Chapter 13
Taming the Flathead wilderness

Construction of an aluminum plant in the heart of the Rocky Mountains at Columbia Falls has often been questioned. A qualified businessman doing his due diligence in 1950 would not be expected to consider building a $65 million (in 1955 dollars) aluminum smelter in the Flathead Valley of Northwest Montana. At over 3,000 feet above sea level, set up against the Continental Divide, the smelter site in Columbia Falls was more than 1,000 miles away from the nearest source of alumina and other raw materials needed to produce aluminum – with no barge or ship access. The factors that clinched the deal included 1) hydroelectric potential in Northwest Montana, including the Hungry Horse Dam, a new facility with sufficient capacity to power two potlines; 2) the availability of war-time surplus aluminum smelting equipment at cheap prices; 3) increased demand for aluminum, incentivized by the federal government, to meet the defense needs of the Korean War; 4) the interests of the Harvey Machine Co., a fabricating company facing aluminum supply shortages as a result of the Big 3 oligopoly that was clever enough to put the first three factors together in one package; and 4) the Anaconda Copper Mining Co., a large and diverse metals company well-versed in vertical integration and with sufficient cash to get a foothold in the U.S. aluminum industry. Anaconda had strong Montana roots – it began in Butte, its chairman had owned a summer lodge in the Flathead Valley since 1906, and the company had first considered building a hydroelectric dam and aluminum smelter in the Flathead Valley as far back as 1914.

The Flathead Valley is bordered by the Salish Mountains to the west, the Whitefish Range to the north, the Swan Range to the east and Flathead Lake to the south. Squeezing through Bad Rock Canyon, the narrow gap between the Whitefish and Swan ranges, are the Flathead River, the second largest river by volume in Montana, the BNSF Railway main line and U.S. Highway 2. Three rivers – the Flathead, Whitefish and Stillwater – flow south across the valley toward Flathead Lake. Seen from the air, the valley floor is a mosaic of river sloughs and oxbows, ponds and lakes, patches of dense forest and farmland. Gone are most of the swamps that were drained by early settlers. While the valley receives an average annual precipitation of only 16.35 inches, it also receives the runoff from an average winter snowfall of 67 inches, which accounts for much the water on the valley floor. The Continental Divide shelters the valley from severe cold fronts coming south out of Canada – temperatures average seven summer days above 90 degrees and 12 winter days down to zero or below – but the three rivers,

thick forests and the numerous pockets of water made travel and therefore development difficult in the early days of settlement by whites. [1]

Periodic floods wiped out riverfront communities. Columbia Falls resident Mike Berne, reminiscing shortly after the 500-year flood in 1964, said the worst flood in the area's history took place in 1894. The Flathead River overflowed its banks in 1907 and surrounded the flour mill and grain elevator at the foot of Nucleus Avenue in Columbia Falls. On May 23, 1948, the Flathead River reached 19.5 feet near Columbia Falls, about 5.5 feet over flood stage, with a flow of 102,000 cubic feet per second. But the 1964 flood is the one that made its way into the history books and claimed national attention. Flathead Lake overflowed its banks for miles north to Evergreen, near Kalispell, and boats floated from the lakeside town of Somers right into Kalispell. The reason more damage took place in 1964 was that more property by then was developed close to the river, and more virgin timber existed in 1894 that limited the effects of that flood. [2]

Explorers and native people

In 1812, Canadian explorer David Thompson rode to a hill near Polson and described Flathead Lake in his journal. His Indian companion told him about a gap through the mountains north of the lake that wasn't used because of the Blackfeet Indians on the prairie side of the Divide. In 1860, Missoula County was organized as part of Washington Territory and included much of northwestern Montana. [3] Before white settlers arrived, the Flathead Valley was home to several native tribes, including the Kalispel, or Upper Pend d'Oreilles, and the Kootenai. The area had been visited and explored earlier by fur trappers from Canada and Jesuit priests, but development of the area was slow because of its distance from regularly traveled routes. [4] Swan Lake, about 26 miles south of the future city of Columbia Falls, was known to natives as Sweathouse Lake and was found on missionary maps dating back to the 1840s. In the 1880s, the writer Frank Bird Linderman traveled to the north end of Swan Lake and counted 10 Kootenai tribal lodges. [5]

One of the centers of Kootenai activity in northwestern Montana was the Tobacco Plains along the Kootenai River. Prior to 1850, the Kootenai hunted seasonally at Flathead Lake, competing with the Pend d'Oreilles, but after that they lived along the lake permanently, replacing or intermixing with the original population. The Hellgate Treaty of 1855 established the Flathead Indian Reservation in the Mission Valley for the Flathead (or Salish), Pend d'Oreille (or Kalispel) and Kootenai tribes. Most of the bands from these tribes slowly moved onto the reservation south of Flathead Lake. The creation of the reservation opened the door to permanent non-Indian settlement of the valleys of western Montana, according to local historian Kathryn McKay. In 1887, the

Dawes Act divided the fertile bottomlands of the reservation into individual allotments, and any land considered surplus was acquired by white settlers. In 1858, the resident non-Indian population of northwestern Montana was about 200 people. By 1870, the population of Missoula County, not including passing gold miners, was a little more than 2,500, but the population hardly grew little over the next 10 years. The W.W. DeLacy map published in 1870 showed a "half-breed" settlement located just north of Flathead Lake, where an Indian trail crossed Ashley Creek. The small settlement was established several decades earlier. [6]

In 1845, two French Canadians joined the Kootenai living at the north end of the lake and built a cabin on Ashley Creek. In the late 1860s, however, several of the families living at Ashley Creek left the area because of Blackfeet Indian raiding, according to McKay. A decade later, several white settlers visited the upper Flathead Valley, with some remaining a considerable time. One early Flathead pioneer recalled that some of the settlers left in the late 1870s after it was reported that Sioux leader Sitting Bull was returning from Canada via the Flathead. Round trip from the Ashley Creek area to Missoula in the 1880s took about three weeks. In those early settlement years, various Indian bands camped in the valley, tanning hides and selling moccasins and other products to settlers. A woman who lived in the Flathead in 1883 recalled that, "Except for the nomadic Indians, life for the most part centered around the trading posts, a few ranches and an occasional trapper's cabin." Relations between the Indians and the incoming settlers were generally peaceful in the Flathead Valley, according to McKay. Two Kootenai, however, were lynched in Demersville in 1887, and three prospectors were killed on Wolf Creek by Indians that same year. Soldiers from Fort Missoula were sent to the Flathead in 1890 as peacekeepers for several months, but they weren't really needed and spent most of their time clearing trails and roads. [7]

By 1890, the Flathead Valley was still a part of the "Wild West," and there were still "Indian troubles," as contemporary accounts described them. Despite the valley's isolation, natives and settlers alike were influenced by the Ghost Dance Movement that spread from the Northern Paiutes of Nevada, striking fear in the valley's pioneer residents, according to local historian Paul Strong. Newspaper accounts began in March 1890 when a man was sentenced to 10 years in the state penitentiary in Deer Lodge for killing an Indian named Jocko in Demersville on Flathead Lake's north shore. On April 1, two companies of soldiers were sent from Missoula to be stationed at Demersville. By April 25, it was reported that a band of Chippewa were camped at Half Moon Prairie, at the north end of the valley below the Whitefish Range. On July 18, Sheriff's Deputy J.J. Grant led a posse of 40 men into a Kootenai sun dance ceremony to arrest several fugitives. Warned about the posse's approach, the fugitives disappeared. [8]

According to Strong's account, Peter Ronan, the U.S. agent for the Flathead Indian Reservation, came to the Flathead on Aug. 1, 1890, to assure the settlers that fugitive Indians on the reservation would be turned over for trial. At the same time, the Cree were in Demersville selling polished buffalo horn. On Aug. 8, Sheriff Houston and a posse of 50 men surrounded the Kootenai lodges at Dayton Creek and searched for fugitives. When the posse attempted to arrest Chief Aneas, the chief pulled a gun and tried to shoot a deputy. "Aneas dropped the hammer on a bad cartridge twice before the gun could be gotten away from him," a report read. On Nov. 28, the Demersville newspaper called for a jail to be built in the county. By Dec. 10, the newspaper reported that residents were concerned that some area Indians were under the influence of the Ghost Dance Messiah. [9]

Prior to 1870, the only way for white pioneers to earn a living in the Flathead Valley area was by hunting, trapping or trading. By the 1870s, lack of transportation to the valley continued to be a problem. According to the 1880 population census, 27 white settlers lived at the head of Flathead Lake. All were livestock men except for one woman, two girls and a blacksmith. The next limited wave of settlement began in 1880 when John Dooley came to the Flathead. Dooley opened a small trading post called Selish on the Flathead River in 1881. Although some settlers moved in, the relatively few residents in the early 1880s were mostly quartz miners from Butte and other areas, a few trappers, some buffalo hunters and some French Canadians. According to early Flathead resident Frank Linderman, "Without the least knowledge of farming these men, many of them confirmed bachelors, took up claims and became farmers as though they had reached the realization of a lifelong dream." [10]

Many family men found it necessary in the 1880s to leave their wives and children behind on their 160-acre homestead claims in the Flathead so they could travel to find work in the mines in Butte, lumber mills and other areas outside of the Flathead, according to McKay. The pioneer stockmen in the Flathead Valley tried to discourage farming with stories of early frosts, low rainfall and mosquitoes. Very few agricultural products were raised in the Flathead until the late 1880s – most were brought in from Missoula. Since the early market for produce was mostly local, many farmers spent their time logging. The Flathead Valley was largely wooded in the 1880s, with natural prairies, occasional groves of ponderosa pine and small lakes. The first area to be settled was the high ground to the north and northwest of Kalispell because it was dry and not heavily timbered. Areas that later became good farmland were too wet and swampy to till in the early years. [11]

Railroads and steam ships

The Northern Pacific Railroad reached Missoula, about 120 miles south of the Flathead Valley, in 1883, and early settlers made the 12-day trip to Missoula about twice a year for supplies. The trip was considered quite hazardous and involved transportation on the Flathead River and Flathead Lake and some overland travel. [12] Interest in the Flathead Valley was generated by the territorial press, according to local historian Charles F. O'Neil. In 1883, an article in the Missoula Gazette praised the Half Moon Prairie area as a potential site for settlement. Pioneering settlers migrated little by little into the Flathead Valley, squatting on the land, staking out homesteads and carving farms out of the timberland. By 1884, travel to the Flathead from Missoula required a train ride to Ravalli, stagecoach across the Flathead Indian Reservation and Mission Valley, and a steamboat up Flathead Lake to ports at Selish or Demersville. But roads in the Flathead Valley were poor or nonexistent, and reports of the area published in the Missoula newspapers referred only in passing to the "Bad Rock area" or "Half Moon Prairie." [13] Some tougher pioneering families prospered over time. The Gaspard Martin family homesteaded in the northern part of Flathead Valley in 1886. The little town of Martin City was named after Mrs. Martin in 1908. [14] In 1887, a trapper named Frank Emerson discovered coal in the Coal Creek area up the North Fork of the Flathead River, on the opposite side of the Whitefish Range from the Flathead Valley. [15]

In 1880, "Honest John Dooley" built a boat landing and store on the Flathead River near Kalispell. In 1885, the U.S. Grant began hauling freight and passengers on Flathead Lake. It was the first of many steamboats on the lake, running freight from the Northern Pacific Railroad terminal at Ravalli to the north end of Flathead Lake. [16] T.J. "Jack" Demers founded Demersville in 1887. His general store proved so profitable that it was purchased in 1889 by the Missoula Mercantile Co. By 1890, about 3,000 people lived in the Flathead Valley north of the lake. The town of Demersville included nearly 50 buildings – residences, stores and saloons. In the surrounding countryside, resourceful men started saw mills, farms and stores. [17] For a few years, until the rise of Kalispell in the early 1890s, Demersville was the largest town in the upper Flathead. The first newspaper in northwestern Montana, the Inter Lake, began publishing there in 1889. Settlers flowed in and out of Demersville, most of them trying to reap profits from the Flathead's abundant resources or from each other, according to McKay. [18]

A temporary building boom began in 1890 once word came that the Great Northern Railway was coming to the Flathead. Speculators believed Demersville would become the railroad's division point, but Kalispell was chosen. Kalispell was founded on St. Patrick's Day 1891, and railroad baron James. J. Hill reputedly named the city using a word from the Pend d'Oreille language meaning "prairie above the lake." The

announcement that Kalispell would become the division point – and a fire that burned several blocks in Demersville – led to the end of the riverside port. Many of the residents and businesses moved to Kalispell in 1892. [19] Kalispell was platted in 1891 as a railroad town, and Demersville soon became a ghost town – some buildings were moved to Kalispell on rollers. In 1904, the railroad company relocated its division point to Whitefish, and many railroad workers moved to Whitefish. [20]

The first lumber mill in the valley, located west of Kalispell on Foy's Lake, could produce 10,000 board-feet per year. Demersville had boomed from 1887 through 1891 as a result of steamboat traffic on Flathead Lake, and the steamboat traffic benefited from shipments of construction materials for the new Great Northern Railway. With the railroad completed, steamboat travel on the lake persisted as late as 1911, until better roads were built around the west side of the lake. The railroad brought civilization to the Flathead Valley. [21] Once Montana Territory, established in 1864, became a state in 1889 primarily because of concern over the lack of local political control, settlement of the Flathead began in earnest. Flathead County was created out of Missoula County in 1893 because of the long distance to Missoula. Flathead County originally encompassed about 8,500 square miles, but subsequent additions and losses (due to the formation of other counties) reduced its size substantially. Kalispell became the county seat in 1894. [22]

Creating Columbia Falls

On Nov. 8, 1889, the same year Montana joined the Union as the 41st state, a group of pioneers formed a village on the banks of the Flathead River not far from Bad Rock Canyon which they called Columbia, according to local historian Beatrice Macomber. To the east were two mountains – Teakettle, at the east end of the Whitefish Range, named for a rock formation on its south face, and Columbia, the northernmost mountain in the Swan Range. To the west and south of the new riverfront village lay scattered timber, grassy parklands and swamps – future agricultural lands. When the settlers first arrived, the river provided one of the main means of transportation. Coal from the North Fork area was brought down the Flathead River on barges and flat-boats powered by donkey engines to Demersville, where it was loaded onto small steamboats. After crossing the lake, the coal was carried by wagons to the railroad in Missoula. [23] The isolated mountain valley slowly drew the attention of industrial interests. In 1889, the Great Northern Railway sent John F. Stevens to explore terrain around Marias Pass east of Bad Rock Canyon to see if it was feasible to build a railroad over the Continental Divide at that point. Stevens brought back a favorable report, and by 1891 a road was built over the pass. [24] On April 18, 1890, a Flathead Valley newspaper reported that "several notables" were on their way up the North Fork to see the coal deposits. At the

same time it was reported that prospectors were looking for oil up the North Fork close to the Canadian border. [25]

On May 26, 1890, the Missoula Gazette described the construction of a new road between Demersville and Half Moon, and some commercial establishments sprang up in the area. The northern portion of the Flathead Valley had two important natural resources to attract investors – timber and coal. By Nov. 20, 1890, a post office was established at Half Moon for the town of Hill, possibly named after James Hill, the Great Northern Railway builder. The post office lasted until April 5, 1893, when the new post office at Columbia Falls took over its duties. On Jan. 19, 1891, a post office was set up in a farmhouse for a small community in the Bad Rock area which called itself Monaco. Within a year, Monaco became Columbia Falls. Almost right away, the new town of Columbia Falls "would edge out Demersville as the most elaborately, promoter-developed, dream-town among the earliest towns of the Upper Flathead," according to O'Neil. "When commercial enterprise came to the Bad Rock locale, it did so with raucous pomp and circumstance, all encouraged by the anticipation of a railroad to be right in the front yard." [26]

Word first reached the Flathead that the Great Northern was being built along the northern tier states in 1890. [27] When the railroad company was deciding where to lay its route through the valley, Demersville boasted of its navigable waters, Ashley that it was at the valley's natural outlet to the west, and Columbia Falls that it was where the tracks would emerge from the mountains at Bad Rock Canyon. But the railroad company chose none of these villages as its division point and instead chose the new town of Kalispell. [28] When rumors reached Helena and Butte that the railroad might run through the upper Flathead Valley, a group of investors quickly formed the Northern International Development Company and bought land west of Bad Rock Canyon. On March 5, 1891, the company filed a plat for the town of Columbia Falls. The site was described in the Missoula Gazette on Sept. 7, 1891: "It is laid out on a high, level tract of bench land, with a growth of heavy pine timber surrounding it on all sides, giving the whole a park like appearance….The river is half a mile away from the center of the town, and between it and the river is a low bottom covered with a heavy growth of timber." [29]

The Northern International Development Co. paid an Indian woman named La Frambois $5,000 for 160 acres to develop a town site. [30] She had received the land as part of an Indian land settlement in Minnesota, where she had lived. The communities near Bad Rock Canyon were about 10 years old by that time and based on timber, farming and North Fork coal. The investors moved on a hunch that the mouth of the canyon would be a logical place for the railroad to maintain a roundhouse and helper engines, using North Fork coal to get the trains up and over the Continental Divide, according to local

historian Marie Cuffe Shea. Frank Langford, representing the Northern International Development Co., bought and platted most of the original Columbia Falls town site and pushed lot prices to $1,800. This speculation helped influence Great Northern's choice for Kalispell as its division point instead of Columbia Falls. By the time railroad construction crews arrived at Columbia Falls, they found a rip-roaring community with 18 saloons and a few retail stores. [31]

According to Ralph Owings, writing in the June 7, 1935, Whitefish Pilot, the Columbia Falls town site was the logical site for the railroad company's division point, "but James J. Hill thought that he was being robbed in the price these bankers asked for the land; he changed the survey and left Columbia Falls more than a mile away from the rails. At first he even refused to build a depot for the citizenry of Columbia Falls because he was so bitter against the town." Kalispell became the division point, but Hill continued to face high land prices. "In his rage, he ordered all the locomotives of the division fired, and on one historic night all of the whistles of the engines of the division began blowing in unison and the division was moved to Whitefish," Owings wrote. Columbia Falls lost the division site to two towns, Owings noted. "Hill later wrote a scorching letter to the land men of Kalispell in which he said that he would live to see the day when the grass grew over the windows of the Conrad bank. This prophecy of the Empire Builder never materialized," Owings wrote. "It has been said that Hill had such a hatred against this incident that he would pull the curtains down in his special car as he was traveling through Columbia Falls, always refusing even to look out." [32]

A fierce rivalry developed between Columbia Falls and Kalispell. As early as March 20, 1890, it was reported that two Great Northern agents had spent four or five days closing land deals for a new town site in the Flathead Valley about three miles north of Demersville. A lot of land-jumping was taking place at the time. A week later, on March 27, 1890, the Northern International Improvement Co. published a large advertisement in the Inter Lake, then being printed in Demersville, calling for settlers to move to Columbia Falls. According to the ad, Columbia Falls offered "Liberal inducements in the way of Water Power, Cheap Coal, Wood, Lumber and Millsites to Millmen and Manufacturers." The company claimed to own the coal deposits up the North Fork and had "the key to the lumber situation of the Flathead Country." [33]

The Northern International Improvement Co. also claimed that "every dollar paid to this company for real estate is reinvested in permanent improvements and enterprises that will support a town when the railroad boom is exploded. It is not shipped out of the country." Meanwhile, valley residents were unsure what to believe, and rumors spread about other town sites planned by the Great Northern. Much of the confusion was the fault of Northern International Development Co. propaganda being published by the

local Columbian newspaper. On Oct. 22, 1891, the Columbian announced that the Great Northern Railway had begun construction on a roundhouse and a large depot in Columbia Falls. On Nov. 5, 1891, the Columbian continued with the story by reporting, "With the Great Northern roundhouse and the largest shipping yards in the valley located at Columbia Falls, this city can have no quarrel with its neighbors. We can, however, pity the men who have been deluded by groundless promises and invested in bubbles, soon to be bursted." [34] The story wasn't anywhere close to truth.

In 1891, James Asbur Talbott, one of the investors in the Northern International Development Co., built the town's first bank. Three hotels were built that year – the Gaylord, the Columbian and the Windsor. [35] An estimated $100,000 was spent before the railroad reached the town site. A wood-crib bridge was built across the Flathead River at a cost of several thousand dollars, a flour mill was built for $15,000 to $25,000, and the Gaylord Hotel was built for $10,000. [36] Soon the little village had a general merchandise store, a barber shop and 18 saloons. New development at the town site on the bench above the river attracted residents away from the river bank, which saw high water each spring. The John O. Olsen Lumber Co. – the first saw mill and lumber company in Columbia Falls – remained down by the river. Timber was cut in the surrounding hills, skidded or hauled down to the river and floated to the mill. A.L. Jordan built a new planing mill at the northeast corner of the town site near the planned rail lines. A narrow gauge tramway was built between the saw mill and the planing mill. The Great Northern depot was built near Jordan's planing mill in 1891, along with a two-story rooming house and a grain elevator. Columbia Falls eventually became known as a major shipping point on the Great Northern Railway for grain. [37]

The Butte investors began to promote their town site right away. A March 27, 1891, advertisement in the Inter Lake read in all caps and bold print, "A new town of Columbia Falls with unlimited water power, cheap coal, has under construction $30,000 railway and wagon bridge, $40,000 hotel, $20,000 steamboat and will have 2 railways within a year." [38] The first newspaper in town, the Columbian, was published by J.W. Pace starting in 1890 and sold for $2 per year. [39] Pace, who came to the Flathead from the Missoulian newspaper, was the loudest promoter of the new town, continuously lauding the town's superior qualities. The Columbian was owned and operated by the Northern International Improvement Co. and was known to exaggerate the truth from time to time, according to O'Neil. By late 1891, the Great Northern Railway had not yet come over Marias Pass, but one wouldn't know it from the way the newspaper described the town. Jim Hill and Great Northern agents had a different idea about developing the area – they secretly bought up land in the center of the valley and ran the railroad to the future town of Kalispell. [40]

Jim Kennedy, the owner of a small drug store, became the first Columbia Falls postmaster in May 1891. According to a popular story still told today, he applied for the name Columbia for the new town and was told a town named Columbus already existed in Montana. His wife then suggested he add the suffix "Falls," and so the town was named Columbia Falls. [41] The first half of the town's name probably came from nearby Columbia Mountain, located near the headwaters of the Columbia River. The second half of the name supposedly was tacked on to avoid confusion with a town near Billings named Columbus. But according to O'Neil's local history, there was no town in Montana named Columbus until several years after Columbia Falls was named. [42] On Jan. 1, 1894, the town of Stillwater, located east of the Beartooth Range along the Northern Pacific Railroad line, changed its name to Columbus to avoid mixing up railroad freight destined for a town in Minnesota already named Stillwater. The town of Columbus started with the name Countryman Stage Station, then Eagle's Nest, then Sheep Dip, then Stillwater, and finally Columbus. [43] The suffix "Falls" more than likely had to do with promotions by the Northern International Development Co., which falsely claimed in their ads that a falls on the Flathead River would provide waterpower for future industry.

Steamboats in Columbia Falls

Soon after staking out lots, the town fathers declared that their site, not Demersville, was the head of navigation on the Flathead River. To support their claim, a steamboat was built in April 1891, christened the Crescent, and set up with scheduled runs from Polson, at the south end of Flathead Lake, to Columbia Falls. [44] The Northern International Improvement Co. directed Captain Depuy to construct the large steamboat in Demersville. A boiler and other heavy machinery were brought in on the Northern Pacific Railroad as far north as Ravalli and then carried by wagons to the southern end of Flathead Lake, where the equipment was loaded on lake-going steamships. The Crescent was flat-bottomed with a shallow draft. It measured 150 feet long and 26 feet wide and was equipped with suitable accommodations and ample dining room for 100 passengers. Around April 23, 1891, the Crescent made its maiden voyage from Demersville to Columbia Falls with a load of freight. The Flathead River was running high and the trip was uneventful. Encouraged by its success, railroad contractors began plans for warehouses in Columbia Falls. On June 29, the Crescent made its second trip to Columbia Falls when the river was much lower. At one point the Crescent turned sideways in the river, nearly running aground, and Captain Depuy ordered the boat back. This ended the claim that Columbia Falls was the head of navigation on the Flathead River, a major setback for the Northern International Improvement Co. [45]

Despite the setback, the town fathers continued to promote Columbia Falls. Talbott and J. E. Gaylord invested $50,000 in 1,120 acres and seven mining claims in the North Fork

coal fields. [46] Explorer Raphael Pumpelly had identified coal beds on the west side of the North Fork of the Flathead River while on a trip through the northern Rockies in 1883, and local prospectors promoted and developed the deposits. The Great Northern Railroad needed coal for fuel but found lignite coal from the North Fork unfit for railroad use. The Anaconda Copper Mining Co. investigated the deposits with the hope that the coal could be converted to coke and used at its smelting operations, but the company found the coal to be too low-grade for such use. In 1887, seven men located coal claims on Coal Creek in the North Fork Valley at the urging of the copper company's boss, Marcus Daly. They sold their holdings three years later to James Talbott and Northern Improvement Company investors for $50,000. [47] James Hill refused to build a branch line up the North Fork to the coal deposits unless all claims were sold to him, according to Strong. When the owners refused to sell, the Northern International Improvement Co. decided to build a steamboat to deliver the coal to the railroad depot in Columbia Falls. [48]

Talbott spent $5,000 to build a steamboat named the T.F. Oakes and send it upriver toward the coal deposits. [49] Built from machinery taken off the Crescent, the Oakes was equipped with a paddlewheel and a large winch mounted on its bow. In May 1892, Captain A.S. Lanneau started up the Flathead River. In two weeks time, they reached Canyon Creek and faster water. After securing the winch cable to a large fir tree, the boat began to make its way up the rapids when its undersized boiler ran out of steam. While waiting for more steam to build up, the boat began to wallow in the fast water, then swung sideways to the current and tipped over. Pieces of the boat floated far downstream – past the watching eyes of the residents in Columbia Falls. As the pilot house floated past, the Columbian proudly announced in its pages that the Oakes had successfully reached the coal fields. [50] The demise of the 100-foot sternwheeler added further fuel to the cross-valley rivalry between Kalispell and Columbia Falls, as the Inter Lake reported, "So another bubble for the fake town has been busted." [51] The next year, Talbott brought out some coal on a raft, but after a second raft also wrecked he gave up on the idea of river transportation. Coal beds were also located in the South Fork of the Flathead River drainage. In the summer of 1891, William Curran camped at these coal fields and used the coal for fire and blacksmithing. He and others also found gold- and silver-bearing quartz in the South Fork. In 1892, Frank Linderman drove a tunnel on his coal claim in the South Fork and reported, "Men are going in, in great numbers, some with and some without provisions." [52]

In December 1891, the first train on the Great Northern mainline pulled into Columbia Falls. By this time, the town of Demersville had essentially vanished, as some of the merchants had believed the stories in the Columbian and moved out, according to Strong. Eventually the Northern International Improvement Co. was forced to recognize

that it was Kalispell and not Columbia Falls which would receive the attention and finances of the Great Northern, including a roundhouse and depot. The Dec. 31, 1891, Columbian conceded the point but added, "It will take more than free whiskey, alkali water and bull beef to make a town, and that is all they have. Columbia Falls will still receive goods at a cheaper rate than any other town in the valley, and so goods will be sold cheaper in Columbia Falls. This town is bound to be the best in the valley and provide merchandise at a lower price." To compound its accumulation of misleading stories, the Columbian reported on Dec. 31, 1891, that a railroad line would be built by the Northern Pacific Railroad up the North Fork to the coal deposits. Then on May 5, 1892, the Columbian reported that the Northern Pacific Railroad would build a line to Columbia Falls from its mainline in the Clark Fork River Valley, up along the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Neither track was ever laid. In late May 1892, James Hill traveled through Kalispell on the first train to make the trip from Minneapolis to Spokane. [53]

Boosting the Flathead

The Kalispell Townsite Co. prospered from the sale of lots at over-inflated prices. Kalispell incorporated and grew into the commercial center of the Flathead Valley. With the completion of the railroad, the lumber industry grew as far west in Montana as the Kootenai River, peaking by 1916. Kalispell's population reached 2,497 residents in 1900, and growth continued slowly but steadily. [54] Flathead County was created on Feb. 6, 1893. It originally encompassed the entire northwest corner of the state of Montana, including much of today's Glacier National Park. [55] In 1894, Columbia Falls lost its bid to become the county seat of Flathead County to Kalispell. [56] Not long after settling on Kalispell, the Great Northern moved its division point to a thickly forested site on Whitefish Lake. In June 1903, the community of Whitefish was platted and laid out as a town. Prior to that it was a community of homesteaders and logging camps with a hotel and a general store on the lake. The town site was cleared of trees and timber-framed buildings were erected in the downtown area – including 14 saloons. The Great Northern began construction of a rail line from Columbia Falls north towards Rexford and a low mountain pass recently discovered by the railroad's surveyor, Charles Haskell. The new rail line was quickly built in 1903 to 1904. [57]

With the loss of the railroad division point to Kalispell, which was closer to developing agricultural lands, and the dream of river navigation seemingly impossible, Columbia Falls turned to its biggest remaining asset – timber. The government lands surrounding the valley were covered with lush forests, open ground for all kinds of logging, legal or otherwise. [58] Meanwhile the town kept developing. In December 1891, rights-of-way were granted to the Northern International Improvement Co. for erecting electrical power poles in town for lighting, telephones and electric cars. [59] The business section of

the town grew steadily, according to Macomber. In the vicinity of Talbott's bank building were a pool hall with a lunch counter, a café, a mercantile store with an "opera house" on the second floor, a clothing and shoe store, several saloons, a furniture store, the Great Northern Rooms, a blacksmith shop and a Chinese restaurant. In 1891, Talbott donated land for construction of an Episcopal Church. That same year, the St. Richard's Catholic Church was built. In 1892, an elegant three-story brick hotel was built by Talbott and Gaylord near downtown with 31 rooms, a dining hall and a bar. In the center of the business section of town was the town square, a city block devoted to a band stand and a park. During the summer, the city band practiced in the evenings and townsfolk gathered to listen. The sidewalks were made of wooden boards, and watering troughs for horses were set up in front of the stores. [60]

In May 1892, E.J. Mathews, manager of the Northern International Improvement Co., vigorously promoted the town to prospective settlers and developers. The Hotel Gaylord was scheduled to open with a grand ball on June 9, 1892, and new carpets, shades, billiard tables, mirrors and other furniture had arrived by rail. [61] A water main was constructed between Cedar Creek, north of the Great Northern tracks, and town. The water main was made of wood staves and tar-covered pipes, and residents recalled the water tasted like tar. [62] Building lots on Nucleus Avenue in Columbia Falls measuring 25 feet or 50 feet wide by 125 feet deep were sold at prices ranging from $300 to $2,000. Mathews told W.W. Coyr of the Rand & Leopold Desk Co. that Columbia Falls would make an excellent location for a furniture factory, with an excellent source of pine, fir and tamarack in the surrounding forests and the completion of the Great Northern Railway to Spokane by June 1892. Mathews also promoted the "famous North Fork Coal Fields, 35 miles north of here, owned by this company." He told Henry Lindlahr of Marysville, Mont., that his idea of opening a brewery in Kalispell should be deferred for three weeks as "I am satisfied you will abandon it altogether and be very thankful that you did not get your money tied up in that town." [63]

By 1894, Columbia Falls was boosted as one of the richest areas in the mountain region along the Great Northern Railway and as a chief grain shipping point between Grand Forks, N.D., and Spokane, Wash. Timber was also doing well, according to boosters – the large State Mill timber plant was operating west of Columbia Falls at Half Moon. [64] On April 11, 1895, the Columbian published an interview from The Silverite that predicted Columbia Falls would become one of three great cities in the western Montana, along with Great Falls and Missoula. The interview predicted that by 1945 the population of Montana would be 10 million, supported by the natural resources of the state, including water power that would energize industrial centers in Great Falls and Columbia Falls. And on Aug. 1, 1895, the Columbian reported that a man named Baptiste Royal had brought back specimens of coal found in large veins along the South Fork of the

Flathead River. The newspaper predicted that with large bodies of coal north and east of town, "the question of fuel for coming ages is settled." [65] On a lesser and more realistic note, the Columbian reported on July 18, 1895, that Main & Co., a store in Columbia Falls, sold six Monarch bicycles. Eleven bicycles were providing "regular evening amusement" in town. [66]

After being proclaimed the healthiest town in Montana in 1894, Columbia Falls eventually was chosen as the site for construction of a Montana Old Soldiers Home. [67] On Aug. 8, 1895, a meeting was held in Helena to decide where the state should build the home. A representative from Columbia Falls persuaded the board that a site offered by his city offered the most in terms of climate, land, fruit orchards and access for hunting and fishing. The board voted to establish the home in Columbia Falls, and Gov. John E. Rickards immediately approved the decision. [68] The Northern International Improvement Co. donated 160 acres and $3,100 for the building. Rickards came to Columbia Falls to lay the cornerstone, and the first enlistment was on June 17, 1897. [69] The Inter Lake, by then publishing in Kalispell, had a critical opinion when it reported on the state commission's choice on Aug. 16, 1895. "Well, here's congratulations to Columbia Falls," the newspaper said. "It is the next best thing to having it located at Kalispell. We hope the location will prove to be a good one, and be a pleasant one for the old soldiers who may live there. We think the commission made a mistake in selecting a location eighteen miles from town when they could have had one but a mile away. The extra subscription offered for the location chosen will not make up the difference in distance. It seems however that the commissioners thought different." [70]

Building a town

Columbia Falls' first school was held in St. Richard's Catholic Church beginning on Oct. 10, 1891, but the schoolmaster only lasted three months. A new schoolmaster was hired for a period of eight months, but funding ran out and the school was closed in December 1891. A bond election was approved for a new school building costing $7,500. [71] The Columbus School was built in 1892 on land donated by Talbott, who became known as the "Father of Columbia Falls." [72] School District 6 was created on Sept. 14, 1898, separate from the rest of the Flathead Valley. [73] In 1908, a bond issue was passed providing for two schools. Talbott arranged for land and construction of the new school, with elementary students on the first floor and high school students upstairs. A high fence separated the boys from the girls on the playground. In 1938, a dormitory was built so children from as far away as Cut Bank could attend. [74] On July 1, 1920, Columbia Falls voters approved building an annex to the Talbott School by 40-32. The idea was to house all the students under one roof. [75] Bonds totaling $100,000 later were sold for construction of a new high school completed in 1941. In September 1952,

the federal government paid for and built a new elementary school in Columbia Falls as a payment in lieu of taxes related to the newly built Hungry Horse Dam. [76]

The Talbott family moved permanently to Columbia Falls in 1900, residing in a 24-room 3-story mansion overlooking the Flathead River. The property was beautifully landscaped and included guest cottages, a servant's quarters, buggy sheds and stables. [77] Talbott spent $38,000 to build Shellrock Manor, which featured eight fireplaces and gardens planted with rare trees and shrubs. The home was completed in 1892. [78] The Talbott home became the headquarters for the first movie to be made in the Flathead Valley, a silent Western called "Where Rivers Rise" filmed in 1919. When a forest fire broke out nearby during filming, the director took advantage of the situation and moved cameras and crew to the site. Many of the film's roles were played by locals. [79]

On June 5, 1903, the Inter Lake reported that D. A. Hendricks had moved printing equipment from the Libby Montanian to Columbia Falls and would publish a paper there. "He states that politically the paper will be Republican," the Inter Lake reported. "It will probably be no difficult matter for Bro. Hendricks to be a Republican – after a fashion. The Montanian switched its position so fast under his administration that it was no easy matter to locate it at all times. It was Republican, Clark Democrat, anti-Clark, and several other kinds, running wild and mixed a good share of the time. Any kind of political coat that was on the shelf seemed to fit well enough. In a Republican stronghold like Columbia Falls, though, it ought not to be hard for him to stick to one line for a few months at a time." The newspaper operated as the Columbian from June 26, 1903 to 1925, when Hendricks moved the newspaper to Whitefish and began publishing the Whitefish Independent. Other early-day newspapers in Columbia Falls included the Columbia Falls Review, which was renamed the Montana Review in March 1939. [80]

Talbott continued to invest in his town. In 1904, Woodlawn Cemetery was established west of town by the Talbotts. In 1907, a new two-story bank building was built next to the show house and run by the Talbotts. Doctors' offices and apartments occupied the top floor. That same year, high waters flooded the town's original location on the banks of the Flathead River. [81] On April 26, 1909, residents of Columbia Falls voted 55-30 to incorporate the town. According to the Daily Inter Lake, "The saloons offered about the only opposition to the movement." E.J. Murray was elected the first town mayor of Columbia Falls on June 21, 1909, with 26 votes going for Murray and 18 votes going for Joe Imholt, 21 for Axel Lund and 13 for C. C. Miller. [82] One year later, telephone service and electrical power were brought to town, and a sewer line was run along Nucleus Avenue. Automobiles made their first appearance at that time. In 1912, the steel-truss Red Bridge was built across the Flathead River near the Talbott Mansion, connecting

farm lands on the east side of the Flathead Valley to Columbia Falls. The floods of 1913 tipped the bridge upstream, but it was later straightened out and reinforced. [83]

The town's street lighting system, using 32 arc lights, was energized for the first time on Sept. 23, 1910. The Kalispell Bee reported that a jubilee was planned. Telephone users in Columbia Falls officially switched to a dial telephone system operated by Pacific Power & Light on June 17, 1956. About 875 dial phones went into use with the prefix Twinbrook 2, or TW2. Calls between Columbia Falls and the Canyon community of Hungry Horse would no longer have long-distance charges. The Hungry Horse number prefix was Dupont 7. Long distance calls from Columbia Falls would be handled by Kalispell operators. [84] By 1916, when Elizabeth Green left England to live the rest of her life in Columbia Falls, only 600 people resided in Columbia Falls, and the main businesses in town were the railroad and logging. Green recalled that much of the social life revolved around lodges, including the Royal Neighbors, the Oddfellows, the Masons, the Eastern Star and the Woodmen, along with social clubs such as the Rifle Club. Green noted that "if we didn't have lodges, we wouldn't have had anything to do. That was our outlet." Businessmen often met in the Gaylord Hotel to play pinochle, and the working men either went to the pool hall or turned to outdoor recreation, such as hunting and fishing. [85]

A "renaissance man" who stood out from the early Flathead days was John Lewis. Born on a farm in Greeley, Iowa, in 1865, Lewis completed a law degree at the University of Iowa where he played football and baseball. He moved to Helena, Mont., to play professional baseball and met the renowned artist Charlie Russell. After hearing about the Flathead, he traveled to the region by train to Missoula and Ravalli, stagecoach to Flathead Lake and steamboat to Demersville. There were few settlers in the Flathead at that time. "It was a roving population and the towns contained numerous saloons, dance halls and now and then a primitive store which also sold whisky," Ralph Owings reported in the June 7, 1935 Whitefish Pilot. "Lewis accepted a job at the Ramsdell store at Egan. Here, he bought and sold furs and traded with the Indians. Trappers as far north as old Fort Steele bartered their pelts away at the Ramsdell store. They came there to get molasses, brown sugar, salt pork and trinkets. During these years, Lewis contacted almost every tribe of Indians in Montana, becoming their life-long friend. He learned their speech and sign language. He bought their furs, collected knowledge and relics of their primitive life." [86]

Hearing about the new town site of Columbia Falls, Lewis headed there to practice law. He built the Columbian Hotel, which burned down in 1910. He eventually became the largest broker of furs in northwestern Montana. Later with C. C. Miller, he remodeled the Gaylord Hotel, which was considered one of the finest hotels along Great Northern

Railway mainline. [87] In March 1920, the Columbian reported that Lewis planned to rebuild the Gaylord Hotel and make it "one of the most modern hotels in Montana." Lewis, renowned as a hotel builder, owner and operator, had hired Kalispell architect Marion Riffo. Plans called for installing steam heat and electric lighting, replastering the walls throughout the building and building a new entrance. A cost estimate came to $21,000. [88]

Lewis also built the Glacier Hotel, which later became the Lake McDonald Lodge in Glacier National Park. "It was the acme of beauty and design," Owings wrote. "It was the last word in personality. Here he enjoyed the friendship of the nation's great who came there to vacation. Here, Charlie Russell, Irvin S. Cobb and Mary Roberts Rinehart and other of the nation's celebrities came every year to sense the frontier personality of John E. Lewis. Charlie Russell painted gift pictures for Mr. Lewis, smoked Bull Durham, sat atop the corral fence and talked to the kids. The cowboy artist would occasionally 'dress up' to satisfy convention, but he always felt uneasy. He never forgot his old friends who appreciated informality as well as he did." The Gaylord Hotel burned down in 1929, and Lewis sold his Glacier Park property to the Great Northern Hotel Co. in 1930 for about $350,000. Lewis eventually moved to Kalispell, where he organized the Northern Fur Co., "but his real work was done," Owings wrote. Lewis died in a Portland hospital on Dec. 8, 1934. [89]

Forests and parks

Flathead Valley residents enjoyed ample outdoor recreation opportunities – the valley was surrounded by national forest lands and, beginning in 1910, a nearby new national park. Nicknamed the "Crown of the Continent," Glacier National Park covered 1,500 square miles that offered spectacular alpine views, historical chalets and lodges, and several large lakes The Park later featured the Going-to-the-Sun Highway, a road carved into steep cliffs over the Continental Divide. South of Glacier Park and sharing a huge natural ecosystem lay a large expanse that later became protected wilderness – the Great Bear, the Bob Marshall and the Scapegoat, together containing 1.5 million acres, often referred to simply as "the Bob." [90]

Between 1883 and 1888, J.W. Schultz and George Bird Grinnell made numerous expeditions to the area which later became Glacier Park. Schultz was a sportsman and writer intent on writing a book about the area, and Grinnell owned and published "Forest and Stream" magazine. Many of the mountains and glaciers were named by members of their expeditions, and through their writings Schultz and Grinnell acquainted Americans with the wonders of the area. The Great Northern Railway crossed the Continental Divide at Marias Pass and skirted the southern edge of the

future national park by following the course of the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Because of its proximity to the Belton train station, Lake McDonald soon became a destination for sportsmen and sightseers and became known as "Lake McDonald country." [91] The half-dozen homesteaders around the lake found profitable work as guides and packers for visitors who departed the Great Northern at Belton and crossed the Middle Fork by rowboat. A bridge was built at Belton in 1897, and a wagon road led to the foot of Lake McDonald, where a steamboat carried visitors to the eastern end of the lake. [92]

Not everyone who explored the area that would become Glacier Park was there for the wildlife and scenery. In 1890, copper ore was discovered on the west side of the Divide in the headwaters of Quartz Creek and Mineral Creek. At the time, large portions of the future national park were part of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and, being closed to exploration, these lands evoked considerable interest in miners and speculators. Rumors of fabulous wealth locked up by the government created political pressure to open up the lands. [93] In 1895, Interior Secretary Michael Hoke Smith appointed Grinnell to begin negotiations with the Blackfeet Tribe to acquire the land. [94] In 1896, a treaty was made with the Blackfeet, and in June 1896 Congress approved spending $1.5 million for the land, which made up the eastern slopes of present-day Glacier Park. The land was opened up to miners and prospectors in 1898, but very soon it became obvious that ore in commercial quantities was not to be found. Except for a short-lived oil boom in the Many Glacier valley, the land that became Glacier Park reverted to hunters, trappers and explorers. [95] Local optimists had talked of a "bigger camp than Old Butte," but experts who came to see the diggings disagreed. By 1902, almost all the prospectors had withdrawn from the region after searching for gold, silver, copper and even oil. [96] In 1901, a wagon road was built from the foot of Lake McDonald up the North Fork to an oil field near Kintla Lake run by the Butte Oil Co., but no real oil boom followed. [97]

In 1892, a local newspaper reported that the North Fork Valley was filling up with settlers hoping to find oil beneath their homesteads and hoping for a railroad to be built up the valley. Neither oil boom nor train travel came to the North Fork. A shortage of capital combined with the financial panic of 1893 led to the temporary abandonment of the oil district in the 1890s, according to McKay. Interest revived in the Kintla Lake oil fields in 1900, land that later became part of Glacier Park in 1910. A group of Butte businessmen organized the Butte Oil Co. and filed a claim on land near Kintla Lake in 1901. The area was inaccessible at the time – developers reached the area from the Tobacco Plains via a trail over the Whitefish Divide, along the "coal trail" on the west side of the North Fork River, or along the "Canadian trail" on the east side of the North Fork River from Belton. The Butte Oil Co. chose to build a road north from Belton to the Kintla area. The July 1, 1901, Kalispell Bee reported that out-of-state boomers and oil

promoters were putting "their ears to the ground listening for the sloshing of oil," and speculators, including locals, filed oil claims in the area, according to McKay. The first oil well on Kintla Lake reached a depth of 1,400 feet, but the drilling plant caught fire and completely burned during the winter of 1902-1903. The drillers never hit a profitable pocket of oil, and the Butte Oil Co. claims were declared void in 1912 after Glacier Park was created. Oil also was discovered on the east side of the Divide in the Swiftcurrent Lake area in 1903, and a short-lived boom occurred there. After a few years, production declined as the wells were lost to penetrating water. By 1911, there were more than 200 mining claims in the newly created national park. [98]

Grinnell first suggested the creation of a national park in the area in September 1891. The Great Northern Railway had made its way to the Flathead Valley by then, and it was thought that the company might back the idea. Grinnell elaborated and promoted his idea in an article titled "The Crown of the Continent" published in Century Magazine in September 1901. [99] An earlier supporter for creation of a national park was Lyman B. Sperry. The movement picked up steam by 1905 when the area around Lake McDonald alone was proposed for preservation. [100] The boundaries were expanded by national park advocates, and in 1907 a bill was introduced into the U.S. Senate after Grinnell approached Sen. Thomas Henry Carter of Montana. The proposal passed twice in the Senate but could not capture the attention of the House until the Great Northern Railway got involved. On May 11, 1910, President William Howard Taft signed the bill into law, and Glacier National Park was created. [101]

The new national park comprised 1,013,163 acres and more than 250 lakes in an area bordered on the west by the North Fork of the Flathead River, on the east by the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, on the north by the U.S.-Canada border and on the south by the Great Northern Railway. [102] In 1912, James Galen, the new Glacier Park superintendent, arrived at the Belton train station on the west side of the Park. Plans were soon drawn up and bids advertised for construction of a bridge to cross the Middle Fork at Belton. The new bridge would measure 240 feet long and 16 feet wide. [103] A larger problem facing the Park was the creation of roads and bridges providing access into the Park. The Great Northern stepped in, spending thousands of dollars building roads to the lakes and campgrounds for tourists. Some of the campgrounds evolved into large hotel complexes. [104]

The early Flathead economy

When the railroad was known to be coming through the Flathead, old prospectors and ranchers came to homestead the valley. Speculators on a small scale, they obtained title until other settlers came to purchase their land. Experienced farmers followed soon

after the railroad arrived, according to McKay. The first cash crops grown in the upper Flathead were oats, grown largely for home feed, wheat and potatoes. The financial panic of 1893 hurt agricultural prices for a time, but prices and demand eventually recovered. In the early 1900s, Flathead farmers raised spring and winter wheat, oats, rye, timothy hay, clovers, vegetables, dairy cattle and various fruits. The population of the Flathead boomed in the 1910s because of higher agricultural prices and higher yields. The agricultural drought that started in the spring of 1917 and carried into the next year was "unrelievedly grim" in Montana. The Flathead was not seriously affected by the drought until 1919. The more inaccessible valleys of Flathead County were not settled as early as the main valley. The Middle Fork canyon area, for example, had only a few squatters in 1899, but by 1923 a school was built in Nyack to accommodate settlers' children. Essex had a number of residents early on because of the railroad work there, but the other railroad stations served only as section houses. Coram, also known as Citadel, was not founded until 1905, when it was established as a logging town. [105]

In about 1920, the Columbia Falls Commercial Club took over the job of promoting Columbia Falls from the Northern International Improvement Co. The development company had paid to have a fanciful map produced that showed Columbia Falls platted for development – the map included an imaginary Northern Pacific Railroad line from Missoula meeting the Great Northern Railroad line at Columbia Falls and continuing north to the coal fields in the North Fork region, an imaginary waterfall on the Flathead River near Bad Rock Canyon providing power for several saw mills and a flour mill, and an imaginary steamboat landing near the Red Bridge. The Commercial Club began its promotional work by issuing a brochure showing the State Lumber Mill near Half Moon, a developed uptown Columbia Falls, pastoral scenes of dairy cows and scenic alpine landscapes in Glacier Park. The club promoted the tourist industry and lobbied hard to have the proposed Roosevelt Highway pass through Columbia Falls on its way west from Glacier Park. After changing its name to the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce, the business organization continued to call for developing the North Fork coal fields. After World War II, the group supported construction of a pulp mill along the Flathead River and construction of the Glacier View Dam on the North Fork and a diversion dam at Bad Rock Canyon. The organization also called for building codes and zoning in response to the boomtown days during the construction of the Hungry Horse Dam. [106]

During a June 1920 meeting of the Columbia Falls Commercial Club, it was reported that construction was wrapping up for an auto park in Columbia Falls where visiting tourists could camp as they traveled past. The auto park would include two outhouses, a woodshed, signs directing drivers to the site, and electric arc lights provided by the Mountain States Power Co. The club also approved a $45 payment to the Flathead-Lincoln Development Association toward that organization's expenses in assisting the

Roosevelt Highway Association, which was promoting construction of a transcontinental tourist highway that would come to Glacier Park. [107] In May 1920, the Columbia Falls Commercial Club learned that the executive board of the Roosevelt Highway Association had met in Glasgow, Mont., on May 23, 1920, and approved printing 5,000 booklets promoting a section of the transcontinental tourist highway route from North Dakota to the Idaho line. The booklets would contain information describing agricultural, scenic and industrial features of 55 towns along the route, and 1,000 feet of film promoting the project would be shown in all the towns in June 1920. The organization was started in 1919 in Duluth, Minn., as the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Association. [108] In April 1920, the Columbia Falls Commercial Club learned by telegram from the Flathead-Lincoln Development Association that a route had been chosen for the Roosevelt Highway that would go from Belton, near the West Glacier entrance to Glacier Park, to Columbia Falls and then on to Whitefish and Eureka. Details were being worked out for how the road would get through Bad Rock Canyon and cross the Flathead River east of Columbia Falls.[109]

The Columbian continued to promote Columbia Falls as the nation moved into the Roaring Twenties. On April 15, 1920, a classified ad in the Columbian promoted the town as a place to move to and invest in. "Columbia Falls, the coming city of northwest Montana, is located in the most fertile part of the Flathead Valley," the ad read. "The town is situated in the Rocky Mountains and the scenery and climate are unsurpassed. Columbia Falls is on the main line of the Great Northern railroad and a branch line gives the county seat connections with Columbia Falls and the outside world. It is but a question of a short time before Columbia Falls will have another transcontinental road. Our principal industries are lumbering, fruit raising and farming. Several large lumber concerns are locating in and around Columbia Falls which employ many men the year round. Fruit of all kinds and farm products grow here to almost tropical proportions. Our streams are full of fish and our forests area a Mecca for the hunter of big game. If you are looking for a growing town, a town with a future, a beautiful place to live, a healthy climate and pure water, come to Columbia Falls and you will find all these things and more." [110]

In February 1920, it was reported that the Columbia Falls City Board of Health had agreed to lift a ban on public meetings that had been enacted because of the global influenza pandemic, which had lasted from January 1918 to December 1920. "The disease has visited practically every family in the city, and there has been only one death this winter from the plague, except two deaths at the Montana Soldiers Home," the Columbian reported. [111] In April 1920, an effort was promoted in the Columbian newspaper to re-organize the Columbia Falls Volunteer Fire Department, which had fallen behind in membership. The department had "splendid and modern fire-fighting

equipment, but it is not being taken care of even to the slightest degree." [112] On April 16, 1925, the Daily Inter Lake reported that Carl E. Anderson, who owned the Liberty Theatre in Kalispell, had opened a new moving-picture house called the Columbia Theatre in the old Kennedy building in Columbia Falls, which had been vacant for some time. Anderson remodeled the building considerably, adding a white stucco front, a stage and "the last word in theatre equipment," the newspaper reported. Movies would be shown three to five nights a week. The opening picture, Harold Lloyd in "Safety Last," played to a large audience. The only other picture theater in Columbia Falls was the Theatorium, which had been running for about 15 years. [113]

In January 1929, during a 10-below-zero blizzard, the Gaylord Hotel caught fire and burned to the ground. The 31-room hotel on Nucleus Avenue in Columbia Falls was described as one of the finest in the Flathead Valley and a regional destination for fur trappers who came to meet with its proprietor, John Lewis. During Prohibition, moonshiners worked "up the canyon" along the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, people danced the Charleston and the Black Bottom at saloons and dance halls, and families flocked to watch talkies in the theaters, according to local historian Henry Eckleberry. At Mar You's Café, a Chinese restaurant in Columbia Falls, old-time music was staged every Saturday night, where people waltzed until dawn. Hand-pumped gasoline sold for 20 cents a gallon, and men worked for 40 cents an hour. Card games were held at the Schander's Hotel. [114]

Fire and lumber

Floods were not the only natural disaster facing the residents of the Flathead Valley. In 1929, an historic wildfire burned much of the forest land surrounding the valley, running all the way to Glacier Park. [115] The Half Moon forest fire was started by sparks from a donkey engine used for a logging operation northeast of the State Mill near Half Moon on Aug. 16, 1929, according to local historian Henry Elwood. Driven by high winds and fed by tinder-dry trees, the fire eventually raced up and over Teakettle Mountain and ran all the way to Coram, halfway to Glacier Park, by noon the next day. Observers said the fire destroyed all the timber on Teakettle Mountain in one hour flat. The wildfire ran within a mile of Columbia Falls but spared the community. With strong winds and so much dry downfall, the fire was impossible to control. The fire burned from Aug. 16 to Sept. 24 and spread as far as 35 miles. It destroyed 100,000 acres, including 40,000 in Glacier Park – vast stands of cedar at the Park's entrance and around Lake McDonald. [116] Much of this same burned land was impacted by fluoride emissions from the Anaconda Aluminum Co. smelter at Columbia Falls after 1955 and the subject of a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Justice Department on behalf of the Forest Service and National Park Service.

Three days after it started, the Half Moon Fire made a "wild run," spreading north and east down the Cedar Creek bottom, crossing the North Fork Road, racing up Teakettle Mountain to its summit and coming within two miles of the Great Northern railroad line at Columbia Falls, the Daily Inter Lake reported. [117] At 3 p.m. the next day, the winds picked up, and the fire jumped the North Fork of the Flathead River and spread into Glacier Park. By evening, the fire had run up the Middle Fork of the Flathead River and was reportedly within two miles of Belton. By noon on Aug. 21, residents at Belton were abandoning their homes. Tourists at Lake McDonald were advised to leave the Park, and the Great Northern Railway arranged a special train to evacuate people from Belton. [118]

Foresters were concerned more high winds would sweep the fire into the Lake McDonald region. Much of the timber owned by the Julius Neils Lumber Co. – described as some of the most valuable timber in all of Montana – was already gone. The National Pole Co.'s bridge on the North Fork, along with the nearby ranger station, had been destroyed. According to A.E. Boorman of the North Montana Forestry Association, all logging camps, tie camps and homesteaders along the North Fork had been burned out. He said it was the "cleanest fire" he had ever seen, taking everything with it down to the mineral soil. Boorman had tried to take a crew up the North Fork Road to stop the fire along its northern front but had been turned back at Bailey Lake. After viewing the wildfire from an airplane, District 1 Fire Chief Howard Flint called the Half Moon Fire the worst he had ever seen. By midnight, a total reorganization of firefighting forces was taking place, uniting the efforts of 110 men from the State Mill and 100 men from the Neils timber company with government forces and other logging companies. [119]

By Aug. 22, 1929, the fire had swept into Glacier Park but had not yet burned the headquarters near Belton. The fire had moved up the Flathead River past Coram and Lake Five, taking lumber camps and residences as it moved, and was within a mile of McDonald Creek inside the Park. Meanwhile, residents of Columbia Falls were trying to protect their town by setting backfires and had requested assistance from the Kiwanis Forestry Committee for more men. A determined effort was being made along a four-mile front about two miles north of Columbia Falls by 100 men including volunteers. Columbia Falls residents were concerned that the wooden flume supplying drinking water from the town's Cedar Lake reservoir might be damaged by the fire. Both Columbia Falls and Kalispell were filled with evacuees from endangered areas near the Park. The ranger station at the base of Teakettle Mountain burned on Aug. 21. Boorman estimated that the fire had burned 15 square miles. [120] The next day, the fire swept past Belton deep into Glacier Park, where it burned many of the buildings at Apgar despite the efforts of more than 250 firefighters. The fire continued up the Flathead River east to the Nyack area. A large trench had been put in place to protect the town of Columbia Falls, which ran westward two miles from the base of Teakettle Mountain. Dense clouds

of white smoke covered the surrounding mountains as residents in the Flathead Valley watched a red glow through Bad Rock Canyon and flames moving across Teakettle Mountain. [121]

The intensity of the Half Moon Fire was personally witnessed by a forestry scientist who had traveled from Missoula to gather information. On Aug. 23, 1929, Harry Gisborne witnessed two square miles of timber explode all at once like a bomb and burn within two minutes after a high cirque above West Glacier was heated to hundreds of degrees and a gust of air blew in to feed the fuel and heat. Gisborne went on to become the "father of forest fire science." [122] Three days later, the fire finally showed signs of slowing down. The Trail Creek portion of the fire stretched 20 miles along the North Fork of the Flathead River and was within half a mile of the customs house at the Canada border. Rain in Glacier Park was helping to slow the spread of the fire out of the Apgar area and along the west shore of Lake McDonald. [123] By Aug. 27, 1929, diminished winds, increased humidity and some rain helped contain the fire, although it had already spread 11 miles into Canada. Along Glacier Park's southern boundary, the fire had run past Harrison Lake and was approaching Little St. Mary's on the east side of the Divide. Firefighters reported seeing no more crown fires and said their trenches seemed to be holding. The situation around Columbia Falls was considered good. [124]

The 1930 U.S. census counted 637 residents in Columbia Falls, a slight decline. The population stayed at that number for the next 10 years through the Great Depression. [125] While town residents enjoyed the benefits of water, sewer, police, fire, roads, telephone and electricity, rural residents in the valley were still living a pioneer existence. But President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal soon changed that. In 1936, the Flathead Rural Light and Power Association held its first organizational meeting. The federal government had established the Rural Electrification Administration on May 11, 1935, and the Flathead Power Company was incorporated in 1937. The name was changed to Flathead Electric Cooperative Inc. in 1939. The Co-op received a $144,000 REA loan to build 133 miles of line for 403 members in 1937. [126] The Co-op's lines were energized for the first time on Dec. 17, 1938. To become a Co-op member, customers had to pay a minimum of $3.25 a month and agree to purchase at least 40 kilowatt-hours per month. [127] By 1945, the Co-op had 664 meters, 210 miles of line, $283,000 in assets and an average monthly usage of about 100 kilowatt-hours per month at 5.6 cents per kilowatt-hour. By 1985, the Co-op had 7,800 meters, 1,344 miles of line, assets of $16 million, and average usage was 1,258 kilowatt-hours per month at 4.4 cents per kilowatt-hour. [128]

Agricultural development in the Flathead suffered through drought, then Depression, then war. During the 1930s, farm families from drought-stricken eastern Montana

moved to the Flathead, but many settled on unsuitable land, according to McKay. By spring 1939, a total of 1,150 farm families in Flathead County were classified as migratory or stranded, living on submarginal or cut-over lands and unable to earn a living. Flathead County had far more destitute farmers at that time than any other county in Montana. After peaking in 1938, the county's population declined in the early 1940s. Flathead County furnished more men per capita to the armed services in World War II than any other county in the U.S. Investments in agriculture and timber came late to the Flathead. Tractors were first used in the Flathead in 1905, but they were not widely employed until World War I and later. The mechanization of logging in the 1930s led to the end of the market for horses and horse feed. By 1940, less than 3% of the agricultural land in the county was irrigated. [129]

The timber industry in the Flathead Valley was booming by 1890, as lands were cleared, towns were built and track ties were produced for the Great Northern Railway. Several hundred thousand board-feet of ponderosa pine were cut that year at the Columbia Falls Mill Co. The Anaconda Copper Mining Co. logged in the Columbia Falls area under the name Daly & Co. by 1897. One year later, Anaconda operated under the name ACM Lumber Dept. of Columbia Falls and then later under the name Big Blackfoot Milling Co., a subsidiary of ACM. [130] On Nov. 27, 1896, the Inter Lake reported that one of two timber mills that recently were shipped to the Flathead Valley by Geoffrey Lavell of Butte was being set up on Joe Gangner's ranch near Columbia Falls. The mill would have a capacity of 35,000 board-feet per day, with all the milled lumber going to Anaconda Company mines. A spur track would be built to the mill by the Great Northern Railway. On March 9, 1906, the Daily Inter Lake reported that the Hollister Lumber Co. of Manchester, Iowa, had bought a site for a sawmill near the Montana Old Soldiers Home, two miles downriver from Columbia Falls, and planned to move a mill there from Michigan. "It is not the intention to manufacture lumber for the general trade, but the company will cut exclusively for its own yards, nine in number, located at towns in eastern Iowa and western Illinois," the newspaper reported. "The company is a strong one and is backed by abundant capital." [131]

By 1907, at least five lumber companies operated in the Columbia Falls area, including State, Hunt Trippet, John Olson, Parker Zorkie and A.O. Westberg. By 1910, local timber mills with rail access included F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co., State, A.O. Westberg and Columbia. Over time, these companies consolidated into Plum Creek, Stoltze, Superior Building Co. and Rocky Mountain Lumber Co. [132] On July 27, 1920, the Columbian reported that three new sawmills soon would be operating in Columbia Falls. "The manufacture of lumber will be carried on steadily by three new sawmills in the immediate vicinity of Columbia Falls, one of the greatest logging centers in the state, and in a short time will be listed among the great lumber shipping points of the state,"

the newspaper reported. The John Olson mill had a large band saw, and their log boom was filled with white pine logs. The Hunt-Trippet Lumber Co. on the Flathead River had a boom full of logs and several million board-feet ready to put in the river at any time. The Parker-Zorzi Lumber Co. north of Columbia Falls had been sawing and shipping lumber for some time, the newspaper reported. [133]

On June 20, 1922, the Montana Western Lumber Co. planing mill in Columbia Falls was completely destroyed by a fire of unknown origin. The mill had been built by the Olson Lumber Co. around 1907. The loss was estimated at about $20,000, with insurance of $10,000. It was believed that one planer and the boiler could be salvaged. A temporary mill would be set back up within 10 days, the manager reported.[134] By the 1930s, however, the local timber industry faded away as readily accessible timber was exhausted and demand for lumber sank during the Depression. [135] A new timber company moved to Columbia Falls after World War II. Plum Creek Logging Co. was founded by D.C. Dunham near Bemidji, Minn., in 1944. Dunham moved the lumber business to Columbia Falls in 1946, opened a saw mill there and renamed it Plum Creek Lumber Co. [136] Twenty-four workers were employed at Plum Creek in 1946. By 1960, there were 200 employees, and the company grew more after that. [137]

The post-war Flathead economy

For much of the 20th century, Columbia Falls sat several miles off the state highway connecting Kalispell with Glacier Park and never developed a big tourist industry. Instead, the town focused on building an industrial base, beginning with the timber industry. In the early 1950s, larger and more powerful logging trucks along with more access roads to timberlands led to a resurgence in the timber industry, and several new lumber mills sprang up in Columbia Falls, while older ones grew stronger. By 1954, the town had an estimated 1,700 residents. [138] That year, a total of 2,600 rail cars left Columbia Falls hauling lumber and other goods. Local lumber mills turned out a record 85 million to 90 million board-feet of lumber in 1954, representing 225,000 man-days of employment and an annual payroll of $3.5 million, including operations in the forests. Over half the lumber shipped from the Flathead Valley was milled in Columbia Falls, while new lumber mills were starting up in the canyon towns of Martin City and Coram. [139]

In 1968, Plum Creek became a subsidiary of the Burlington-Northern Railroad Co. In 1976, the mill in Columbia Falls shipped 5,000 train-car loads and 5,000 truckloads of milled lumber. In 1977, about 40% of the timber milled at Plum Creek came from national forest lands, and another 40% came from Burlington-Northern lands. [140] Lumber production in Montana peaked in 1986 at 1.6 billion board-feet per year and

then dropped to 600 million board-feet by 2013. Meanwhile, the number of timber mills in Montana fell from 150 to 30, and timber-related employment fell from 10,695 workers in 1994 to about 7,000 in 2014. [141] Flathead County had long relied on natural resources – agriculture and timber – but by the 1990s the economy shifted more and more to tourism and retirement communities. Real estate prices rose sharply in the 1990s, and recreational activities became ubiquitous. Tourists and residents alike were drawn to Glacier Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, skiing at Big Mountain in Whitefish and boating on Flathead Lake – the largest freshwater body west of the Great Lakes, measuring 27 miles long and 15 miles wide, with 124 miles of shoreline. [142]

A detailed snapshot of the Flathead Valley at the end of World War II was made by the Bonneville Power Administration in anticipation of construction of the Hungry Horse Dam. In 1945, geographer George Sundborg completed a 77-page study for the BPA titled "The Economic Base for Power Markets in Flathead County, Montana." According to the study, income per employee for every industry in the county was lower than the average for comparable employees in all of Montana and the U.S. – including agriculture. Part of the reason for the low income was attributed to the seasonal nature of work in the timber industry. [143] The valley's population in 1940 was 99.4% white and 92% native born, with 45 Indians, two Chinese, 57 Japanese and 35 Negroes. Typical of frontier or semi-frontier areas, Flathead County had a larger number of males than females. The largest economic sector was the service industry, which employed more workers and had a larger payroll than the forest industries and agriculture combined. The annual per capita wage in 1939 for the 765 employees in manufacturing was $1,111; for the 935 employees in retail it was $942; for the 55 employees in wholesale trade it was $1,418; and for the 95 workers in service establishments it was $779. Gross agricultural income in the county averaged out to $951 per farm or $205 per capita for the valley's rural population. Farm income in the county was far below the U.S. average and even farther below the Montana average. Furthermore, the seasonal nature of the forests industry dragged down the earnings figures for manufacturing. [144]

Sundborg, who worked in the BPA's Market Analysis Section, described Flathead County as "a broad and fertile valley, 5,000 square miles of forests, mountain peaks, deep lakes, and swift rivers," all of which presented an opportunity for a thriving community based on its "cropland, timber, minerals, irrigation water, tourist attractions and power." As a result of World War II and other causes, however, the population of the county had declined from more than 25,000 in 1938 to about 22,000 in 1944. Sundborg believed the county's best prospects for economic advancement was to further develop existing sectors, including forest-product re-manufacturing, irrigated farming and the tourist industry. Sundborg noted that Flathead County had an advantage over many other counties in the Pacific Northwest – its economy had not been converted to war-time

industry, so there would be no post-war economic readjustment or sudden increase in unemployment as industries shut down. On the other hand, the county had one serious disadvantage – the highest freight costs in the U.S., a condition that had discouraged industrial development in the past. Sundborg called for some kind of relief from the unfavorable rates. Suggested development activities in his report included pulp and paper mill feasibility studies, improvements to the highway system, development of modern airport facilities, and construction of the Hungry Horse Dam as proposed by Congress. [145] The study concluded that, provided sufficient electrical power, the Flathead Valley could easily sustain a population of 40,000 residents. [146]

Economic conditions didn't improve much by 1950. The population of Flathead County increased by 29.8% since 1940. About 71.95% of the county's 5,280 square miles were owned by the federal government. Farms and ranches took up 673 square miles, compared with 4,539 square miles of timber lands. The county's population was 31,495, with 41.3% living in towns and another 41.8% living in rural areas but not actively farming. Only 16.9% of the population was rural farmers. Only 57.2% of the county's dwelling units had hot running water and toilets. Major industry employed 10,313 workers. [147]

A new booster came to the Flathead Valley and Columbia Falls in the late 1940s. Like J.W. Pace a half century earlier, Melvin H. Ruder was a newspaperman who heartily promoted economic development for his community. But unlike Pace, Ruder owned his newspaper and was not in the employ of local industries. According to a 2000 biography by Tom Lawrence, Ruder was born in Manning, N.D., on Jan. 19, 1915, and graduated from Bismarck High School in 1932, where he was a top student and spent a year saving money for school at the University of North Dakota. Ruder was an outstanding student in college, graduating in 1937 with a bachelor's degree in journalism and a minor in European history. He managed the college newspaper and founded the University News Service, a public relations operation he ran from 1938 to 1940. He also taught journalism as an assistant professor while working on a master's degree in sociology, which he completed in 1942. Ruder was 27 when he enrolled in the Navy during World War II, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant while serving in both the European and Pacific theaters. After the war, he applied for a job at the New York Times but was turned down. [148]

Deciding to pursue a career in the West, Ruder ended up in Montana where he heard about the future Hungry Horse Dam. Gurney Moss, the longtime owner of the Whitefish Pilot, advised Ruder to start a newspaper in Columbia Falls, which hadn't had a newspaper in three years. Four publishers had seen their newspapers fail in Columbia Falls, Ruder learned. Within five weeks, he had set up his newspaper office in a room he

rented on Nucleus Avenue. [149] Volume 1 Issue 1 of the Hungry Horse News/Columbian was published on Aug. 8, 1946. The word "Columbian" later was dropped from the name. [150] Ruder had very little money at first – he washed himself and his clothes in a creek on the edge of town, according to Lawrence. But within a year, he used $6,500 he borrowed via a G.I. loan to build a log cabin for the newspaper's office and set up a bedroom in the attic. Using $4,000 he had saved from the Navy, Ruder bought a typewriter and a large-format Speed Graphic camera. He started out distributing the Hungry Horse News for free in hopes of attracting readers and advertisers. He was 31 and single when the newspaper started, but a few years later he met Ruth Bergan, a young widow with a daughter. Ruth was teaching school at the time she met and married Ruder. [151] The Hungry Horse News was more than the newspaper of Columbia Falls. Ruder had worked one year in Glacier Park, and eventually the newspaper gained a national readership for its coverage of Glacier Park and Ruder's photographs. [152]

Ruder was also a very active community member. He served on the District 6 School Board for six years, was a member of the Flathead National Forest Advisory Council and the Glacier Natural History Association, and was a founder and chairman of the Memorial Foundation at the Montana Veterans Home. He also served on the board of directors of Plum Creek and the Bank of Columbia Falls – the same bank that had turned him down for a loan. [153] Ruder was also one of two Montanans appointed by Interior Secretary Stewart Udall in 1961 to work with the BPA on a study of economic growth in the Pacific Northwest. [154] Ruder served as the unpaid secretary of the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce for 11 years, later being elected president, and was a Mason and a Shriner. He was a consistent booster, writing numerous editorials calling for industry and stable year-round jobs, paved streets and sidewalks. [155] Ruder Elementary School in Columbia Falls was named for him. Ruder also served on the Montana Press Association as president from 1957-1958 and was inducted into the association's Hall of Fame on June 20, 2002. [156]

On May 3, 1965, Ruder learned that he had won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished General Local Reporting for his detailed coverage of the 1964 Flood in Northwest Montana. He was the first Montanan to win a Pulitzer Prize. According to the back story, Ruder felt extremely proud of his achievements during the flood and wanted the public to know how good his work had been. So he asked friend and fellow journalist Dorothy Johnson to assist him by nominating him for the Pulitzer Prize. Johnson, a renowned Montana writer who had spent some time in New York City, wrote the nominating letter and sent it to John Hohenberg at the Columbia University School of Journalism. [157] Ruder published the Hungry Horse News for 32 years before selling it to Bruce Kennedy of Greybull, Wyo., in 1978. [158] Ruder was 85 when he died on Nov. 19, 2000, in the Montana Veterans Home, where he had lived for several years. [159] Mike Mansfield, who

served in both the U.S. House and Senate and was a personal friend of Ruder's, wrote in a forward to Lawrence's 2000 biography of Ruder, "I can only describe Mel Ruder as a man of great modesty, great understanding and a deep personal student and admirer of the people of his community, our state and our country. Our state and country need many more like him, trustworthy, capable, understanding, knowledgeable, friendly; I could go on and on extolling his virtues, of which he has many." [160]

By the end of World War II, the Flathead Valley and Columbia Falls was on the cusp of great change. The post-war population boom and demand for lumber was just around the corner, and a big hydroelectric dam project had moved from the planning offices to the field. As if to mark the moment, the city of Columbia Falls finally retired its 1912-model Thomas Flyer fire truck in 1947, which was replaced by a newer Ford fire truck. [161] The Hungry Horse Dam was the key to bringing an aluminum smelter to the Flathead, and at least one family linked the early pioneers to the aluminum industry. On July 4, 1891, Robert Saurey Sr. pitched his tent at the south edge of what later became the city of Columbia Falls. He came to the area in a covered wagon and lived to be nearly 100 years old. His grandson, Gordon Saurey, retired from his job as a process development supervisor at the Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant outside Columbia Falls in 1982 and died on May 31, 1986. [162]

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