Chapter 18

A boost for the Flathead

In late 1951, the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. announced its intentions to build an aluminum smelting plant in the Flathead Valley near the new Hungry Horse hydroelectric dam. The company would become the fourth producer of primary aluminum in the U.S. and the first to join the industry since Kaiser entered the field in 1946. Anaconda initially took over plans by the Harvey Machine Co. to build a plant near Kalispell, but later moved the building site. The federal government had hoped that a new smelting plant would be up and running within a year, but Anaconda engineers felt that Harvey's proposed plant site and plant designs were unsatisfactory. [1] The company and its patriarch, Con Kelley, indicated they wanted their smelter to be the jewel in the Anaconda system – as modern and efficient as any other in the world. Time would tell if that was true, but first a plant needed to be built.

Once the Anaconda Company took over the Harvey Machine Co.'s interests for an aluminum smelter in the Flathead Valley, it possessed a certificate of necessity from the federal government authorizing accelerated tax amortization, and federal guarantees for a long-term power contract based on output from the new Hungry Horse Dam. Both Harvey and Anaconda possessed the engineering ability to build and run a smelter, but where Harvey lacked the finances and failed to obtain a large federal loan, Anaconda possessed more than enough cash to complete the project. That, however, wasn't the end of the matter. Aluminum smelting is not a static endeavor, even if the reduction pots seem to hum along by themselves through graveyard shifts, weekends and vacations. Issues that come and go include power supplies and contracts, workforce training and availability, raw material supplies and cost, and how changing technology affects production and end-uses of aluminum metal. Anaconda needed to address these issues from the beginning, along with building a plant from scratch.

Right away, Anaconda faced a power contract deadline. According to the contract between Harvey and the Bonneville Power Administration, as soon as the Hungry Horse Reservoir was full and the four turbine generators were in operation, the company was obligated to begin paying for the dam's power if the BPA was unable to sell the power elsewhere. When Anaconda took over Harvey's contract for 111 megawatts of firm power, the mining company was obligated to buy the Hungry Horse power. The dam began operating in 1953, but the new smelter outside Columbia Falls didn't begin producing metal until August 1955. During the time the dam was producing power and the aluminum plant remained under construction, Anaconda was allowed to sell the

Hungry Horse Dam power to other users, such as the Montana Power Co., or use it at other Anaconda facilities in Montana. As it turned out, the BPA was able to find customers for the power while the smelter was being built. Under the terms of the federal act creating the Hungry Horse Dam, all power generated by the dam was to remain in the state of Montana, and an amount of power equal to that generated at Hungry Horse Dam must be brought back to the state of Montana as a result of the benefits of water stored behind the dam for downstream dams. [2]

The Teakettle bench land

The question of where in the Flathead the new smelter would be built wasn't entirely settled until more than a year after Anaconda announced publicly that it had bought Harvey's interests in Montana. On Jan. 1, 1952, Anaconda representatives took advantage of mild winter weather to inspect bench land at the foot of Teakettle Mountain as a possible site for the new plant. The gravel road leading out to the site was snow free, and the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce arranged for a bulldozer to open up an abandoned road to the gravel pit at the base of Teakettle Mountain. [3] By mid-January, W.C. Rae, the Anaconda Company's general land and tax agent, left the Flathead carrying with him information he had gathered for the company's proposed aluminum plant. Four sites for the plant were being considered – at Rose Crossing six miles north of Kalispell in the middle of Flathead Valley, on Trumbull Creek north of the F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co. mill near the Half Moon area, at the base of Teakettle Mountain two miles northeast of Columbia Falls, and a site in the Canyon east of the Flathead Valley 1 1/2 miles east of Coram. [4]

Rae was back in the Columbia Falls area on April 1 securing land for the proposed plant. The 120-day options held by the company for the land at the foot of Teakettle Mountain were set to expire by May 9, 1952, and the company renewed the options for another 60 days. [5] On April 17, 1952, Anaconda gave up its options on 100 acres of land near Coram that might have provided a site for the new aluminum smelter. [6] Rae was sent back to the Flathead Valley in mid-June to look at the Rose Crossing, Half Moon and Teakettle sites and a new one east of Whitefish. [7] In early July, the Anaconda Company extended its options on land owned by Henry Larkin at the foot of Teakettle Mountain. Larkin, who was the only homeowner living at the site, was paid $1,000 for the option, which would apply to his share of the $16,000 he would get for his home and 276 acres. Other options extended by Anaconda for the Teakettle land included 238 acres owned by Pat Kelly, 160 acres owned by Bernard S. Tracy and 72 acres owned by Edward Johnson. [8]

Then on Aug. 30, 1952, Anaconda chairman Con Kelley announced that the company had chosen the Teakettle Mountain site for its new smelter. [9] On Sept. 3, 1952, it was reported that the company officially exercised its options on 750 acres of bench land at the base of Teakettle Mountain as a site for the new plant. [10] The land purchased for the plant included 280 acres owned by Henry Larkin and Mrs. Marion Hellen, 160 acres owned by Bernard Tracey, 238 acres owned by Pat Kelly, and 70 acres owned by Edwin Johnson. Prices ranged from $10 to $25 per acre with remuneration for buildings. The properties consisted primarily of second-growth timber and a few small fields. According the Hungry Horse News, the land was not supporting a single family. [11] Anaconda's decision stirred up the old cross-valley rivalry between Columbia Falls and Kalispell. In a Sept. 5 editorial in the Hungry Horse News, publisher Mel Ruder laid heavy criticism on efforts by interests in Kalispell and the Daily Inter Lake to bring the smelter to Rose Crossing, closer to Kalispell. The Aug. 31, 1952, editorial in the Daily Inter Lake apparently took a very negative view of Anaconda's decision to put the new plant at the base of Teakettle Mountain. [12]

The Hungry Horse News also reported under a front-page banner headline that construction would begin the following week. Surveying and clearing would begin for railroad spurs off the adjacent Great Northern Railway mainline as well as for buildings and other facilities. According to the newspaper, the Anaconda Company would serve as its own general contractor. Most of the construction would take place in 1953, and aluminum production would begin in 1954, the company optimistically said. [13] Four days later, four men gathered in the Bank of Columbia Falls to witness Anaconda make its first payment on the Teakettle land. Rae joined Anaconda President Robert Dwyer as a check was handed to Bernard Tracey for his land. Dwight Lohn, vice president of the bank, said to Tracey, "There goes the old homestead, Ben." Tracey replied, "Yes, thank God." [14]

Henry Larkin had moved to Columbia Falls in 1947 after serving with the First Marine Division in the Pacific Theater during World War II. He set up a tent on a 40-acre parcel of land he had bought in 1930s on the bench above the Flathead River not far from Bad Rock Canyon. Over time, he built a cabin and stables for his horses, and he acquired adjacent acreage until his property grew to about 300 acres. When he and his wife Grace sold the land for $15 per acre, two property corners were located literally in the Flathead River. Larkin said he was told the land would be used for a Christmas tree farm. "I didn't know it was for an aluminum plant until the day I got the check for the land," he later recalled. [15] In mid-October 1955, two months after the Anaconda Aluminum Co. smelter had begun operating, the former Larkin log home, the only building on the plant site prior to construction, was sold to Henry Urban Jr., an AAC employee, who planned on moving it to a new site. [16]

Ruder described the many advantages to the local economy that the new aluminum plant would bring to the Flathead Valley in a Sept. 12 editorial. With the expanded tax base, residents would be able to improve schools and build better highways and roads. With a more stable market, consumers would be able to find better choices for food and finished products, a boon to local farmers and lumber mills. A steadier year-round income for the 400 families expected to be directly supported by the plant would affect all levels of the local economy. Ruder also fired another volley at the Daily Inter Lake, which continued to belittle the Teakettle site as unsuitable. Ruder cited Anaconda surveyors and topographic maps as proof that the bench land below Teakettle Mountain was level and a good industrial site. [17] The plant siting matter was settled once and for all in the third week of March 1953 when W.C. Rae made final arrangements to sell the Rose Crossing land. The Hungry Horse News reported that the likely buyer was Conrad Casualty Co. of Kalispell. [18] The buyer was James Gray Edmiston, a vice president at Conrad National Bank. He and his wife started Edmiston Land & Cattle Company at the Rose Crossing site, which became the third largest producer of registered Herefords in Montana. With a foundation herd sire purchased from John D. Rockefeller's son Winthrop, Edmiston's cattle earned top awards at shows, including the Northwest Montana Fair, Montana State Fair, Bozeman Winter Fair, Missoula Top Cut, Calgary Stampede and others. [19]

Teakettle Mountain and Columbia Mountain frame the entrance to Bad Rock Canyon from the Flathead Valley. Teakettle, lower and rocky, is the easternmost terminus of the Whitefish Range. Columbia, taller, wider and covered with thick green forest, is the northernmost mountain in the Swan Range. Teakettle got its name from a rock formation that was more easily seen when blanketed with new fallen snow and was no longer visible after the 1929 Half Moon Fire burned across its face. In 1895, James White climbed atop the Lone Pine Park hill overlooking Kalispell and used a telephoto lens to photograph the Flathead Valley looking toward Teakettle Mountain and Bad Rock Canyon. The photo clearly showed a teakettle formation of white snow in his winter shot. [20] South of the proposed plant site, the Flathead River flowed westerly from Bad Rock Canyon before turning south at Columbia Falls toward Flathead Lake. Columbia Falls sat at 3,037 feet in elevation, and the mountains bordering Flathead Valley ranged from 5,000 to 7,000 feet. The western entrance to Glacier National Park was about nine miles away from the proposed plant site – as the crow flies. [21]

Wildlife stories abounded in the Flathead, as they do today. In mid-November 1953, the kokanee salmon run up the Flathead River past Columbia Falls was bigger than usual and the fish appeared larger, ranging up to 20 inches long when the average was typically 12 to 14 inches. Swarms of salmon blackened patches of the normally clear water. The landlocked salmon ran up the river from Flathead Lake in the fall to spawn

on gravel beds upstream in places like McDonald Creek in Glacier Park. Unfavorable spawning conditions in 1948 impacted the salmon run as late as 1952, when the run was very light. [22] In February 1953, a hunter killed a mountain lion and its kitten on Teakettle Mountain within half a mile of the newly cleared aluminum plant site. Construction crews clearing the site talked about seeing mountain goats on Teakettle Mountain and deer on the flats. [23] By Oct. 14, 1954, hunters were informed that the plant site was posted for no hunting to protect the workers from stray bullets. [24] But 21 years later, two Columbia Falls High School freshmen, Rick Berry and Dave Sullivan, were hunting for mule deer on Teakettle Mountain above the AAC plant on Nov. 9, 1975, when they surprised a black bear. As the bear grabbed a hold of Sullivan's pants leg, he and Berry opened fire and killed the bear. [25]

Staffing the new plant

The new plant presented an economic boon to the community – first for temporary and seasonal construction workers and later for steady year-round plant workers. Concerns were expressed that a large influx of workers would require an immediate housing boom followed by development of long-term permanent homes. The March 14, 1952, editorial in the Hungry Horse News warned that land speculation prompted by Anaconda's proposed aluminum plant could hurt development in and around Columbia Falls. The town's population had doubled over the past decade as a result of new lumber mills and construction of the Hungry Horse Dam. [26] Employment in the Flathead Valley was high from 1950 through 1952, thanks to the boom brought by construction on the Hungry Horse Dam. During that time, home buyers paid as much as $1,500 for 50-foot lots recently cleared of jack pine. By September 1952, the boom faded, the local economy was on the skids and the jack pine was growing back on empty building lots. As news of the aluminum plant spread, outsiders thought a second real estate boom would take place, but it never did. Most of the post-war expansion in homes and businesses in the Flathead Valley that took place as a result of the dam project dampened the need for more building to accommodate the new aluminum plant project. [27]

On May 16, 1952, Ruder took a look back at the evolving story of the proposed aluminum smelter. He conceded that earlier news stories were unrealistically enthusiastic. "We are older and wiser heads now," he wrote. "The early headlines were over enthusiastic when they referred to a giant plant employing 2,000 men. A June 21, 1950 account also carried information that the plant 'is in the final stages of negotiations this morning, according to reliable sources.'" Warning about speculation, he described the situation around the town of Hungry Horse during dam construction. "There are cleared from brush lots in the Hungry Horse area which sold for $1,000 and $1,500 in 1946 and 1947 that today don't find a buyer when priced at $100." [28]

The Anaconda Company took notice of housing needs in early June 1952 when it renewed its options on 40 acres of land owned by the Hoerner brothers. Located immediately southwest of Columbia Falls, the Hoerners' land was considered a possible site for company homes. [29] The company exercised its options on the land in September. [30] By the third week of October, Anaconda was purchasing lots in Columbia Falls for new homes for company officers. Plans included a home for the superintendent with a guest house on the same plot. The company looked at lots near the high school but backed away at the $1,000 prices for unimproved 50-foot lots. [31] By early November, Anaconda invited bids for construction of four staff homes. Six more homes were slated to be built in 1953 in the same northeast corner of town. [32] By January 1953, five homes were under construction in Columbia Falls. Three were for the plant's first general manager, Howard G. Satterthwaite, production manager James F. Smith and plant chief engineer Carl J. Lundborg. [33] In mid-March, Anaconda announced it planned to build 11 more homes in Columbia Falls. The homes were to be located at various places in town, but the company owned 38 acres of land adjacent to the Columbia Falls Kennedy Addition, where more homes could be built in the future. [34]

The Anaconda Company announced Satterthwaite as their choice for plant manager at the new aluminum smelter on Nov. 20, 1952. Satterthwaite graduated from Washington State College, in Pullman, Wash., with a bachelor's degree in science in 1916 and had worked for Anaconda ever since graduating. [35] He had traveled to the town of Anaconda, Mont., in 1916 to work as a schoolteacher and coach and ended up working for the Anaconda Company instead. [36] Satterthwaite worked for Anaconda for 43 years. He was transferred to Great Falls for a short time and then returned to Anaconda in 1927 to help build and supervise a new zinc plant there. In 1935, he returned to Great Falls where he rose to become assistant supervisor of the zinc plant, and then assistant general superintendent. During World War II, he managed 3,500 workers at the Basic Magnesium plant near Henderson, Nev. [37] After the war, Satterthwaite became assistant general superintendent of the reduction department at Anaconda's plant in Great Falls, where he was working when the announcement was made. [38] Satterthwaite's wife died on March 10, 1954, after being seriously ill for at least a month. [39] He married Marie S. Forrest of Anaconda on Aug. 21, 1954. They had attended Washington State College at the same time. [40]

Satterthwaite announced his retirement on June 19, 1958. [41] Mel Ruder praised Satterthwaite's contributions to the community in a June 20, 1958 editorial. "'Satt' was a steady, sensible sort of a man, who had been around and knew the score," Ruder wrote. "Good men worked with and for him." Among Satterthwaite's greatest accomplishments was seeing 600 industrial workers achieve 1 million-plus man-hours without a single lost-time accident and the lowest absenteeism rate among all

Anaconda Company plants in Montana. [42] While under his supervision, the AAC plant produced more than its rated capacity of 60,000 tons per year in 1956. [43] Satterthwaite also participated in the local Lions Club and other local meetings. [44] Satterthwaite passed away at his home in Escondido, Calif., on May 11, 1960, where he had retired. [45] In July 1962, the board of directors of the Columbia Falls Booster Club named the new lighted football field at the new high school in Columbia Falls after Satterthwaite. [46] Satterthwaite had played football and baseball for Washington State College. [47] The field was dedicated during a half-time ceremony at the first conference football game between Columbia Falls and Polson. The lighting project for the new field cost $9,500. Future plans including building a track around the football field and lighting the nearby baseball field. [48]

The Anaconda Company also announced on Nov. 20, 1952, that James F. Smith of Great Falls would be the production superintendent for the new aluminum plant. [49] Smith graduated from the Missouri School of Mines in 1927 with a degree in metallurgical engineering and went straight to work at Anaconda Company's plant in Great Falls, where he worked for 25 years as a foreman, research chemist, superintendent of the refinery furnace and assistant superintendent of the copper refinery. In 1948, Smith was sent to Cobre de Mexico to help set up a copper processing facility for Anaconda. [50] Smith was promoted to general superintendent from production superintendent at the AAC plant in Columbia Falls on Sept. 18, 1956. [51] When Satterthwaite retired in 1958, Smith took over as plant manager. In 1962, Smith was appointed AAC vice-president. [52] He was recognized with a gold arrowhead service pin for 35 years of service during a supervisory staff dinner at the AAC Employees Club in Columbia Falls in April 1962. [53] Smith was appointed vice-president for alumina and primary metal for AAC and transferred to Louisville, Ky., in June 1966. [54] Smith was a member of the Rotary Club and the Elks Club and board director of the Whitefish Memorial Hospital and the Bank of Columbia Falls. [55] He also was a member of the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, and a member of the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce and the Elks. [56] The Anaconda Company also announced that Carl J. Lundborg would be the new plant's chief engineer. Lundborg was an electrical engineer who had worked with Anaconda since he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1926. [57] He rose to assistant mechanical superintendent at the smelter in Great Falls and then transferred to Columbia Falls in 1953. Lundborg was promoted to a new position in Butte on Sept. 17, 1956, where he stayed until he retired in 1965. [58]

Other new management included Ed Woster. Born on a North Dakota farm in 1915, Woster graduated with a degree in chemistry from St. Olaf College in 1937 and did post-graduate work at the University of Minnesota. [59] After teaching high school, he began work for Reynolds Metals Co. at Troutdale, Ore., and Longview, Wash., and in Texas. [60]

Woster moved to Columbia Falls in 1954 and began working for the new AAC smelter as the potlines superintendent. [61] He began working in the aluminum industry at the bottom, as a jackhammer operator during construction of the Longview smelter. [62] At Columbia Falls, Woster was promoted to assistant works manager in 1958 and was the plant's general manager from June 1966 to January 1970 before being transferred to AAC headquarters in Louisville, Ky., where he directed reduction operations and helped plan for construction of a new aluminum smelter at Sebree, Ky. He returned to Columbia Falls in January 1972 and continued his position as general manager until he retired in 1979. [63] Woster served as president of the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club and was a member of the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers. [64] According to a 1994 biography of Woster in the Hungry Horse News, Woster "always felt as comfortable on the potlines as he did in the corporate office" and "knew the name of every worker at the plant." [65]

In the mid-1950s, Roy Lindsey came to Columbia Falls to help in the construction of the new aluminum smelter. Lindsey had helped build aluminum plants across the U.S., including in Tennessee, Texas, New York and the West Coast, as well as in Paris. "I've helped start more plants than any man living that I know of, and with all the aluminum industries I followed, I found the Columbia Falls employees were an outstanding group of people to operate a business," Lindsey explained in a July 1988 interview. "They had interest in their work. A lot of places, it wasn't that way." Lindsey stayed on with the AAC plant once it was up and running, retiring as a potline foreman in 1975. "There aren't many small towns that have industry like here with the aluminum plant and lumber mills," Lindsey explained. "Columbia Falls, to me, has been fortunate to have the industry they have here. They've done a good job." As mayor of Columbia Falls from April 6, 1959, through 1961, Lindsey pointed out that the city's budget was very limited then, and he had to rely on volunteers to maintain the city's parks and repair the city's streets. [66]

Albert W. Hook, a native of Spokane, Wash., started at the AAC plant as the laboratory superintendent. The laboratory was considered among the most modern in the aluminum industry, with a staff of 18 that included five chemists, a chemical engineer, four technical assistants, three quantometer operators, a secretary, a custodian and four technical supervisors. [67] In addition to a chemistry degree from the University of Montreal in 1950, Hook took graduate courses in law at the University of British Columbia and in metallurgy at Washington State University in Pullman, Wash., and Gonzaga University in Spokane. Hook was chief of the laboratory at Kaiser's aluminum smelter in Spokane before coming to Columbia Falls. He served as a member of the Montana Governor's Committee on Mental Health and was one of the organizers of the Flathead County Association for Retarded Children. He also served as president of the

Columbia Falls PTA and director of the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce and was one of the organizers of the Family Marriage Clinic, which sought to reduce the divorce rate in Flathead County. In early March 1963, Hook announced his candidacy for a seat on the District 6 School Board in Columbia Falls. [68]

Housing and workers

By early April 1953, concern was being heard in town over a housing shortage in Columbia Falls and the future needs of the new smelter plant. Some residents expected Anaconda to either build more homes or arrange for others to produce them – perhaps as many as 200, Ruder noted in an editorial. Good homes would attract a good stable workforce for the plant, went the reasoning, and property prices had not soared as a result of the new AAC plant as some had feared. [69] Anaconda followed up by announcing its intent to go ahead and build 11 more homes in Columbia Falls. By mid-April, five other homes were nearly completed by Whitefish-based building contractor Monegan & Rowe. The 11 additional homes would be located in the northeast section of town near the other five homes. Three of the new homes would be adjacent to the home built for Satterthwaite. Anaconda said it wanted to calm real estate investors by noting it did not plan on building a housing project, although the company owned a 38-acre parcel near the Kennedy Addition. [70]

A housing development near the plant site's access road kicked off in mid-September when the Fredricksen Real Estate Co. began selling lots in a residential project called Tracey's Aluminum City. Located within a mile of the plant site, the 12-block area on the North Fork Road included 144 lots measuring 50 by 125 feet and offered electricity, telephone service, lower taxes, paved roads within a year and prices beginning at $375 per lot. [71] A year later, in September 1954, Tom Taylor, a Flathead Valley real estate promoter, announced plans to build a shopping center at Tracey's Aluminum City. The shopping center would include seven shops, a service station and a parking lot. Taylor was connected with a 1946 proposal to build a pulp mill in the Flathead that was never built, and some investors lost their investment capital. As a result, Ruder advised caution to those wishing to invest in Taylor's proposed project. [72]

On Nov. 3, 1953, while visiting Columbia Falls, Anaconda Aluminum Co. President Russel B. Caples explained the company's housing policy to the Hungry Horse News. AAC intended to own as few homes as possible in Columbia Falls, especially in a block-by-block layout, in order to avoid any resemblance to a company town. Satterthwaite said he saw a need for the company to build more homes, but he preferred that the company not become a landlord and instead find a way to help employees finance their own homes. [73] Caples, who was president when the Anaconda Aluminum Co. was

formed in 1953, had literally worked his way up from the bottom while with the Anaconda Company. After graduating from the Missouri School of Mines, he went to work as a mucker at lead mines in the Coeur d'Alene mining district, then as a brick mason at the Anaconda Reduction Works in Anaconda, then as a researcher in the Testing and Research Department at the Anaconda Laboratory, and finally as manager of the Great Falls Reduction Department before taking over at AAC. [74] Since 1941, Caples had managed the company's reduction plant in Great Falls. In 1948, he was awarded an honorary doctorate of engineering by the Missouri School of Mines. In addition to heading AAC, Caples would continue to oversee zinc contract negotiations for the company's zinc operations in Montana from his offices in New York City. [75] At a May 1953 stockholders meeting, Caples was elected to the board of directors of the Anaconda Company. [76]

By the end of November 1953, a minor housing boom in Columbia Falls alleviated some worries about a housing crunch. Monegan Construction completed building five more 3-bedroom homes for AAC employees, with six more homes in line. After clearing legal hurdles, more homes were planned on the former Seaboard Surety Co. lots that would range in price from $8,500 to 11,000. [77] By mid-February 1954, Monegan Construction was scheduled to begin construction on ten 3-bedroom houses in Columbia Falls for sale to plant employees. Monegan was contracted to build 16 homes for Anaconda with an asking price of about $12,000 per house for the 10 homes. AAC management announced it intended to pay for construction of no more than 16 homes in Columbia Falls while acknowledging at least 46 more homes would be needed for employees with special skills in aluminum production. The company hoped that local building contractors would be willing to build the 46 additional homes. [78]

By 1950, the population of Flathead County had increased by 29.8% since 1940. About 41% lived in towns and another 42% lived in rural area but were not actively farming. Major industry employed 10,313 workers. [79] Until 1950, lumber production was the main industry in the county, with tourism related to Glacier National Park also a major factor in the local economy. Until the construction of the Hungry Horse Dam in 1948 through 1953, the prospects for development in the area were limited, especially for any industry requiring large amounts of electrical power. [80] The local economy also included some farming and ranching, Christmas tree farms, tourist souvenir manufacturing and service businesses for the tourist industry. Hunters in the surrounding national forests harvested about 1,000 elk and numerous mule and white-tailed deer, black and grizzly bear, and mountain goats. Nine miles west of Columbia Falls was Whitefish Lake and the Big Mountain ski area, where three national meets had been held in recent years. [81]

When the Hungry Horse News first published a front-page story on the Harvey Machine Co.'s plans to build an aluminum smelter in the Flathead on June 23, 1950, it reported that employment at the smelter would run from 750 to 1,500 workers. The population of Columbia Falls at that time was 1,237 residents and growing slowly but steadily. [82] The Hungry Horse Dam project reached its peak employment with 2,550 workers in August 1951. During winter time, unemployment numbers for the Flathead could reach 2,700 as a result of layoffs in construction, the timber industry and tourism. [83] In mid-July 1952, rumors ran rampant across the Flathead that 30% of the workforce at the dam would be laid off soon, amounting to about 400 to 600 men. The workforce at the dam was as big as it had been since 1951, but Mel Ruder expressed hope in his July 18, 1952 editorial that construction at the new aluminum plant would begin soon. [84] Anaconda Company Vice President Roy Glover had told the press on Jan. 24, 1952 that construction of the new plant would begin in the spring of 1952 with the aim of beginning aluminum production by early 1953. Meanwhile it was reported that hundreds of men in Butte were applying for work at the aluminum smelter. It was expected that Anaconda Company Vice President Frank O. Case would direct construction of the new aluminum plant. Case had been in charge of building the Basic Magnesium plant near Henderson, Nev., during World War II. [85]

On Sept. 19, 1952, the Hungry Horse News published a survey form issued by the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce, which was trying to collect information on the availability of workers and housing in and around Columbia Falls. The form inquired if people were interested in working at the plant, how far they lived from the plant site, whether they owned their own homes and how long they had lived in the area. [86] Results were published in the newspaper on Nov. 21, 1952. The Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce received results from 167 men. Two-thirds of the men seeking a job at the plant had lived in the Flathead Valley for at least five years, and 78% owned their own homes. Half lived within five miles of the plant site, and the rest lived within driving distance. About 38% were between 40 and 49 years of age, 28% were between 30 and 39, and 16% were between 20 and 29. About 40% were classified as mechanics, 35% as laborers and the rest as miscellaneous. [87] On Jan. 8, 1953, Satterthwaite told the Hungry Horse News he expected 1,000 construction workers would be needed during the summer of 1953. He explained that plant buildings were still being designed and orders for construction materials were being placed, and he dispelled rumors that construction of the aluminum plant was being delayed. [88]

But by mid-April 1953, no word had been received in Columbia Falls about the winning bid for construction of the new AAC plant. To address rumors that construction might be delayed or even postponed, Anaconda's Butte offices issued a statement: "There is no question but that the Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant will be built in the Flathead."

Employment offices in Flathead County reported seeing 850 jobless workers – up from 777 a year ago. Many of the Hungry Horse Dam builders had already left the valley to find work elsewhere. [89] On May 15, 1953, a large ad was placed in the Hungry Horse News announcing that interviews for future smelter workers would be conducted at the state employment offices. [90] Three days later, the Anaconda Company announced the winning bidder for Phase 1 of the plant's construction, the J.A. McNeil Co. of Alhambra, Calif. The construction company expected as many as 400 workers would be needed that summer. Local residents would be given a hiring preference and local materials would be used as much as possible. [91]

Four days later, the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce sponsored a trout dinner in honor of the AAC management. Honored guests brought along their wives. The dinner was held at the Canyon Hotel, where 210 dinners were served. Representing Montana Gov. Hugo Aronson was Wesley Castles, chairman of the Montana Unemployment Compensation Commission. According to Castles, the Flathead Valley had the highest wintertime unemployment rate in Montana. Castles felt confident the new AAC plant would address that seasonal problem. [92] By early June 1953, more than 750 people had applied for work at the new plant. [93]

Supply and design

While the availability of workers and housing was being sorted out on its own, the Anaconda Company was negotiating raw material supplies. The key one was alumina. On April 9, 1951, Rep. Mike Mansfield wrote to Don Treloar, president of the Flathead Valley Citizens Committee, saying that the Reynolds Metals Co. was in line to receive a private loan to build an alumina refinery in Corpus Christi, Texas, that would supply alumina for the new AAC plant. [94] With an alumina refinery lined up, Anaconda needed to find a good supply of bauxite to ship to Corpus Christi. In early February 1952, Case left the Flathead for Washington, D.C. to secure a supply of bauxite. Under the existing national emergency, the Korean War, Anaconda was guaranteed a two to three year supply of bauxite, but the company wanted a long-term bauxite supply to justify its big investment in the new plant. Case said the company was sincerely concerned about the problem and would try to locate a new bauxite supplier if current producers could not be relied on. [95] By mid-February 1952, word reached Columbia Falls that the Anaconda Company might end up mining the ore itself rather than buying it from a supplier. [96]

By early March, however, Anaconda reported that it had secured a supply of alumina. This was considered the last major hurdle for building the plant. The Reynolds Metals Co. would supply 100,000 tons of alumina per year, enough to make 50,000 tons of aluminum. Anaconda's mining department would continue to search for an

independent source of bauxite just in case. [97] But it wasn't settled business. On April 3, 1952, Mansfield reported that Reynolds was negotiating with several insurance companies and banks for financing construction of a new alumina refinery at Corpus Christi. Anaconda executives indicated they wanted to be sure the Reynolds plant would be built before they committed money to building an aluminum smelter in Montana. [98] Ruder wrote about Anaconda's decision-making delays in an April 11, 1952, editorial. "It seems that if the Anaconda company was 99 percent sure of the 'alumina' source, it still would not be willing to start the Flathead plant," wrote. "Anaconda is obviously playing completely safe." [99]

On April 17, 1952, Mansfield learned that Jess Larson, head of the General Services Administration, had written to Treasury Secretary John Snyder "demanding" favorable and prompt action regarding loans sought by the Reynolds for a new alumina refinery. The loans were to come from insurance companies and banks, but they required federal approval. [100] Five days later, Mansfield announced that the U.S. Comptroller of the Currency had approved the applications from the insurance companies and banks. [101] But by late June 1952, Roy Glover was expressing public dismay over more delays and complications – Reynolds continued to face difficulties in financing its $87 million alumina refinery. [102] By July 26, Reynolds was still trying to secure financing, while the deadline for an agreement between Anaconda and Reynolds was Aug. 31. [103] Mansfield was optimistic when he spoke to the media during a visit to the Flathead on Aug. 14. Federal Reserve Board approval, however, was still lacking. [104] Then on Aug. 30, one day before the deadline, Con Kelley announced that Anaconda's plans were going ahead for the aluminum smelter in the Flathead. Plans had been delayed only temporarily until a secure supply of alumina could be located. The alumina would be shipped to the Flathead by rail car. [105] When it began operating in 1955, the AAC smelter processed 120,000 tons of alumina per year that began as bauxite in Jamaica and was refined into alumina in Reynolds' refineries in Corpus Christi and Hurricane Creek, Ark. [106]

According to an Anaconda press release on Aug. 30, 1952, the delay caused by the alumina supply "has been utilized by the Anaconda staff in investigating the most modern plants in this country and abroad, with the result that the plant, when constructed, will be of the most efficient and modern design." [107] Anaconda engineers traveled across the U.S., Canada and Europe studying alternative smelter designs. The plant that most impressed the Anaconda engineers was located in St. Jean de Maurienne in France and was owned by the century-old aluminum company Pechiney Compagnie de Produits Chimiques et Electrometallurgiques. Anaconda believed the Pechiney process would run more efficiently than other designs, cut down on atmospheric contamination by fumes, minimize electrical power consumption and increase daily yields. Implementing the French designs raised the final cost of the plant

from $50 million to $65 million, but Anaconda management believed using an older design would have made the plant outdated by the time construction was completed. In most cases, initial aluminum produced from greenfield smelters was not up to standard grade, but with the new design elements in the Anaconda smelter, a longer than usual testing period was anticipated. [108]

Looking back, Anaconda Chairman Roy Glover explained to those attending the plant's dedication on Aug. 15, 1955, that the company knew next to nothing about the aluminum industry when it decided to get into the business, "and knowing that we knew nothing, we of necessity started from scratch." Con Kelley further explained that the company's staff searched for information on aluminum production in the U.S. and in Europe and found what they were looking for in Southern France – the Pechiney process. Kelley praised the plan. "Anaconda again has pioneered in this way for the erection of the most modern, the safest, most efficient plant in existence with the best working conditions," he said. [109] Four Anaconda engineers had traveled to Europe in May 1952. After investigating several European aluminum plants, the engineers concluded that the Pechiney plant at the foot of the Alps in St. Jean de Maurienne, the largest in France, was the most modern and efficient of its kind. Negotiations followed, and Pechiney agreed to let the Anaconda Company make a detailed study of its plant and to provide technical support, including personnel, should Anaconda decide to go ahead with its plans. The Pechiney plant was operating at 90% efficiency while similar operations in the U.S. operated at only 80% to 82% efficiency. [110]

Frank Case, Anaconda's vice president in charge of aluminum, and three other Anaconda executives returned from a visit to aluminum plants in Europe in late June 1952. [111] On July 3, Case told the media that a great deal of improvements had been made in the design for the company's aluminum smelter in the past six months. While delays in the project had given the company time to consider different designs, Case was anxious to begin construction and expected the whole situation to be clarified by late August. [112] Case returned to France in July to inspect more aluminum smelters. More design changes were being developed, the company reported. [113] By the middle of October, three French engineers were in New York City to meet with Case. [114] An agreement between Anaconda and Pechiney was signed in November. According to the Hungry Horse News, "Advantages of the French method include complete control of contamination factors and mechanical improvements in operation." The design to be used would be a combination of American techniques with those found at St. Jean de Maurienne. The new plant was expected to include four buildings from 1,200 to 1,500 feet long housing two potlines capable of producing 50,000 tons of aluminum per year. [115]

On Dec. 12, 1952, Anaconda repeated the message that the key factor in its decision to adopt French technology was "the maximum control it gives in preventing air contamination. The Flathead plant will be the most modern in the United States in this respect." [116] Anaconda provided more information in February 1953. No waste water would be discharged into the Flathead River, and no air pollution was expected. Synthetic cryolite made from fluorspar would be shipped to the plant, along with coke and other chemicals needed to produce the carbon for cathodes and anodes. Partially consumed anodes would be crushed and recycled in the making of carbon. [117] On March 24, 1954, six future plant managers traveled to France to study aluminum smelting. Heading up the group was the plant's production manager, James Smith, on his third trip to France. The group visited St. Jean DeMaurienne, where Pechiney used the vertical-pin Soderberg-type anode. As developed by the French, the anode design was considered the most effective for controlling fumes and reducing costs, Anaconda reported. [118]

The six men returned to the Flathead in May. They included Smith, potlines superintendent E.O. Woster, metallurgist George Hanson, formerly of the Anaconda smelter in Anaconda, and general foremen William Alderman, James Clemens, Verne Johnson and Roy Lindsey. A seventh man who joined them in Columbia Falls was chemist Albert Hook, who had worked at the Kaiser aluminum plant in Spokane. [119] In March 1955, two additional French technicians arrived from Pechiney to assist the AAC plant begin operations. The first two, including an interpreter, arrived in February. One of the new arrivals was a paste plant technician. [120] Pechiney manager Jean Grolee visited the AAC plant on Oct. 6, 1955. Grolee was in charge of Pechiney's 100-year old aluminum operations. Seven other Pechiney men had been working at the AAC plant site since earlier in the year and four had departed for France earlier in the week. [121] Bert Gerelle, a Pechiney engineer, returned to Columbia Falls in June 1984, twenty-nine years after he first came to Montana. Gerelle took his first foreign assignment for Pechiney by helping design and build the carbon paste plant at the AAC plant. During his 38-year career with Pechiney, Gerelle helped start up paste plants at 14 aluminum plants around the world on five continents. He received France's Legion of Honor Medal for his work. [122]

Gas, power and rail lines

On Feb. 1, 1952, the Hungry Horse News reported that the Montana Power Co. would definitely bring natural gas into the Flathead from gas fields in Alberta. The information came from an interview with J.E. Corette, the company's vice president. The gas could be used by the new aluminum plant for preheating new reduction pots and other uses. [123] Meanwhile, work continued on linking the Hungry Horse Dam and Western Montana

to the Pacific Northwest power grid. On Feb. 27, 1952, Harold Cantrell, an electrical engineer with the Bonneville Power Administration, described new transmission lines that would bring power to the AAC aluminum plant, a proposed phosphorus plant near Butte and other lines connecting Western Montana to the BPA grid. Access to low-cost electrical power could mean development of electrolytic plants for manganese and zinc production, he said. More than $1 million had been spent on transmission lines in Montana, including a 50-mile long 115,000-volt line from Kerr Dam to Hungry Horse Dam and new substations at Hungry Horse, Kalispell, Elmo, Kerr Dam and Silver Bow. A 230,000-volt line was under construction from Spokane to Hot Springs, Mont., and from Hot Springs to the Hungry Horse Dam. The 146-mile long line from Spokane to Hot Springs was expected to be energized in October 1952. Another $4 million in contract work for the rest of the transmission lines and substations had been completed. [124]

On Oct. 12, 1952, the last segment of wire was strung on the transmission line between the Hungry Horse Dam and Hot Springs. Construction of a transmission line across the Flathead River to the proposed aluminum plant was expected to begin in the spring of 1953. [125] The BPA started surveying for two one-mile long tap lines from Columbia Heights to the aluminum plant site in mid-December 1952. Anaconda had asked the BPA to begin the work. One of the 230 kilovolt lines would be referred to as the Hot Springs leg and the other as the Hungry Horse leg. [126] In March 1953, however, the Hoerner brothers filed a lawsuit in federal court in Great Falls claiming the BPA had diminished the value of their property along the Flathead River by constructing the transmission lines to the plant site. The federal government had stated that the property was only good for grazing and had offered the Hoerners $800, but the Hoerners believed the land was worth much more as potential residential property. [127]

On Aug. 18, 1954, three court-appointed local commissioners placed a value of $1,020 on the 12.3 acres owned by the Hoerners. [128] The Hungry Horse leg over the river was energized for the first time on Feb. 11, 1955, connecting the plant's switchyard to other BPA power providers, including the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington. Until this time, the construction crews at the plant site were using about 1.5 megawatts supplied by the Flathead Electric Cooperative. When completed, the plant was expected to use 120 megawatts of electrical power. [129] The plant was connected to the BPA grid system for the first time on June 1, 1955. The initial plan was for Anaconda to use Hungry Horse Dam power for the six months that water flowed through the dam's turbines and then switch to power from downstream dams in the BPA system, such as Grand Coulee, for the next six months. [130]

In addition to being near the transmission line connecting the Hungry Horse Dam to the BPA grid, the AAC plant site was within sight of the Great Northern Railway mainline. On

Sept. 5, 1952, plans were being worked out for connecting the new plant's spur lines to the mainline. A large sign would be erected on the former Larkin oat field, visible to the mainline, that would read, "Site of Anaconda Aluminum Co. Reduction Works." [131] By Oct. 2, 1952, a Great Northern crew was laying ties for a 1,500-foot service track. [132] In March 1953, Great Northern workers began building a 4,000-foot long siding track parallel to the main line near the plant site. [133] At the same time, the Flathead County Commissioners were negotiating with Great Northern Railway about improving the railroad crossing on the North Fork Road which connected the town of Columbia Falls to the plant site. The road to the plant would be widened and an automatic gate would be installed at the crossing. [134] In May 1953, construction began on a 1,000-foot spur line from the Great Northern mainline to bring cement to a concrete batch plant. [135] On Oct. 2, 1953, the name of the Brent Siding on the Great Northern mainline was changed to Conkelley Siding in honor of Anaconda Chairman Con Kelley. Brent had stood for Bad Rock Entrance. [136] In November 1953, Great Northern crews began laying the first permanent tracks on the plant grounds. [137] In late April 1955, twenty-four men from Great Northern began laying the last seven miles of track at the new AAC plant. [138]

During its due diligence investigation, Anaconda engineers had looked into underground water resources for the new smelter. On Dec. 12, 1952, the company announced that contracts had been made for drilling five wells to provide all the water for the plant. [139] By early February 1953, Olsen and Justin of Columbia Falls had drilled a 12-inch test well at the site more than 100 feet deep. First signs of water appeared at 95 feet. [140] Olsen and Justin reached 200 feet two weeks later. The water zone was located between 94 and 116 feet. The subsurface structure was hard-packed gravel to 116 feet and then closely packed sand. The drillers were given the go-ahead by Anaconda to start drilling a second test well. [141] By late February, Olsen and Justin had reached 156 feet at their second test well, but production was not as good as at the first well. A pump would be installed on the first well and additional wells would be drilled. [142] By early April, the first test well was reportedly producing 540 gallons of clear water per minute, with a draw-down of 1.8 feet in water level. The well was considered good enough for construction purposes, but more wells would be drilled to find sufficient water for aluminum production. [143] In mid-August, the Layne-Minnesota Co. of Billings signed a contract to drill three 20-inch production wells at the plant site. The wells were to be under reamed to 42 inches in diameter in the underground water-producing range. Together, the three wells needed to produce 3,000 gallons per minute for production purposes. [144]

The Anaconda Company, with seven decades of industrial construction experience, served as the plant's general contractor. On Sept. 5, 1952, nine Anaconda mining engineers from Butte began surveying the contours of the site below Teakettle Mountain. Five days later, several of Anaconda's top engineers gathered at the site to

look over locations for the plant's buildings. They included John W. Irvine, an Anaconda construction engineer from Yerington, Nev.; Wilbur Jurden, Anaconda's top electrical and mechanical design engineer from New York City; and R.J. Kennard, Anaconda's chief engineer for western operations from Butte. Joining them were Frank Case and H.G. Satterthwaite. That night, some of Anaconda's top men gathered for a dinner with the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce and Gov. John Bonner. The governor told the audience of tremendous strides being taken by the state to utilizing its natural resources, such as water power for electricity. [145]

Irvine returned to Columbia Falls in February 1953 from the Anaconda copper mine in Yerington, Nev. Joining him from New York City was Anaconda engineer Arthur L. Otto. [146] In March, Anaconda announced that Irvine would oversee construction of the new plant. Irvine received an engineering degree from Oregon State College and went to work for Henry Kaiser building the Grand Coulee Dam. In 1940, he traveled to Panama to help in bomb-proofing the canal and naval facilities before World War II broke out. After the war, Irvine worked for General Electric at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. He joined the Anaconda Company in 1948, travelling to Chile where he spent three years building the company's new copper processing plant at Chuquicamata. Next he went to Yerington where Anaconda was building a new copper plant. Irvine planned to move his family to Columbia Falls during construction of the aluminum plant. Otto had a master's degree from New York University and was previously employed by the Port of New York Authority and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Association. After joining Anaconda, he was involved with the Yerington plant as well as the company's uranium oxide processing facility near Grants, N.M. Otto was to act as a liaison between Irvine in Columbia Falls and Wilbur Jurden, Anaconda's chief engineer based in New York City. [147]

The former Larkin home was converted into a temporary construction office in February 1953 with an addition to accommodate the office workers. [148] In March 1953, William Liddicoat, the construction project's storekeeper, moved into AAC's temporary offices in downtown Columbia Falls. Mary Findell, formerly of the Flathead County assessor's office in Kalispell, served as the secretary in the construction offices at the former Larkin home. [149] On April 1, 1953, the Anaconda Aluminum Co. opened up its temporary offices in rooms 17, 18 and 19 of the Bank of Columbia Falls building. [150] The first building erected at the plant site was a 40-by-132-foot Quonset hut previously used by General-Shea-Morrison as a warehouse during construction of the Hungry Horse Dam. [151] Set up in April, the building had sentimental value and was still standing when demolition began at the plant site in 2016.

Site preparation began in the fall of 1952 with timber work at the plant site. Looking back in July 1955, the Hungry Horse News stated, "Land that had not provided a

livelihood for a single family now was an industrial site to provide steady jobs for 450." [152] By the second week of September 1952, clearing was under way on 130 acres of the 750-acre plant site. Chains and cables were strung between two bulldozers that traveled across the site knocking down second-growth trees and bushes as they moved. The contractor for clearing the land was Wixson & Crowe, the same firm that spent four years using the same methods to clear land for the Hungry Horse Reservoir. The trees and brush were gathered into piles for burning. [153] The site was cleared of trees and brush by Oct. 2. Great piles of slash were burning brightly during the night of Sept. 30, when President Truman's 18-car train passed by on the Great Northern mainline. [154]

On Sept. 29, 1952, the foundation engineering firm Dames & Moore, of Salt Lake City, began investigating the plant site. [155] While surveyors began to lay out the physical location of the plant, Dames & Moore began digging test holes to sample the soil. The deepest hole was 100 feet and hit water at 95 feet. Plum Creek delivered 50,000 board-feet of lumber to the site for temporary buildings. [156] By the middle of October, Dames & Moore engineers were still looking for water and setting off explosions for seismographic tests. [157] On Dec. 12, 1952, Anaconda announced that erection of plant buildings would begin in the spring of 1953. First to be constructed would be general offices and a garage near the former Larkin home. The office building would be finished in Montana tapestry brick, a design that would extend to the employee change house and plant laboratory. [158]

On Feb. 1, 1953, F & S Construction began clearing an additional 200 acres of second-growth timber at the plant site. Construction of temporary power lines were being bid on by Mountain States Power Co. and Flathead Electric Cooperative. It was expected that 500 to 1,000 workers would be at the site after April 1. [159] A number of nationally-known construction firms had expressed interest in bidding on the new plant. The lumber requirements for concrete forms were estimated to be 2 million board feet. A local source of gravel for the concrete was being investigated. [160] Meanwhile, land clearing continued and logs taken from the second-growth timber were salvaged in 8-foot lengths for fire wood, railroad ties and 2-by-4s. Flathead Electric won the bid to run temporary power lines across the Flathead River near Bad Rock Canyon for construction of the plant. [161]

Representatives from several large construction companies visited the plant site in February 1953 in preparation for bidding on the project. Bids were to be received at Anaconda's New York City offices by March 11, with contracts to be signed by March 16. The companies inquired about the availability of housing, concrete laborers and carpenters, as well as weather conditions and supplies of sand and gravel. An analysis of the gravel at the site found it to be unsuitable for making concrete. Some of the gravel

was too soft, and some was coated with limestone. [162] Seventeen companies submitted bids by mid-March. [163] The Anaconda Company requested revisions the next week. [164] By early April, an announcement of the winning bid for the first phase of construction had not yet been made, prompting concerns since workers were already leaving the Flathead Valley to find other work. The first phase involved excavation and foundation work, including laying pipe and conduit. [165]

On May 18, 1953, Anaconda announced that the winning bidder for Phase 1 was the J.A. McNeil Co. of Alhambra, Calif. Phase 1 was estimated to cost about $3 million and involve excavating 500,000 cubic yards of earth and placing 75,000 cubic yards of concrete, as well as laying pipe and conduit. The construction company expected as many as 400 workers would be needed in the summer of 1953. Local residents would be given a hiring preference, and local materials would be used as much as possible. A temporary construction office for McNeil would be built by Monegan & Rowe, the same contractor that built Anaconda staff housing in Columbia Falls. [166] On June 2, 1953, a brief ground-breaking ceremony with no fanfare marked the beginning of construction. First to be built was a 90-foot by 360-foot warehouse. On the same day, the J.A. McNeil Co. concluded wage rate negotiations with AFL representatives for skilled and unskilled workers in Phase 1 of the project. [167]

Local economic impacts

The impacts of the new aluminum plant on the local community were immediate and would continue for decades. This included national publicity. In December 1952, Anaconda ran a full-page ad in a national magazine describing its plans to build an aluminum plant near Columbia Falls. The Hungry Horse News remarked in a Dec. 26 editorial on the attention the small Montana town was receiving now. [168] Other impacts were more practical. In March 1953, an attempt was made to gather support for construction of a $150,000 hospital in Columbia Falls. The need was based on the growing timber mill industry, the new aluminum plant, the Hungry Horse Dam and the town's proximity to Glacier National Park, with its large influx of tourists in the summer time. [169] Meanwhile, local boosters began to leverage the aluminum plant into an overall economic promotion. An April 10, 1953, newspaper advertisement paid for by the Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce and the Columbia Falls Real Estate Association portrayed Flathead County and Glacier Park in a map with cartoon-like figures that focused on the new aluminum plant. The map featured recreational resources, lumber mills, the Great Northern Railroad and Hungry Horse Dam. The purpose of the ad was to promote Columbia Falls as the "Industrial Hub of Montana's Scenic Flathead." According to the ad, "The town has a future" with "steady jobs, good schools, churches and a scenic, recreational setting." [170]

Nationally syndicated radio newscaster Walter Winchell was rumored to have predicted in April 1953 that the AAC plant would never be built in the Flathead. Mel Ruder rose to the occasion with an April 24, 1953, editorial. Winchell never said anything specific about the AAC plant, Ruder noted. Instead, Winchell reportedly said that with peace developments in the Korean War, it was likely that the U.S. aluminum industry would scale back. One week later, another rumor spread around the Flathead Valley – that Winchell had predicted that Coram, an isolated place in the Middle Fork of the Flathead River canyon, would become the center of industrial development. "This spreading of rumor seems to be a variety of Flathead cabin fever," Ruder commented. "Fortunately people recognize such rumors as loose talk and hang tight to their dollars." [171] U.S. aluminum companies were not as prone to rumors. In 1953, while construction was just beginning at the AAC plant, the Nichols Wire & Aluminum Co. placed the plant's first order for aluminum. [172]

In 1955, when the reduction pots in the Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant began to first produce metal, Columbia Falls had approximately 2,300 residents – significantly more than the 637 in 1940 and 1,232 in 1950. Building permits had boomed for the first nine months of 1955, with construction valued at $681,966 compared to $253,295 for all of 1954. Assessed valuations were 22% higher in 1954 compared to 1953. There were 800 telephones in service compared to 125 in 1946, one weekly newspaper with a paid circulation of 3,000 copies, seven motels and hotels, one downtown and one drive-in motion picture theater, one public heated outdoor swimming pool, a volunteer fire department limited to 25 members and two full-time policemen. [173]

Overall, the local economy was seeing a boost as a result of four factors – lumber, the dam, aluminum and tourism. Columbia Falls was the lumber center of the Flathead, shipping 2,600 freight cars of lumber over the Great Northern Railway in 1954 and employing more than 600 workers. The local lumber industry had seen a 10-fold increase in capital investment over the past decade. The new aluminum plant employed 500 construction workers. In the summer of 1955, a total of 104,785 tourists visited the Hungry Horse Dam. The local economy also included some farming and ranching, Christmas tree farms, tourist souvenir manufacturing and service businesses for the tourist industry. Glacier Park was only 17 miles away from Columbia Falls. Nine miles west of Columbia Falls was Whitefish Lake and the Big Mountain ski area. The boost to the economy enabled local voters to approve construction of a new high school for its 315 students. Out of 46 graduating seniors, 18 had gone on to enroll in college. With the new aluminum plant, School District 6 increased its assessed valuation from $12.1 million in 1954 to $26.6 million in 1955 – a larger figure than seen in many counties in Montana. One result of this increased valuation was that the tax levy on homes in Columbia Falls was 20% less than for homes in the rest of the Flathead. [174]

Like an anchor store in a shopping mall, the Flathead aluminum plant served as a steady source of employment, tax revenue and local purchases. Located basically out of sight but within a short drive of downtown Columbia Falls, it steadied the Flathead economy for several decades while other sectors of the economy developed further, particularly wood products, government services and tourism. But several decisions Anaconda made at the very beginning dogged the plant years later – choosing the Soderberg design over prebake anodes and the geographical location. The plant site was not only a thousand miles or more away from raw material sources and aluminum markets, there was only rail access for bulk transportation. The site was also too close to Glacier Park.

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