

# High Country News

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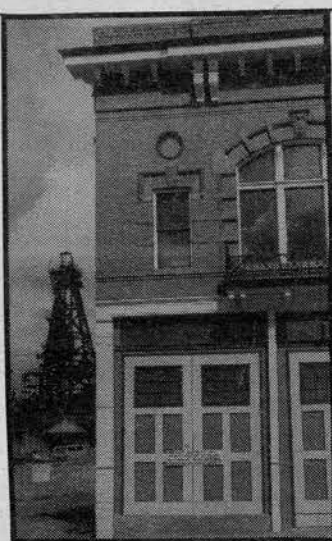
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**A headframe stands near a historic Butte building**

## BUTTE, MONTANA, SEEKS A NEW LIFE

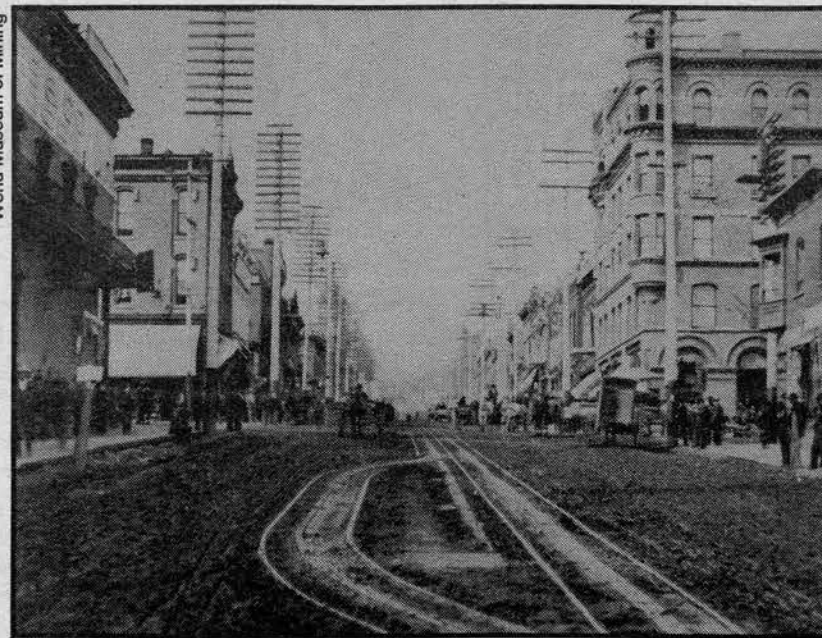
Can a scarred, poisoned landscape be transformed into a tourist attraction?



David Spear

**Butte, Montana**

World Museum of Mining



**Cable car tracks lined the streets of Butte in 1895 (above); today, historic buildings remain (right).**



Florence Williams

by Florence Williams

Paris is not the first image that comes to mind amid the blighted landscape of Butte, Mont. But the incongruity doesn't stop Mark Reavis, a tall, bearded redhead whose tweed blazer flaps open every time he steps from his car to point to something. "Now that," he says, nodding toward a gawky steel headframe at the mouth of an old mine shaft, "is like the Eiffel Tower."

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# Butte seeks to mine its past ...

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We stand atop what was once known as "the richest hill on earth," where a glorious vein of copper ore caused Butte to boom. Reavis, whose energy as the city's historic preservation officer matches his hair color, continued: "That headframe is vintage 1890. See how it's iron-riveted? These mines used cutting-edge technology."

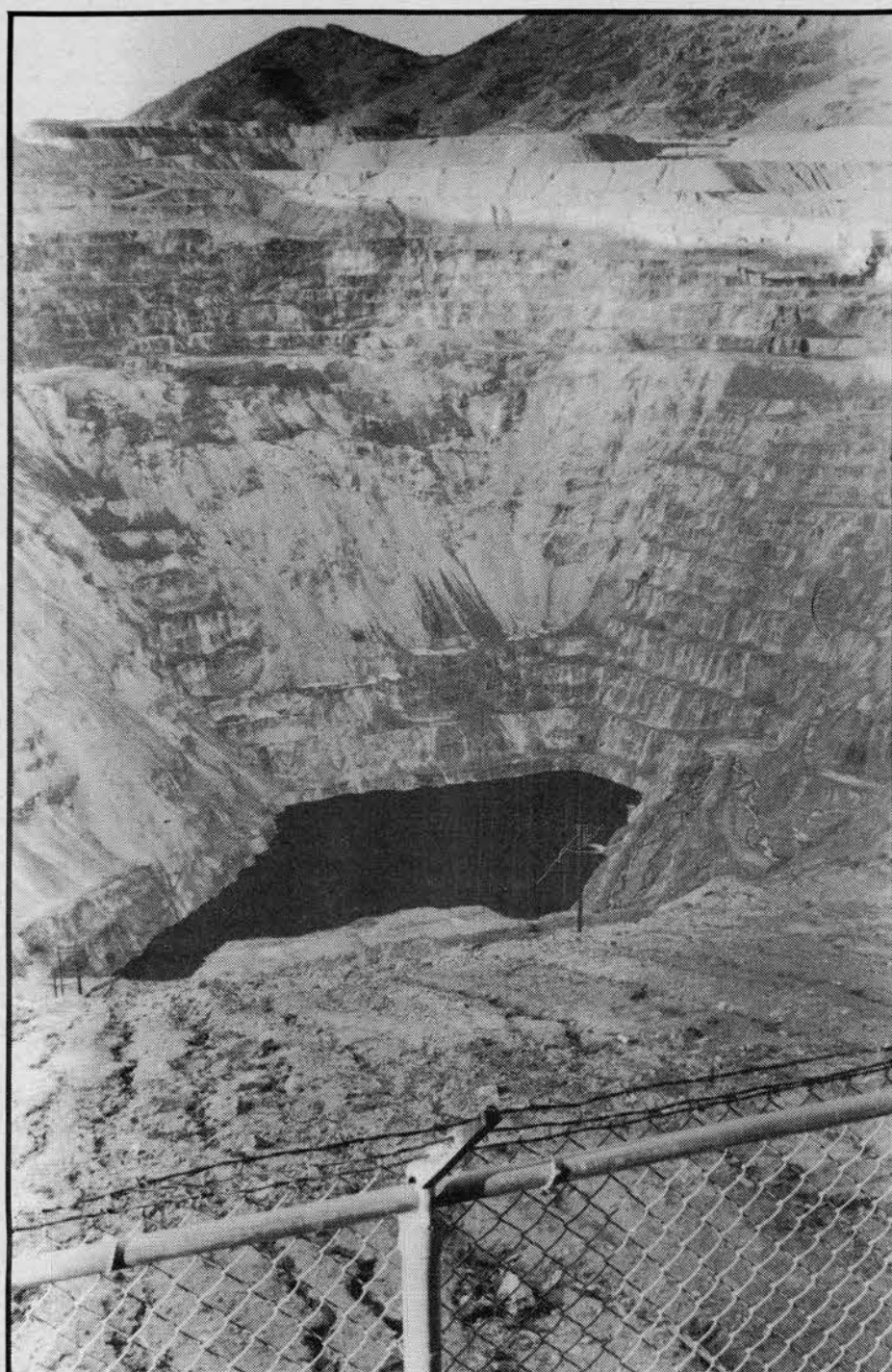
But what was once the world's largest, richest copper mine is now the nation's largest Superfund site. In addition to huge steel headframes, before us lie acres of wood headframes, covered with soot, and straddling gaping mine shafts. There is also the infamous Berkeley Pit, a gigantic hole filled with 17 billion gallons of toxic turquoise water. A closed strip mine, it is now the deepest, dirtiest lake in Montana.

The depressed town has reached a crossroads. The question for Butte is what to do with its situation: an industrial wasteland sitting in the middle of a state best known for the rivers that run through it — rivers Butte continues to pollute. One answer lies with Reavis, who instead of seeing desolation on the ghostly hillside sees dollar signs.

If Reavis has his way, this beer-can-studded mound above old-town Butte will be transformed into one of the hottest tourist destinations in Montana. He is currently working to get the hill designated a national park, to be jointly managed by the city and the National Park Service. The plan has widespread support. If successful, the rutted jeep road would be paved, signs erected and overlooks installed.

The idea may seem outrageous and ambitious, but so is everything about Butte. For a hundred years, the city had one destiny — mining — which it pursued with genius, fervor and disdain for other values.

Its thirst for ore and capital pushed the envelope on every industrial technology from pipelines to electricity to railroad-ing. An urban island in a sea of cattle ranches, Butte laid the foundation for much of the state's current, bitter political climate. The city's ethnic strife, labor warfare, insatiable greed and fabulous wealth dominated the Legislature for decades. Butte was home to the grandest mansions, the poorest ghettos, the finest Prohibition whiskey and the tastiest pork pasties.



The Berkeley Pit near Butte

Ed Marston

The raucous, century-long party ended in 1974, when debt-ridden Anaconda Copper Mining Co. shut its last deep mine. Atlantic Richfield, which bought the company, continued mining the Berkeley Pit until 1982. Then, for a decade, Butte slumbered in its worst recession, only rousing itself briefly to test for lead and arsenic in the blood of its children.

Accordingly, the state of Montana has, until very recently, treated Butte like an eccentric relative best kept out of

sight when visitors come calling. After all, Montana tourists come for scenery, wildlife and pristine air and water. And not for a ravaged landscape surrounding a city that looks like a bit of New York. Although Butte lies halfway between Glacier and Yellowstone national parks, at the junction of the state's busiest summer highways, the department of transportation for years ignored Butte's request for road advertising.

Currently, Butte draws only 5 to 10 percent of all the tourists who drive by.

And most of those who do stop avoid "uptown" in favor of suburban Butte, with its strip malls and franchised motels. A sign taped to the Vintage Clothing store uptown says: "Winter hours: open by chance or appointment" with a phone number.

Last March, *Travel and Leisure Magazine* ran an article on the Continental Divide. It called nearby Anaconda "a sad-sack mining town dominated by a smelter smokestack." It was tougher on Butte: "the ugliest spot in Montana ... despite a spirited his-

toric district amid the rubble, the overall picture is desolate."

But change is coming to Butte, slowly and steadily, the way planners and development consultants prefer. Several small- and medium-sized businesses have moved in, the plunge in population has leveled off, and some of the historic architecture is being rescued by investors from disrepair. While Reavis' dream of a world-class destination town seems remote, it does not seem impossible.

"We used to be a one-company, roller-coaster town, and now we're moving toward a stable, diversified economy," says mayor Jack Lynch. Gradually filling the void left by Anaconda are high-tech firms cleaning up the mess. These, however, still leave a big gap in blue-collar jobs; Butte's wintertime unemployment hovers around 10 percent, three points higher than the state average. But with characteristic tenacity and optimism, the town sees no reason why tourism can't become a major player.

"We want people to pay more attention to what we have here, a diamond in the rough," adds Lynch. "We just need to dust it off, and use the uniqueness of the area to draw tourists."

But would a national historic park complement the town's hard-won stability or turn it, like other tourist towns, into a drive-by movie set with a sanitized past and a crop of resentful locals? Some observers don't see how a national park could accurately represent the labor strife, ethnic divisions and ecological damage that was Butte.

"I'd hate to see the historic features of Butte get phonied up, with boardwalks and such, like at Ellis Island," says Dave Emmons, a professor of American history at the University of Montana.

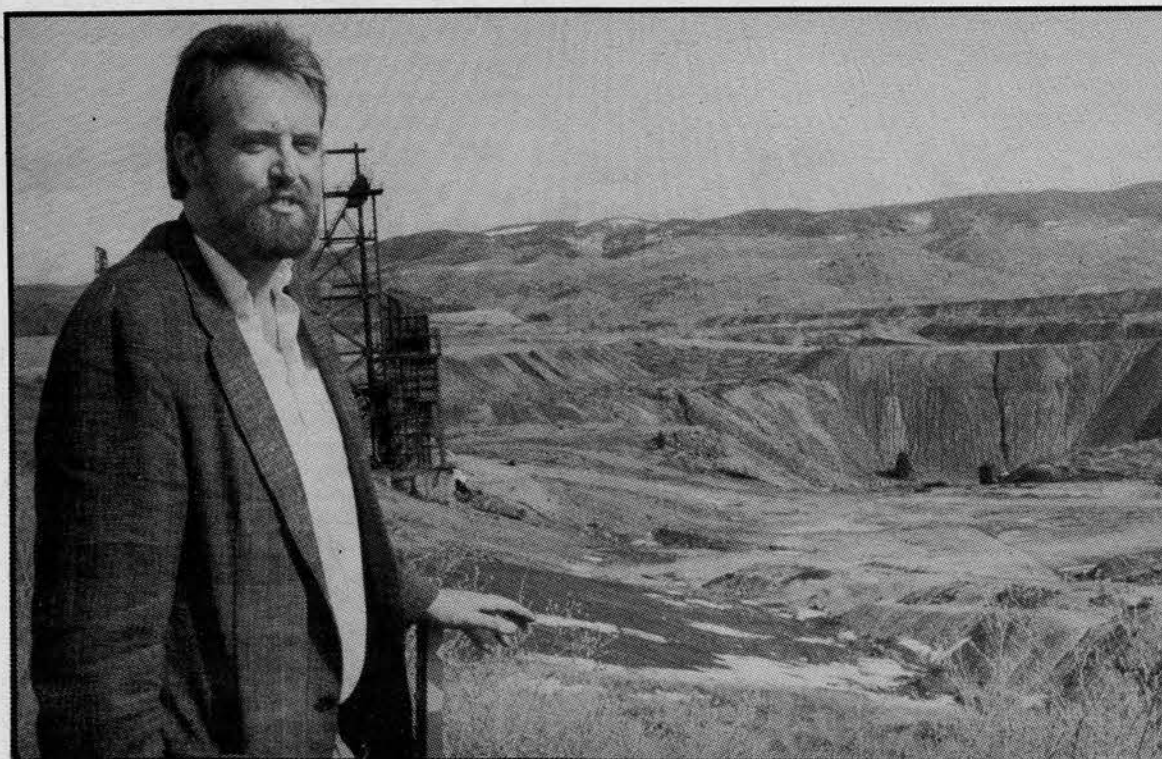
## BUTTE AS THEME PARK

It's not surprising that Butte, whose extractive industries have steadily declined since the 1930s, wants to cash in on the state's popularity. For every person who lives in Montana, six visit. The state is second only to Hawaii in dollars generated by tourists, and last year tourism was the state's fastest growing industry. Butte, once the largest and most prosperous town between Denver and San Francisco, wants its due: recognition of its pivotal role in the settlement of the West.

The National Park Service began looking at Butte last year, when Congress mandated that the Department of Interior come up with a list of sites for a potential labor history park. Butte had already hired a Pennsylvania-based consultant to draw up plans for a theme park centered on Butte's colorful mining past. Now, says Park Service planner Robert Spude, the agency will try to list Butte as an "American Heritage Area," a new rubric that creates partnerships between the agency and local governments. The ball is already rolling. Last spring, the Montana Legislature designated Butte and its smelter city, Anaconda, as the state's first official "historic corridor."

"A lot of people think Butte is ugly," says Spude. "They want to just bulldoze the whole thing. We think its landscape contributes a unique heritage to the West."

Richard Dill is the Pennsylvania-based consultant who wrote the theme park proposal for Butte and its former smelter site, Anaconda. He once worked in the "imagineering" departments of King's Island and King's Dominion,



Mark Reavis, Butte's historic preservation officer, stands near a pit and a 100-foot-high headframe

Florence Williams



both amusement parks. "What Butte has going for it," says Dill, "is market: 2.5 million qualified visitors travel through the intersection of I-15 and I-90. We need to capture them and hold them for part of their vacation."

He proposes a \$35 million development. With such attractions as an electric railroad, an "in-mine" experience, the Berkeley Pit viewing station, headframe night lighting, a smelting interpretive center, smelter-stack lighting, audio tours and a golf course, Butte would be on its way. In fact, says Dill, such attractions "would create a world-class destination." He estimates an 800-percent increase in tourism with nearly a million visitors, all paying admission fees and buying tickets.

Dill and Reavis are banking on what they already know about the behavior of tourists. Like movie-goers, tourists love blood and gore. In Butte, that means the Berkeley Pit. An observation deck looks out over the glowing lake, surrounded by scarred rings of bulldozed strata. Three thousand miles of underground tunnels all drain into the flesh-colored chasm, depositing arsenic, lead, zinc and a host of other poisons. Even today, it is the most visited spot in Butte.

The Park Service and most other people and groups want a theme park. But Butte has always been a town marked by feuds, and it still is. Mark Reavis, who sees himself as a champion of history, finds his biggest opponent in the Environmental Protection Agency. On our hillside tour, he angrily points out a wheat field, which the agency has planted over a contaminated mine waste dump. To Reavis, the capping and revegetating is sacrilege.

"Who wants a fenced wheat field?" he asks. "Odd as it may sound, these dumps are historic resources. The preservation community here is worried we're going to lose, bury and cover up all signs of mining."

The EPA has little patience for "preserving" what it is supposed to clean up. But the agency is caught between opposing legislation. Downtown Butte, known as "uptown" Butte because of its spot on the hill, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Some 4,000 buildings

and numerous mine structures are scattered over the six-square-mile landmark. In addition, the National Historic Preservation Act deems any structure older than 50 years a potential "resource" that all federal agencies must consider when carrying out their activities.

ARCO, the company now stuck with the clean-up fee for sites once owned by the powerful Anaconda Company, finds itself juggling powerful, competing interests.

"Quite frankly, we're the ham in the sandwich," says Sandy Stash, who manages the multi-million-dollar clean-up. "The historical value of some of these sites is questionable, and now we have to mitigate for losses if we cover them up."

Plenty of mill tailings and mine-waste dumps remain to be caught in a tug of war between the town's numerous history buffs and those who want to see Butte returned to a reasonably normal-looking, safe place to live. One such spot is the large, flat-topped mound of contaminated rock matter that came out of the Alice pit mine in Walkerville, a hilltop neighborhood once dominated by Irish miners.

Some Butte residents, especially those who live near the toxic materials, find the historic argument foolish. "I don't know what's likely to happen now that a ridiculously stupid thing like the Alice Knob, which is just a big mound of toxic crap, is considered a valuable his-

torical resource," says Mary Kay Craig, a third-generation Butte resident who helps monitor pollution for the Clark Fork Coalition, a Missoula-based group.

Arguing the other side is Alan

Hooper, a 73-year-old retired mining engineer who volunteers at the World Museum of Mining, located on the east side of the hill, where he builds wooden frames for the hundreds of archival photographs collected by the city. "I've lived here all my life and it's never hurt me any," says Hooper, clad in work boots and Osh Kosh overalls.

"Slag heaps and dumps, that's what makes this town. That's what makes it different. If you were visiting from California, you wouldn't want to visit a tree-lined city. That's what you have at home."

The chamber of commerce agrees with Hooper. It wholeheartedly backs the proposed theme park as a way to cash in on Butte's heritage. "We don't say we're the Garden City, like Missoula," says Connie Kenney, the chamber's director. "There are other charms here. We had to feed people. We're different. We need to think bigger."

Mark Reavis is thinking big. Our next stop is the Anselmo Mine Yard, once a phenomenally successful copper mine. Although ARCO was responsible for cleaning it up, the city has agreed to take over its liability because it wants it for tourism.

"This is one of our pet projects,"

says Reavis. "It's the only remaining site that has all the mine buildings intact. We're going to use it as an example of what it took to get ore out of the ground. Paths will take you through the office, carpenter shop, mechanic shop and main hoist room, with the little tourist railroad stopping here. We'll have interpretive signs ready by spring."

Reavis is good at fixing things up. Trained as an architect, he converted an 18-car carriage house downtown, bought at auction, into his home. In addition to his work on the park, he also spearheads a project to sell historic buildings for as little as \$500 to people who will restore them. He calls it urban homesteading. It is also an act of desperation: Much of Butte's once-opulent downtown lies gutted and decrepit, literally falling down, with few local funds available to rescue them.

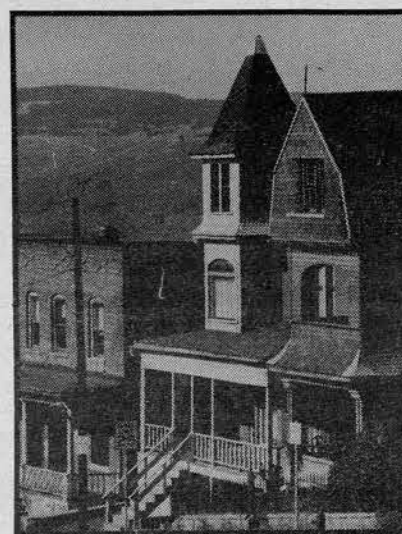
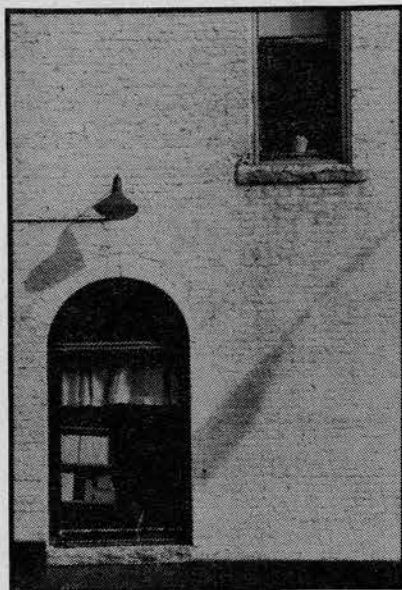
At Anselmo, we enter the main hoist room, a dank, cavernous warehouse filled with enormous crank shafts and rolls of steel cables used to lower the miners nearly a mile underground. Several stories of small-pane windows climb the walls. It's atmospheric; an MTV video was filmed here last year.

"It won't be dangerous," adds Reavis. "The EPA is capping all the contamination."

ARCO is also thinking big, and it has embraced the theme park proposal. Strategically, the company hopes to placate warring factions of historians, boosters and environmentalists. In an ambitious move that has met with both skepticism and excitement, the company hired Jack Nicklaus to design a \$5.5 million-\$7.5 million golf course for Anaconda. The course would make use of capped slag and tailings piles while creating a tourist attraction. It would not be a typical country club atmosphere. The course would incorporate some of the landscape's historic features, including century-old flues and smelting ovens.

Once the public course is built, ARCO will turn it over to the city. It will also donate once-contaminated land nearby for real-estate development. ARCO cleanup manager Stash says Nicklaus, a

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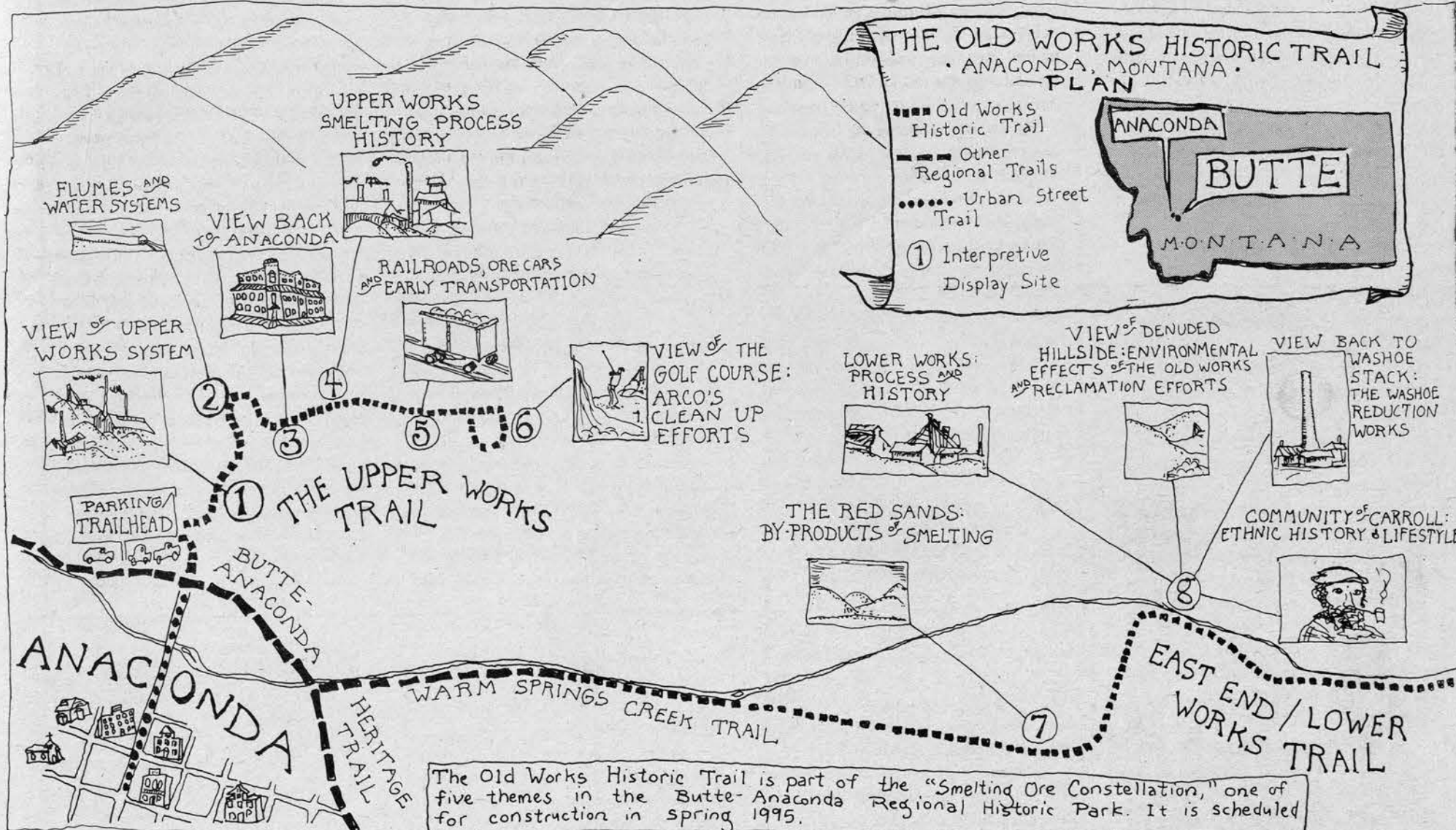


David J. Spear

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source: urban edges inc. and murray lamont plan for ARCO / rendered by diane sylvain for high country news



# Butte seeks to mine its past ...

Continued from page 1

world-renowned pro and designer, is intrigued by the site's challenges. One oddity, for example, is that the sand traps will be black, a clever use for millions of tons of vitrified metals and slag material left over from smelting copper.

Construction is also set to begin on a trail system near the molten slag walls along Butte's Silver Bow Creek. The funds would come partly from federal transportation money. Miles of the black, 10-foot-high smelter waste stretch along the city's eastern end. "You should see the black against the green in the spring," says Reavis. "It looks pretty good."

Don't expect to go fishing, though; Silver Bow Creek, a tributary to the Clark Fork of the Columbia, is sterile.

Although the federal government has yet to commit funds to the proposed park, the cities of Butte and Anaconda, together with local businesses, are forging ahead. They recently formed a non-profit corporation, First Montana Heritage Park Partners, to raise dollars locally. If the National Park Service has any reservations about the Disney-esque plan, it's not saying. What the agency wants is a better reputation for working with communities, and money to do the work.

But some historians are leery of the Park Service. Dave Emmons of the University of Montana says he wonders if the Park Service's interpretation would accurately portray the grimmer aspects of Butte's history, such as when local ranchers filed a lawsuit in the 1890s because the air pollution was insufferable. He also worries about the town's remaining living artifacts, its people.

"I don't know of any one place so important to American industrialization. It's a place where working people should be celebrated, not made into a tourist attraction. They don't want to be industrial mannequins. Sites like this can get too sanitized, warm and cuddly. I think that's like the desecration of a shrine."

There is already some debate as to whether the Park Service accurately interprets natural history, such as the Yellowstone fires, much less cultural history. One historic national park unit, Pennsylvania's Steamtown, U.S.A., has drawn fire for being a pork-barrel, tacky project, and Park Service-managed Ellis Island in New York has been accused of manipulating history.

Critic Philip Gourevitch recently wrote, "Museums, after all, are entertainment. They are obliged to win and reward the attention of the audience."

The afternoon following my tour with Reavis, I drive around with Jim Harrington, a retired history teacher who is the primary force behind efforts to designate Butte as a labor landmark. He shows me where the miners' union building was blown up in 1914. The same year, the mayor was flung out of a two-story window. In 1917, a union organizer named Frank Little was taken from his bed in the early hours and hung from a railroad trestle, presumably by corporate thugs. Two weeks later, the U.S. Congress introduced the Sedition Act. Butte housed the first chapter of the Miner's Union, and the first national headquarters of the International Workers of the World, known as the Wobblies.



Montana Historical Society, Helena

The Anaconda reduction works c. 1920s. Copper ores from Butte were processed here.

## Seeking treasure in Butte's trash

When Butte and Anaconda were designated as the nation's largest Superfund site in the early 1980s, it was a stigma from which the depressed towns thought they'd never recover. Not only did they have to cope with high arsenic and lead levels in the blood of their children, but they thought they'd never attract new businesses and people. The mine had recently laid off 5,000 high-paid, blue-collar workers, leaving only contaminated dust and a handful of jobs.

"Everyone thought we would just blow away," says Bill Rauthio, a third-generation Butte resident who directs marketing for the chamber of commerce. But "that Superfund designation has brought in a lot of business."

First the town prospered by making a mess, and now the town prospers by cleaning it up. Butte's pollution is so vast and complicated that the world's best engineers flock to it. In the last five years, tens of millions of federal dollars have poured into Butte. EPA has opened an office, ARCO has established clean-up offices in Butte and Anaconda, and a half dozen high-tech firms moved here to field-test ideas and vie for contracts. Conventional copper mining currently employs about 330 people, but the clean-up industry employs almost three times as many.

"This is a classic case of taking a lemon and turning it into lemonade," says mayor Jack Lynch.

"Butte is a natural laboratory for clean-up technologies," says Don Peoples, the president of MSE Inc. "The

Berkeley Pit offers the most contaminated and difficult water to deal with that anyone's ever seen. There's a lot of opportunity here."

MSE, with 300 employees, designs and tests waste management technologies. Under contracts from the Department of Energy, MSE runs a pilot project using a "plasma arc furnace," a super-hot rotating tub that destroys organic waste in soils and traps inorganic waste in a glass-like material.

MSE also oversees the National Environmental Waste Technology Testing and Evaluation Center (NEWTTEC). Since 1989, the center has grown from a \$1 million project to a \$15 million program to demonstrate new waste treatment facilities that could be used to clean up contaminated government sites throughout the West. Its funding comes from state agencies and universities, EPA, and the departments of Defense, Energy, Interior and Agriculture.

One innovative, fast-growing corporation is Mycotech, whose 80 employees use "fungal biotechnology" to attack creosote, PCBs, coal tar and other thorny contaminants. Its prize fungus, known as white-rot, appears particularly adept at breaking down nasty chemicals, explains president William Black. The company houses its specially patented fungal reactors in the former train depot. The trick now, says Black, who is seeking an EPA contract, is to perfect the technology to handle large areas of contamination.

Vying with Mycotech is a brand new company, Metanetix, which says

it can take polluted water, extract marketable trace metals, and produce drinkable water. The 60-person firm has set up shop above the inactive Kelley Mine, where it cleans small quantities of contaminated shaft water.

Metanetix site administrator Lynne DeVoe says the 3-month-old operation is already selling pure metal products, such as zinc, aluminum and iron, directly to fertilizer manufacturers and veterinarians. Next month it will start extracting manganese, magnesium and calcium, and DeVoe hopes to build by next year a new facility that can pump up to 6,000 gallons of water per minute. She says the company, a subsidiary of the publicly held Harrison Corp., has already invested \$26 million in the patented technology.

"We didn't come here to clean up, but to go into business," says DeVoe, who founded the company with her husband, Irving, an environmental scientist. Both recently moved from California. "That we can do this with waste water is great, but we're here to make money." Says Stephen Roth, president of the Kelley Resource Recovery Project, a partner in the operation: "Everybody sees this site as a disaster. We see it as a venture."

The mining-of-a-mine has set off a buzz around Butte. Says 83-year-old Dave Piper, an engineering consultant for Metanetix: "I was heartbroken when the mines closed. This is a new era in Butte. I'm terribly excited to see it come back."

—F.W.

"That's Dublin Gulch," says Harrington, 55, pointing to a street high on the hill. "My father was born in that green house. My grandmother came over from Ireland when she was 4 years old."

Is Harrington, a history buff who loves his hometown, worried about how Butte and tourism will mix?

"I do have some apprehensions," he

says. "I don't like tourist traps. But mining won't always be here. Superfund won't always be here. We need some economic stability."

Earlier in the day, when I'd asked Mark Reavis the same thing, he'd grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Butte has always been exploited, so we don't mind development and crowding.

We wish we had those problems."

For more information contact Bill Browlin, chairman, Heritage Park and Partners, 110 W. Park, Anaconda, MT 59711 (406/563-8412) ■

Florence Williams is a former HCN staff reporter who lives in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.