workers in one family forced the family to adapt, with Art and the two children doing cooking and laundry. “We just make the best of it,” Vickie said.¹⁰⁴

Plant workers also gathered together in warmer weather for annual picnics. An early event took place on May 18, 1958, when the plant’s maintenance foremen sponsored a family picnic at the Apgar Campground in Glacier National Park.¹⁰⁵ In 1980, the AAC plant celebrated 25 years of operation with tours of the plant for employees and their families on July 16 and 17. A banquet was held at the Outlaw Inn in Kalispell on July 18 with Lt. Gov. Ted Schwinden and ARCO Chairman R.O. Anderson as guests. The next day, about 3,000 people attended a picnic at the plant on July 19. Hot dogs and pop were provided, along with music by the Nelson Brothers from a bandstand set up on the lawn.¹⁰⁶ On Aug. 14, 1987, the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. held an open house for employees and family members at the plant to mark the second anniversary of the new

company's operation.¹⁰⁷ A large party was thrown for the 775 workers billed as Employee Appreciation Day. Cowboy music filled the air, and workers' families toured the plant to see its operations.¹⁰⁸

On May 26, 1988, a reunion took place in Columbia Falls for retired hourly and salaried plant workers. Among the group were some of the earliest employees, who had helped build and then operate the aluminum smelter.¹⁰⁹ Shortly after Glencore acquired the plant, management organized a Glencore-CFAC Family Day event at the plant on Sept. 11, 1999. Among the advertised activities was an opportunity to "meet Glencore."¹¹⁰ Former employees showed up for the event, some having retired 10 or more years earlier. Workers on shift duty were allowed to leave their assignments and come to the picnic once they were relieved. Also present were several representatives from Glencore, including Simon Trinca, an Australian who had successfully caught a 2 ½-pound cutthroat trout the previous day on a local river.¹¹¹

The Glencore-CFAC Family Day company picnic was held from noon to 6:30 p.m. All workers were told they would be allowed time off to enjoy the festivities. Activities included the Sawdust Search for kids, an elk-bugling contest, face-painting for kids, a free-throw contest, a Frisbee throw, a balloon toss for kids, an exhibit set up in the Safety Conference Room with photos and displays showing 44 years of plant history gleaned from local newspapers and in-house publications. Self-guided tours of the plant were allowed with minimum personal protective equipment requirements.¹¹² The picnic took place on the lawn between the machine shop and the office buildings. A bandstand was set up next to several large tents. A large catering staff brought several whole pigs from Farm-To-Market Pork, along with several truckloads of hot dogs, hamburgers, salads and desserts. Numerous workers from the Field Maintenance department and the Service Crew prepared the site. Horseshoe pits were dug, a basketball hoop was set up, and a large tent was erected with games for children named Kids Korner. Events for children included a three-legged race and a special PPE Relay Race in which children donned personal protective equipment commonly used by workers at the plant.¹¹³

The Glencore-CFAC Family Day featured hot rods and classic cars owned by employees at the Shine and Show display. The machine shop exterior was painted and signs were erected with information about the aluminum plant. Heavy equipment were parked nearby for viewing including Big Red – the largest forklift at the plant, the diesel locomotive, the new Gapvax vacuum-cleaning truck, an alumina dispensing truck, Big Joe (the anode briquette dispensing truck) and the big Caterpillar front-end loader. Ingots and T-bars were set up on the parking lot, and small foot-long aluminum castings with the words Anaconda imprinted in large letters were found on the picnic tables holding down paper plates and napkins from the slight breeze. An old-time fiddler's

band played, couples in costume square-danced and later a band featuring Butch Strey, a security guard at the plant, played rock-and-roll.¹¹⁴ A follow-up CFAC Family Day was held at the Big Sky Waterslide in Columbia Falls on July 20 and July 21, 2000, for employees, retirees and family members with hamburgers, hot dogs, chips, ice cream, sodas and coffee. Door prizes included camping gear and clothing, and all invited guests were allowed to use the facilities' waterslides, miniature golf, bumper cars, carousel and other equipment.¹¹⁵

A wide variety of clubs, sports teams and outdoor recreational activities were connected to the aluminum plant. On March 15, 1957, the AAC Technical Society met for the first time at the AAC Employees Club. Lee Smith was named advisor to the club's board, representing the plant laboratory, and Bob Sneddon was named program chairman.¹¹⁶ The Glacier Amateur Radio Club met at the AAC Employees Club on Dec. 18, 1962, for a talk on Ohm's Law.¹¹⁷ The large proportion of engineers and electricians at the smelter would explain the general interest in science and technology, but the biggest attraction at the club was likely bowling. A bowling league kicked off on Nov. 5, 1956, with 48 men's and 18 women's teams. Playing the first night were the Crisco Kids, Briquettes, Crane Breakers, Alkamia Diabolos, Warehouse, AAC Alloy, Anaconda Pipefitters, Mainteneers, Service Department No. 1, Service Department No. 2, Dark Horse and Bull Gang.¹¹⁸ Automatic pin-setting equipment was installed at the club in March 1958.¹¹⁹ The 14th annual Anaconda Company bowling tournament began on April 18, 1958, with 200 teams from Anaconda, Bonner, Butte, Great Falls, Helena and Columbia Falls.¹²⁰ The annual AAC Bowling Smoker was held in Columbia Falls on May 28, 1959, and the H.G. Satterthwaite Trophy was awarded to the Aluminaires team for the second year in a row after racking up the highest score in the club's history at 8,327.¹²¹

When it came to baseball, the company sponsored children's teams and left softball to the adults. The teams often did very well. By the end of July 1962, the AAC Braves baseball team remained undefeated, a first in Columbia Falls Pee Wee League history. The team was invited to participate in a tourney in Whitefish.¹²² In July 1968, the AAC Braves won the Columbia Falls Peewee League championship against the Plum Creek Hawkeyes and the Rocky Mountain Lumber Co. Redlegs.¹²³ In June 1972, a baseball team sponsored by AAC won the Babe Ruth title.¹²⁴ On July 22, 1982, the AAC women's softball team won the championship in the Bad Rock Canyon Women's Softball Tournament.¹²⁵ On June 15, 1984, the local ARCO-sponsored baseball team won the Minor League Baseball League championship, capping a perfect record and winning the title for the second consecutive year.¹²⁶ On June 6, 1991, a CFAC-sponsored team won the Columbia Falls Minor League championship tournament by a score of 20 to 19.¹²⁷ The plant also sponsored teams for basketball and golf. In March 1983, the ARCO basketball team won the Columbia Falls Men's League championship.¹²⁸ In September

1961, casting foremen Tony Stempin and Howard Wright placed first and second in the AAC Employees Golf Tournament. Eighteen golfers played in the tournament at the Whitefish Lake Golf Club.¹²⁹

The variety of competitions and activities were wide-ranging. On April 20, 1961, six three-round boxing matches were held at the AAC Employees Club featuring boys from the Whitefish Boxing Club.¹³⁰ In 1966, plant employees engaged in chariot racing at the Rocky Mountain Riders and Saddle Club track in Columbia Falls. The chariots were made from 55-gallon drums mounted on an axle and attached with a yoke to two horses. The chariots were capable of covering the quarter-mile track in about 19 seconds. R.D. Shorty Mower, an iron worker from Shed 8 at the plant, was the consistent winner. Other racers included Jim Ellman, Ray Nicklaus and Forrest Prichard.¹³¹ Some plant workers took up martial arts. In 1967, Daniel Bean retired from the Navy after about 27 years and moved with his wife Winnie to Coram where he found a job at the smelter. He worked there for another 23 years. Bean not only became a 32nd-degree Mason and a master of the Columbia Falls Masonic Lodge, he also set up a judo club in the Hungry Horse VFW Club. Some of his students went on to be contenders in the Junior Olympics. Bean held a rare seventh-degree black belt in judo and was one of its earliest members.¹³² On Dec. 16, 1982, the plant continued its sponsorship of a ski race at the Big Mountain ski area near Whitefish. Organized as a U.S. Ski Association Regional Qualifying Race, about 150 ski racers competed for positions on the U.S. Ski team.¹³³ On July 31, 1993, the Plum Creek MDF plant's tug of war team hoped to win its seventh straight tug of war title at the Columbia Falls Heritage Days celebration. CFAC's team, led by 220-pound Mark Lampman, vowed to take the crown away after losing to Plum Creek six times in a row. CFAC had protested the defeat in 1992, claiming Plum Creek's team wore shoes with cleats, so the event was tried again – barefoot. Plum Creek still won.¹³⁴

Many of the longtime and short-time Flathead residents were fishermen, and this was the same for the aluminum plant. In October 1959, ten men and five children received prizes in the AAC Employees Club Fishing Derby. Paul McMaster took top honors with a 16 pound 11 1/2 ounce Dolly Varden trout. Second place went to John Lengstorf for a 14 pound 2 ounce Dolly Varden. Bob Lester caught the largest rainbow trout at 7 pounds 8 ounces. The largest cutthroat trout was caught by potlines supervisor and Columbia Falls Mayor Roy Lindsey, weighing in at 5 pounds 10 ounces.¹³⁵ The plant held its fourth annual AAC Fishing Derby for employees from April through September 1961 with divisions for bull, rainbow, cutthroat and brook trout and bass. Top quality fishing equipment was given away as prizes for the largest fish.¹³⁶

Hunting and shooting sports were also popular with the plant. On April 7, 1959, the U.S. Army Reserve Program's Kalispell Area Command presented a certificate of appreciation to the plant for donations of land and assistance in construction of a rifle range near the smelter. The range was operated by the Columbia Falls Rifle and Pistol Club. This was possibly the only award of its kind given to a Montana industry, the newspaper noted.¹³⁷ On Feb. 8, 1961, the Columbia Falls Junior Rifle Club defeated the Shed 8 Mechanics in a shooting match. The AAC marksmen included Baker, McGill, Thurston, Stratton and Sneddon. The junior riflemen included Bill Wagner, Dennin Kimzey, Sally Rahn, Gary Hamilton, Robert Kloetzke and Charlotte Schultzman.¹³⁸ According to an April 1982 news story, plant machinist Steve Sklany was an accomplished maker of muzzle-loading rifles, particularly an imitation of the rare model made by Patrick Ferguson during the American Revolution. Sklany was working as a machinist in Wisconsin and Illinois when he vacationed in the Flathead Valley in 1963 and left an application for work at the AAC plant. Three years later, he was called back for a job.¹³⁹

That interest in hunting and fishing helped explain the plant's support for search and rescue programs. In March 1982, twenty-three plant employees volunteered for the North Valley Search and Rescue organization. Another five workers were members of the Flathead Search and Rescue organization.¹⁴⁰ That experience paid off on Feb. 2, 2000, when a private plane crashed into the side of Teakettle Mountain above the smelter. Members of the plant's first responders unit hiked through deep snow and thick fog searching for the aircraft, finally locating the pilot crawling downhill away from the burned plane. Members of North Valley Search and Rescue and the Flathead County Sheriff's Office used the plant's facilities to move the pilot aboard a helicopter for transport to the hospital. The plant's first responders unit had recently completed a 16-hour course for continuing education training to remain certified. All first responders were required to do 32 hours of training every two years. CFAC's first responders carried pagers and responded to all emergencies at the plant site 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Many of the first responders also served on local fire departments and quick response units.¹⁴¹ In summer 2001, the plant served as a base of operations for federal firefighters working on the Moose Fire in the North Fork Valley. With the fire barreling down on them, the firefighters had left their base camp at Moran Creek on Aug. 28, 2001, and moved to the former softball fields west of the plant parking lot. Plant workers cut down the tall weeds, plowed roads and brought in gravel for roads. Within hours, the camp had been established for more than 800 firefighters. The number later reached close to 1,200.¹⁴²

Contributing to the community

The plant also encouraged its workers to support civic and charitable causes. On June 18, 1959, AAC Plant Manager James Smith began a 10-day drive to increase the number of employees taking payroll deductions to purchase U.S. Savings Bonds. In 1955, the plant received a government citation for its participation in a similar drive when 93.8% of the plant's employees participated. Smith pointed out that President Eisenhower's proposal to increase the bond's interest rate to 3 3/4% made the plan a smart investment for workers and their families.¹⁴³ By June 28, the 10-day drive had succeeded in enrolling 63% of the employees. During the campaign, foremen and department heads contacted each employee personally about subscribing for a new bond or increasing their present deduction.¹⁴⁴ When the drive concluded, 71% of the plant's employees had signed up for the program, the highest rate in Flathead County. In October, the U.S. Treasury presented the plant with a plaque in honor of its employee participation. The plaque was put on display in the AAC Employees Club.¹⁴⁵

The plant and its workers also donated to local charitable organizations. On Nov. 3, 1965, a drive was organized at the plant to raise money for the Whitefish Memorial Hospital. The drive was organized by the Aluminum Workers Trades Council and the company. The company announced that it would donate \$25,000 to the fund and match employees' donations up to another \$25,000.¹⁴⁶ In November 1970, the plant presented a check for \$5,000 to the Flathead County United Givers, a charitable group which supported nine organizations including the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Senior Citizens, Montana Association for the Blind, Montana Children's Home, Salvation Army, USO and Red Cross.¹⁴⁷ In October 1983, Plant Manager Bob Sneddon presented a \$5,000 grant from the ARCO Foundation to the Flathead Food Bank.¹⁴⁸ In 1985, the ARCO Foundation contributed \$10,000 to the Flathead Search and Rescue Association, \$5,000 to the local Food Bank, \$10,000 to the Columbia Falls Ambulance Association, \$5,000 to the CA/RE Program, \$7,200 to the Flathead Industries for the Handicapped and \$10,000 to the ALERT helicopter ambulance program.¹⁴⁹ On Jan. 13, 1986, the ARCO Foundation donated \$20,000 to the Flathead County United Way. "Traditionally, ARCO's past participation has made up about 15 percent of the Flathead County's United Way budget," Sneddon said. He pointed out that ARCO would also stick to its promise to match the individual contributions of ARCO employees and retirees for 1986.¹⁵⁰

In 1987, the Flathead County United Way beat their fund-raising goal by nearly \$11,000. "Plum Creek and CFAC just did a tremendous, tremendous job this year," said Sherry Stevens Wulf, the organization's executive director.¹⁵¹ At the conclusion of the 1987 United Way fund drive, the top contributor was Plum Creek, which was credited with

16% of the \$260,000 goal. Number two was CFAC, edging out the Kalispell Regional Hospital.¹⁵² In 1988, CFAC was the top donor for the United Way fund drive. Together with Plum Creek, the two raised 31% of the drive's total of \$273,763.¹⁵³ In 1989, CFAC employees broke their previous record by raising 11% more money for the United Way fund drive than in 1988.¹⁵⁴ In 1991, Plum Creek employees were the largest single employer group in the United Way fund drive, while the combined CFAC employees and CFAC corporate match were the largest single donor group in the drive.¹⁵⁵ On Feb. 26, 1992, it was announced that CFAC was the largest United Way contributor in the Flathead. Of the more than \$424,000 raised by United Way in the Flathead, nearly \$110,000 came from CFAC and Plum Creek. Plum Creek was the number two giver.¹⁵⁶ In 1999, employees at CFAC raised \$82,250 for United Way, about 11% of the total raised for the Flathead.¹⁵⁷

Other plant donations came in the form of property access or skilled labor. In January 1959, the plant set aside a 25-acre tract on Cedar Creek, about two miles north of Columbia Falls, for use by the local Boy Scouts Troop 41 for camping and outdoor crafts.¹⁵⁸ In April 1959, the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce announced plans to install 300 street signs at 150 intersections. The AAC plant donated \$150 and materials toward the project.¹⁵⁹ In May 1961, AAC donated \$2,500 for developing the athletic field at the new Columbia Falls High School. The project, led by the newly organized Columbia Falls Booster Club, involved building a field and a track, installing lights and erecting bleachers.¹⁶⁰ On Dec. 30, 1962, the chairlift at the Big Mountain ski area near Whitefish slid backward to a stop in the midst of a record-breaking day of skiing when a shaft in the lift's reduction gear snapped in two. After the skiers were evacuated from the lift, the drive mechanism was dismantled and rushed to the AAC plant's machine shop. Machine shop foreman George Blomgren led a crew including Charles Creon, John Popa, Al Kerestes and Wesley DeYong in making a new shaft for the reduction gear. According to Big Mountain general manager Ed Schenck, "If it weren't for Anaconda Aluminum and their fine cooperation, it would have been impossible to have the lift running at all this week." The lift was back in operation two days later.¹⁶¹

Starting in mid-April 1982, the AAC plant loaned administrative manager Jerry Miller to the Montana Governor's Council on Management to help the state government streamline operations. AAC picked up the tab for Miller's salary and expenses while he worked in Helena. Miller worked on the state's social, health and institutional programs, including the state prison system, the veterans home in Columbia Falls and the Swan River Youth Camp.¹⁶² In early November 1987, CFAC workers produced decals for the Columbia Falls Police Department's vehicles to save them a big expense. The decals were made by company artist Don Reynolds, matching the shoulder patches worn by officers.¹⁶³ In April 1994, CFAC announced it would donate a wooden bandstand

originally built to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the smelter to Columbia Falls for use in a city park. The bandstand was used during the 1980s as covered bleachers at the smelter's softball fields, but it sat idle for nearly a decade as the softball fields were no longer used. The deal was set up by CFAC line foreman Jim Cheff and his wife Kim, who was the city's parks manager. The structure was moved by Schellinger Construction Co. to GSA Park in Columbia Falls, which was later renamed Marantette Park.¹⁶⁴ In 1996, CFAC donated 1,000 pounds of aluminum metal to the Boulder Voluntary Fire Department for repairs to a community carousel that had been built for disabled residents at the Montana Development Center in Boulder, Mont. Of the 36 cast aluminum horses on the carousel, 12 needed repair. Some of the repaired horses were originally cast with aluminum donated by AAC in the late 1950s. Each horse needed about 70 pounds of aluminum poured into 40-year-old molds to make 18 pieces.¹⁶⁵

In April 1957, AAC plant employees organized a federal credit union. Membership cost 25 cents per employee and shares sold for \$5 apiece.¹⁶⁶ The AAC Employees Federal Credit Union granted its first loan on May 22, 1957 – a \$200 loan for home remodeling. Payroll deductions at the plant had built up a sufficient supply of capital to begin issuing loans.¹⁶⁷ On Jan. 19, 1959, credit union officers held a meeting in the AAC Employees Club where they recommended a 3.5% dividend. The credit union's membership totaled 227 by that time.¹⁶⁸ In 1999, the CFAC Credit Union merged with Parkside Federal Credit Union, which started in 1965 as the Whitefish Great Northern Federal Credit Union to serve employees of the Great Northern Railway and their family members.

The abundance of wildlife on the plant's undeveloped land led to interesting stories. On May 25, 1986, a young black bear wandered through open doors at the north end of Potroom 10 at the east side of the smelter and chased potman Jim Hunnewell four feet up onto a reduction pot. Hunnewell said at first he thought it was a large dog, and he threw his broom at the bear when it was about 40 feet away. "It stopped for a second, then saw a doorway and took off outside," Hunnewell reported. By that time, Bob Seliger had already seen the bear as it entered the potroom and had radioed his sighting, but there was no immediate reply from his skeptical co-workers. Foreman Lee Nelson saw the bear as it left the building and watched it try to climb a chain-link fence. At that point a female coyote chased the bear away from her lone pup. Later in the day, the same bear was seen crawling under a fence at the southeast corner of the plant and heading for Teakettle Mountain. Plant security guard Dan Smith reported he had previously seen the same bear in the area.¹⁶⁹ On May 20, 2003, a mule deer was rescued from a potroom basement by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks personnel and CFAC workers. The potlines in the rooms where the deer ran in the basement were off line at the time. After surrounding the deer, it was tranquilized and carried up two flights of stairs to the ground floor.¹⁷⁰

The plant's undeveloped buffer land surrounding the smelter provided a special outdoor recreation opportunity that came to fruition on Oct. 24, 2009, when the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks announced that CFAC had enrolled 900 acres of land along the Flathead River for deer and elk hunting by youths aged 12-15 and by disabled people. The property hadn't been open to the public in a long time and was located on the valley floor. Hunters needed permission from CFAC. The state said it had approached CFAC about the idea, and if it worked out well, company officials said other company land might be opened up to hunters. The only other large blocks of private land open to hunting was made available by Plum Creek and F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co.¹⁷¹ On Sept. 8, 2011, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks announced to the media that CFAC had again enrolled its land around the smelter plant in Columbia Falls in the state's block management hunting program for youths and disabled people. The north half of the property would be open to youths and adults with disabilities but was walk-in only. Only one party with up to four hunters would be allowed to use each area per day. A drawing would be held on Oct. 3 to determine the dates and hunters.¹⁷²

Other wildlife stories at the plant were humorous if not bizarre. On July 18, 1988, while unloading alumina at the smelter, Bill Padgett found an 8-inch long brown snake in the raw ore. Experts were not able to identify the snake, but it was thought to have come from Australia with the alumina and was possibly poisonous. The snake died a few days later.¹⁷³ On July 27, 1988, the Hungry Horse News published a large cartoon by Craig Goble of a man outfitted for catching snakes. Apparently a second snake was discovered at the plant shortly afterwards only to turn out under closer inspection to be made of rubber.¹⁷⁴ On April 10, 2014, two plant security guards at the shuttered plant found what was believed to be a black-hooded parakeet in the machine shop. Flathead County animal control officer Paul Charbonneau said the bird's wings had been clipped so it couldn't fly, and it had a band on its leg with an identification number. He couldn't explain how the bird got in there. The plant had stopped running in fall 2009.¹⁷⁵

Dale A. Burk, the AAC plant's public spokesperson, teamed up with Elmer Sprunger, the plant's sign and poster painter, in April 1962 to publish "Buck Fever," a short book with a humorous portrayal of hunters. Burk did the writing and Sprunger created the cartoons.¹⁷⁶ Sprunger began his drawing career while working as a logger for the Montana Power Co. and continued by illustrating the "104 Reporter" union newspaper while working as a boilermaker in a Tacoma, Wash., shipyard during World War II. He began drawing editorial cartoons for the Bigfork Eagle on Oct. 25, 1978, targeting unfair labor-practices charges made against the Bigfork schools. His cartoons typically addressed politics, environmental issues and everyday life in the Bigfork area, where he lived most of his 83 years. In 1982, Stoneydale Press published a book called "Elmer Sprunger, Wildlife Artist." In 1995, he collaborated with boyhood friend Bob Salzman on

a paperback book, "Montana Bob Stories: Tales of Glacier Park and the Flathead." In his later years, Sprunger became involved in local environmental issues, and the Sprunger-Whitney Trail in the state forest in the Swan Valley was named for him. In June 2003, Elmer Sprunger received an award from the Montana Newspaper Association for Best Editorial Cartoon.¹⁷⁷

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