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River we carry with us| Two centuries of writing on the Clark Fork

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THE RIVER WE CARRY WITH US:
TWO CENTURIES OF WRITING ON THE CLARK FORK

by

Emily Miller

B.A. Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 1995

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

The University of Montana

August, 2001

Approved by:



Chairperson,



Dean, Graduate School

7-30-01

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Preface:
Project Summary

I have been working for the Clark Fork Coalition (CFC) in Missoula on a new book about the Clark Fork River. I was hired by the CFC to compile, introduce and co-edit this compilation of historic and contemporary writings about the Clark Fork, which will be published in September 2001 by Clark City Press in Livingston.

Traditionally, the Clark Fork Coalition has relied heavily on science and litigation as means for protecting and improving the river. While these tactics are both necessary and effective, other approaches to promoting river awareness exist. The anthology is intended to be just this – a different approach for the Coalition to take to protect the Clark Fork River, and hopefully to inspire others to join them.

With this book, we hope to begin to tell the river's story—to plumb the variety and significance of humans' relationships with the Clark Fork and its tributaries in the basin, expressed in writing over the past century and a half. Through a collection of essays, newspaper clips and photographs dating back to the 1800s, as well as essays written by contemporary local authors, the anthology explores the premise that human experience here has been and continues to be closely shaped by and tied to the Clark Fork River.

The book is both comprehensive and very local. It includes:

- An introduction, written by me, providing a backdrop for the rest of the book. In it, I sketch out the natural and human history of the basin, including a summary of the basin's geologic history and features; a general account of human habitation of the Clark Fork Basin; a summary of the issues that have

shaped people's relationships with the river in recent history (the past century and a half).

- The body of the book is divided into five main sections, starting with pieces Butte, Anaconda and the upper Clark Fork, then traveling downriver—The Blackfoot is section Two, then Missoula and the middle river, then the Bitterroot, and finally the Flathead, the lower river, and Lake Pend Oreille. Each section includes a combination of the following:
 - 1) Historical documents: journal excerpts, memoirs, newspaper/magazine clips) detailing relevant river-related events and accounts dating back as far as the 1800s.
 - 2) Non-fiction pieces by contemporary, local writers. These include Bill Kittredge, Annick Smith, David James Duncan, Edwin Dobb, Fred Haeefele, Sandra Alcosser, Ginny Meriam, Duncan Adams, Dick Manning, Bill Vaughn, Ian Frazier, Dan Flores, Don Snow, Colin Chisolm, Phil Condon, Debra Earling, James Lee Burke and Rick Bass, among others.
 - 3) New photographs of the river by Missoula photographer Mark Alan Wilson.

This project's aim is to provide a unique, in-depth look at the Clark Fork River Basin as it has affected the humans who inhabit it and vice versa. With the goal of showing the many sides of life along this oft-maligned river (a river that boasts the largest Superfund site in the country on its upper reaches), this collection of essays is simultaneously informative, enjoyable to read, and nice to look at. And by generating

appreciation of and enhancing interest in the Clark Fork River, this book is meant to inspire its readers to reconsider the place they live – and especially the river that runs through it. Hopefully, this book will encourage people to become involved in protecting and enhancing the river they live with, and ideally, encourage people to care better for the Clark Fork in the future.

This packet includes 1) my original introduction to the book 2) the book's table of contents, showing what I've researched, compiled, collected and edited, and 3) a list of works consulted for my introduction.

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Introduction

Living in western Montana means living with rivers. We cross them each day, we watch them rise and fall with the seasons. We fish them when we can, we fear them in times of floods, and we immerse ourselves in them in August's heat. And in a summer as dry as this one, the summer of 2000, we watch and wait, worried, as the Clark Fork River shrinks down to a meager trickle, a tentative suggestion of its powerful spring self, or even its winter self. People say how strange it is, the river all but disappearing, and shake their heads on the Higgins Avenue Bridge as the water level falls by the day. And it is strange—this river that, in many, mightier forms, has washed away our bridges, rendered our railroads useless, and even flooded our homes. Today, you could walk from one side to the other and not even wet your head.

Strange, too, how in this dwindling river, objects start to pierce the surface, emerging as the water continues to recede: ties from an old railroad bridge near Orange Street, abandoned tireless bicycles, a cast-off yellow-green recliner, a rusted hubcap, a sky-blue refrigerator door, and an infinity of moss-cloaked rocks. It's not difficult to imagine each of these sunken pieces has a story to it, a story hinted at but not quite told, as if the river is a great, vast mind, and what lies in its bed are its memories. The Clark Fork, certainly, is filled with these memory-stories: stories of mistakes and triumphs, of loss and renewal, of lives lived.

Of course too many stories, here, tell of misuse and negligence – of decades upon decades of abuse and degradation. The Clark Fork's bed is lined with proof of human greed, of years of laziness and neglect, our tendency toward excess, our lack of foresight. Indeed, for the hundred years from the 1880s to the 1980s, the Clark Fork River was,

literally, a dump—a receptacle for mine waste, lumber mill byproducts, town garbage, litter, airborne pollution, car bodies, packing waste. Whatever humans generated and cast off, chances are it found its way into the Clark Fork River.

But each cubic foot-per-second of water that rolls past us offers more than these tales of despair: this same Clark Fork River remains the backbone of this place, life-giving and ancient. The Clark Fork's are also stories of inspiration and wonder, of human devotion and family, of the importance and power of beauty, of the remarkable resilience of nature, and maybe even the triumph of hope.

* * *

High in the mountains of western Montana's Silver Bow County, a creek of the same name rises from the forest floor. Gathering water as it flows west from the Continental Divide, it falls into a valley, slipping alongside Butte, and Anaconda, joining another small stream, Warm Springs Creek. Together, they become the Clark Fork River, which runs north then west, through the Deer Lodge valley, picking up mountain streams like Flint Creek, Rock Creek and the Little Blackfoot, and continuing west toward the Hellgate Canyon, where it joins the Big Blackfoot River (made famous by Norman Maclean in *A River Runs Through It*), at the lumber-mill town of Bonner.

After the Milltown Dam, the river flows through Hellgate Canyon, into the city of Missoula. There it picks up the Bitterroot, passes Frenchtown and Alberton and is joined by the Flathead before passing Paradise, Plains, Thompson Falls, Noxon and other towns on its way to northern Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille – a total of 320 miles in Montana and

Idaho. And from the ancient Idaho lake (measuring more than 1,100 feet deep), the Clark Fork's waters eventually spill into the Columbia River and feed, ultimately, into the Pacific.

The Clark Fork River we know today, though the largest river in western Montana, is a mere creek compared to the crushing surges of water that once rushed through the Clark Fork basin. The rocks that line the river's banks and canyons are older than ancient; some date back to the time the basin was first forming, as long as 240 million years ago, when the Rocky Mountains rose up from crashing continental plates. Much of the basin itself was formed between 130,000 and 70,000 years ago, when huge walls of ice pressed into walls of rock, gouging enough away over the years to create sloped valleys and deep canyons.

For many years, though, the entire Clark Fork basin lay deep under water – 4,000 feet of it in some places. Periodically, the water would rise, covering most of western Montana with what is now known by geologists as glacial Lake Missoula, then drain and rise again. Around 15,000 years ago, geologists believe, a large glacier some twenty miles wide moved south from Canada, lodging itself between the Cabinet and Selkirk mountains in present-day northern Idaho, near Lake Pend Oreille. Stuck, the glacier became an enormous ice dam, standing more than 2,000 feet high. Behind the dam, glacial Lake Missoula rose again. This ice dam melted, floated, and refroze several times, shrinking enough to drain the lake and let water rush west, to the Pacific. Several times, according to geologists, the entire Lake Missoula was unleashed across the Spokane Valley in a period of floods some believe to be the greatest ever on Earth. One of these floods, they say, sent a massive wall of water gushing through Oregon's Columbia Gorge

at over 50 miles an hour – a torrent which, as it flowed out the Clark Fork Valley where the towns of Thompson Falls and Paradise now stand, is believed to have contained more water than all the rest of the world’s streams combined.

Geologists say this damming/flooding process repeated itself in varying intensities at least 35 times over several thousand years. They know this from marks the water has left on the land. The horizontally striated hillsides of the Missoula Valley, for example, show where the lake’s surface was each time it rose. Those who take the time to notice find stories of millions of years of flowing water carved into the landscape all over western Montana.

This does not mean only geology. The Clark Fork Valley has supported a rich variety of vegetation and wildlife whose survival has depended heavily on the rivers’ waters. The climate of the northern Rockies yields long, cold winters, short, hot summers, and relatively little precipitation. Deciduous trees—cottonwoods and aspens—line the rivers’ banks in many spots, but mostly, especially as one moves away from the water, conifers such as Douglas firs and ponderosa pines are dominant.

The valley’s best-known inhabitants may be its large predators – grizzly bears and wolves – though both species have been driven to the brink of local extinction over the past century. Of course, many other animal species inhabit the basin, too: moose and elk, mountain lions, black bears, ermine, mountain goats, beavers and bighorn sheep to name just a few. And then, of course, there are the fish.

Fish, specifically trout, are the reason many people come to western Montana, and a probable reason many stay. The West Slope cutthroat and bull trout are native to the Clark Fork River, and are rumored to have once existed as far upriver as Silver Bow

Creek, as far down as Lake Pend Oreille. Today they are less common, though, mostly because of factors related to human population growth: industry, pollution, and the introduction of foreign species by government biologists and, in some cases, by so-called “bucket-biologists”—individuals who intentionally introduce foreign species into an ecosystem. These introduced species, such as pike, eastern brook trout, and rainbow trout, cause problems for the Clark Fork’s natives, be it by predation, competition for food, or interbreeding. Because of these and other factors, the bull trout is currently listed as “threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act, and many believe the West Slope cutthroat should be as well.

The Clark Fork’s fish problems started in the middle to late 1800s, concurrent with the large-scale settlement of whites along the river, an event that was nothing short of a disaster for the creatures living *in* it. While it’s true that many of the Clark Fork’s tributaries such as Rock Creek and the Blackfoot River support strong native trout populations, the uppermost section of the main river, sadly, does not. The stretch of water from Butte to Milltown, in fact, has the fewest fish of any section of the river, primarily because of the high levels of copper in the upper Clark Fork’s water. The middle section (from Milltown to the confluence of the Flathead), has slightly stronger fish populations, because much of the mine waste has collected behind the dam at Milltown, leaving the water below the dam more fish-friendly. But the lowest stretch, from the Flathead to Lake Pend Oreille, is home to three major dams at Thompson Falls, Noxon and Cabinet Gorge. These are obstacles to fish reproduction, and keep populations fairly low.

Up and down the river, especially on the main fork, fish are plagued by several problems caused by humans: high levels of copper and zinc from the mines upriver, low

flows resulting from irrigation projects; channelization; roads; and high nutrient levels produced by agricultural and human waste. These factors, collectively, paint a fairly grim picture for fish in the Clark Fork. The river's fish populations are estimated to be a mere one-fifth of what they have been historically and what they should be today based on populations in comparable streams around the region.

Fish populations in the Clark Fork may be down, but the human population along the river is up. Way up. Not that habitation is new. Archeological evidence suggests human settlement along the Clark Fork River as far back as thirteen thousand years. The Salish people (also known as the Flathead) and the Pend Oreille (also called the Kalispel) had occupied much of the Clark Fork Valley for thousands of years before whites appeared early in the nineteenth century. Their territories included the Bitterroot and Flathead valleys and a large swath of land stretching from Flathead Lake west, through modern-day Idaho into what is now eastern Washington.

The Blackfeet, too, were well established in the area, inhabiting the Blackfoot river corridor as far east as the Continental Divide. These Indian tribes lived closely connected to the rivers, fishing in them, drinking from them and even being healed by them. An 1884 *Missoulian* article, chronicling a four-day float trip on the Bitterroot, describes a sweatlodge near an old Indian camp: “a basket-like coop, just big enough for one to creep into, be covered with blankets and take a steam bath from some hot stones inside, and then they run out and jump into the deep water near by. It is one of their modes of treatment in sickness.”

It is difficult to imagine, today, the landscape inhabited by the Indians of the Clark Fork Valley for all those thousands of years—a landscape devoid of pavement,

buildings, bridges, lights; a landscape intact, for the most part, when white settlers began trickling into the valley; a landscape that was changed quickly as white populations grew. But until the first parties of white explorers ventured along the banks of the Clark Fork, it was the Indians' lives – their stories – that marked the river.

In Hellgate canyon, for example, the Blackfeet often fought with the Salish and Pend Oreille, who traveled up the Blackfoot River each year to hunt bison. White explorers found evidence of bloody conflicts – Indian bones and weapons – scattered along the banks of the Clark Fork. The explorers called the place Hell's Gate, a name eventually adopted by the town settled downriver and ultimately included in the larger town, later called Missoula.

In those early 19th-century years, the valleys of the Clark Fork were rapidly gaining a reputation among whites – those involved with the fur trade, especially – for bounty as well as beauty. Aided by cooperative Indians, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark—whose names remain, marking much of the landscape including the Clark Fork River itself—explored the region in 1806. The two spent time in the Bitterroot valley, crossing Lolo pass and making camp for several nights at a place they called Traveler's Rest near present-day Lolo, before splitting up, with Clark going south and Lewis traveling northeast, up the Blackfoot River, and along the old Blackfeet buffalo trail on the return.

David Thompson, though far less well-known than Lewis and Clark, was another important early visitor to the region. His British-mandated quest for the headwaters of the Columbia River led him up the Clark Fork all the way to present-day Missoula, which he visited in 1812, climbing atop Mt. Jumbo that year to complete one of his early maps of

the five valleys. Thompson made his way to several of the Clark Fork's tributaries, spending time at local fur-trading posts such as Saleesh House (near Thompson Falls), Kutenay House in British Columbia, and Kullyspel House on Lake Pend Oreille. At one camp, Thompson scoured the hills for a giant woolly mammoth, rumored to lurk high in the Kootenai River basin.

Increasingly, though, most non-natives in the Clark Fork Valley were not explorers or cartographers, like Lewis, Clark or Thompson, but fur trappers. Companies such as The Hudson's Bay Company, The American Fur Company, and The Rocky Mountain Fur Company vied for control of the lucrative fur market, employing hundreds of trappers to harvest all the fur they could, and eventually making a sizable dent in the Clark Fork basin's ecosystem. Hudson's Bay Company records report the area being "heavily trapped" as early as the 1830s, with populations of furbearers – ermine, beaver, fisher, wolverine, for example – showing serious signs of depletion. Trapping was the first large-scale extractive industry embarked on by whites in the Clark Fork basin, and it may have been precedent-setting in several ways. Some historians have argued that the era of the fur trade was an important turning point in the history of the Clark Fork basin, and of the entire region, because it created a legacy of stripping the land of natural resources while providing little, if any, long-term returns for local communities—monetary or otherwise.

Throughout these years, white migration to the Clark Fork basin – and the exploitative practices that came along with it – increased steadily. And as white presence in the basin grew, Indian communities felt the pressures of white culture, and especially its more destructive elements—liquor, disease, guns, missionary Christianity—and the

reckless disruption of native economic and political systems that those brought about. Undoubtedly, some whites lived peacefully with Indians (like John Owen, who married a Shoshone woman), but most new Montanans and their government did whatever they could to push the natives out of the valleys in the Clark Fork basin.

For example, Jon Mullan, a respected captain in the U.S. Army whose name marks many spots in the modern-day Clark Fork basin including the Mullan Pass, was sent to the Northwest to assess the possibilities for a road from the Missouri River to the Columbia River. His 1865 Miners' and Travelers' Guide, a report of his travels and a set of recommendations for the American government, reflects the misguided paternalism displayed by many nineteenth-century American expansionists. In order to “save *any* of the Indians,” Mullan writes:

[We must] take the children and educate them under a proper system; for it is as difficult to mould the ideas and acts of an Indian, after he has passed the age of twenty-one, as it is those of his white neighbor; and it is only by taking the children, and rescuing them from sloth, ignorance, and savage propensities, that any decided improvement can be attained.

For myself I would like to see the supervision of the Indians transferred to the war Department, so that the hand that rewards should be the one to punish when needed, and thus produce a more uniform and harmonious management, giving greater security against outbreak, and a more economical administration of the finances of the government.

After years of broken agreements and bogus treaties, the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, signed between the new Washington Territory governor Isaac Stevens and local native

leaders, dealt a definitive blow to most of the Clark Fork basin's native people, including the Blackfeet, who were forced from the Bitterroot, and like the area's other natives, exiled to various white-chosen reserves. Some of the exiled people went to St. Ignatius in the Mission Valley, while others went to the Flathead, Kalispel and Coeur d'Alene reservations where many of their descendants still live today. By the early 1900's, though – only a century after contact with explorers Lewis, Clark and Thompson – the Kalispel population, for example, hovered around 150 people, down from what had only a hundred years prior, been many thousand.

As the human population of the Clark Fork Valley changed in the latter half of the 19th century, so did the natural environment. As demonstrated by letters, journals and records, the earliest settlers found the Clark Fork basin to be a land of natural abundance and clear rivers, a place brimming with fish, wildlife and vegetation, valleys chock full of bear, wolves, bighorn sheep, moose, antelope, deer, and bountiful species of fish and fowl.

Granville Stuart, a Byron-reading gold prospector and farmer who, with his brother James, settled in the Deer Lodge valley in the 1860s, kept a daily journal (preserved in the book *Forty Years on the Frontier*), chronicling his gardening efforts, Blackfeet horse-thievery, the drunken miners of the river valleys, and the settlements springing up along the Clark Fork. In a journal excerpt, Stuart described the wildlife that frequented his property, noting: "Killed three large wolves last night with strychnine and probably more if they could be found." In a single afternoon, Stuart recounts killing one black-tailed deer and three elk by the river, though one elk is all he kept. "Antelope are

tolerable plenty,” he wrote. “Just now we have more meat than we can use before it spoils.”

The years James and Granville Stuart spent in the Deer Lodge valley were a critical time in the history of the Clark Fork River; those decades lay on the cusp of a new era in western Montana. The first recorded gold strike in Montana was made in 1858 by the Stuarts on the upper Clark Fork at Gold Creek in the Deer Lodge Valley. Though national attention quickly refocused on larger strikes farther south – places such as Alder Gulch and Grasshopper Creek – life in the Clark Fork basin would change drastically in the coming years, as would the life of the river that ran through it.

People with high hopes for quick wealth poured into Montana in the months and years after the first gold strikes, spurring many small settlements and the businesses and schools and churches to accompany them. In the greater Missoula area, for example, Higgins and Worden’s Market opened to supply goods for a fast-growing mining community. Towns grew around the many clusters of prospectors, most of whom were sluicing and panning for gold—basically, running scoops of riverbed through strainers in hopes of separating chunks of gold from rocks and dirt. As *The Missoula Pioneer* of September 15, 1860, described it, “Now the pick and the shovel resounds [sic] in many a canyon, where but a few months ago nought [sic] but the silence of nature held sway.”

The “silence of nature” would hardly hold sway again along the Clark Fork River, because as surface deposits of gold became scarcer, miners expanded the techniques they used to get at the precious metal. Soon, the pick and shovel were replaced by new, more destructive types of mining, aimed at removing as much sand and gravel from a riverbank as possible. Using such devices as the hydraulic pump, miners washed bank after bank

into the water and downstream. Though they did not require chemicals or heavy machinery, these shallow mines, known as placer mines, were changing the face of the Clark Fork Valley, environmentally and otherwise; white population was on the rise to work the mines, commerce was growing around the industry, and roads were being built to accommodate both.

While it's difficult to estimate the overall impact placer mining had on the river itself, there is written evidence that Montana's pristine rivers and streams were being compromised, even at this early, pre-industrial stage. Visitors to the area reported muddied streams and gouged-out banks. Future U.S. president James Garfield, on a trip through western Montana, noted the degraded state of the Clark Fork in 1872, writing, "The beautiful [Clark Fork] River has been permanently ruined by the miners; and has been for three years as muddy as the Missouri." He added, "Before the discovery of gold, it was as clear and pure as any mountain stream could well be." But it was far upriver, near the Clark Fork's headwaters, that entrepreneurs were laying the groundwork for an industry whose scale and capacity for both metal production and environmental destruction would, in comparison, make the placer camps of the 1870s seem practically benign.

Butte, Montana, began as a gold camp in 1864, expanding in fits and starts as men came to extract fortunes from the earth in silver as well as gold. But while the quest for these metals was making some men rich, many small mills were suffering. Butte in the mid-1870s was gathering fame for its ore lodes, especially silver, but the shallow deposits were just about gone, as was the case downriver. Operations like the James Stuart Mill (named for Granville's brother), on Flint Creek near Philipsburg, closed nearly as soon as

they opened. The nationwide financial panic of 1873, caused in part by East Coast bankers overcommitting funds to western rail-building efforts, meant slow times for the Montana Territory as well as the rest of the country. Despite the recession, though, such men as William A. Clark and Marcus Daly were busy setting up shop in Butte, buying up small silver and gold mines and expanding their operations. Without railroad access, though, most mines simply did not have the tools, machinery or manpower to access the deeper deposits, where the real money lay. The railroad, finally completed in Montana in 1883, was the key needed to unlock the riches of Butte Hill.

By the late 1880s, Butte had become one of the world's leading copper producers, as well as a major urban center with a wide mix of ethnicities and economic classes. Butte was also the battleground for a mounting war between the booming copper industry and individuals concerned with the public's health. In his book *Smoke Wars*, Donald MacMillan describes Butte in these years and the tension that ensued between corporate profit and public safety. In this portrait, mines and smelters crank around the clock, and the city air is so thick with smoke that on the worst days, Butte's inhabitants can't read street addresses on downtown doorways. In addition to its thriving, boisterous, often violent mix of theaters, restaurants, bars, and brothels, Butte had serious health problems. Mysterious respiratory illnesses were common, and livestock in fields were known to drop dead unexpectedly, with festering sores around their noses and mouths. In some cases, too, apparently healthy men, usually miners, died suddenly of unknown causes.

These years initiated a century of pollution, damage and destruction on the Clark Fork River that we are only now beginning to reverse, and the mining industry in Butte cannot be overemphasized as a major force in the Clark Fork's story; Edwin Dobb's

essay “Pennies from Hell,” which first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*, provides a thorough and fascinating history of mining there and its legacy, not just for the Clark Fork or even Montana, but for the entire global community. Dobb examines the complex role mining plays for those who have called Butte home—Butte, a place known alternately as “the Richest Hill on Earth” and “the black heart of Montana” throughout the 20th century.

Dobb writes:

Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from...Indeed, it can be looked upon as a national laboratory, in which the inner workings of a crucial kind of economic activity are laid bare and U.S. environmental policy is being put to one of its most severe tests. Butte is where we must return, in the manner of a pilgrimage, if we wish to grasp in full the implications of our appetite for metals--for everything from cars and computers to building materials and batteries--an appetite that remains unabated even as we grow more dependent on imports to satisfy it, conveniently displacing the costs and consequences overseas, beyond the reach of conscience.

Now, just after the close of the 20th century, Butte, which produced an estimated 20 billion pounds of copper, 5 billion pounds of zinc, and 704 million ounces of silver in scarcely more than a century, has quieted down substantially. Today, the city sprawls across a brown, mostly barren hill and valley. It has only one remaining mine, which shut down in 2000 because of soaring electricity prices, and a population that is one-third of what it was a century ago. The marks that the industry left on the landscape, though, are

anything but subtle. Piles of mine tailings are scattered liberally around Anaconda, where “For Lease” signs hang in empty shop windows, and boarded-up homes seem almost as common as lived-in ones. Many of Butte’s eastside neighborhoods have been consumed by the aggressive expansion of the vast Berkeley Pit, once a mine, now a gigantic hole filled with billions of gallons of toxic soup, which many fear will fatally contaminate the local aquifer even before it overflows into the Clark Fork, as is predicted in just a couple of decades. The former mining boomtown is now a place known for and by its history above all else, a place scarred indelibly by an industrial past.

All said, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not kind to the Clark Fork and its tributaries. Metals and wastes and byproducts of mining and smelting flowed into the river at astounding rates. Natural traumas wreaked havoc on the river, its wildlife and its immediate surroundings; newspaper clips tell us of forest fires periodically scouring nearby forests and destroying towns. Near Plains, the world-famous 1910 fire heated a stretch of river up enough to kill large numbers of fish. The great flood of 1908 washed out Missoula’s Higgins Street Bridge, many riverside homes and businesses, and sections of the railroad up and down the river, stranding a group of travelers in Thompson Falls for almost three weeks. Still though, the river is resilient and able to recover from natural disaster, probably because it evolved with such events. It’s the human-induced damage that has most seriously compromised the Clark Fork’s vitality.

For most of the 1900s, the Clark Fork was known by many as an eyesore or worse. In local histories, old-timers from the Deer Lodge valley speak of open skin sores festering after contact with the Clark Fork’s water, and of being warned by fearful parents never to touch the water, or even get too close to it. Silver Bow Creek was known

by locals for years simply as “Shit Creek.” And in Missoula throughout the 1950s and 60s, near the Orange Street Bridge, residents and businesses regularly backed trucks up to the river and dumped their garbage right in.

Problems at the upriver mines, too, often meant trouble for the valley’s residents; a mine strike in Butte, which might leave mine systems unmanned, or a heavy rain, could cause the river to run brick-red from Butte to Milltown for days on end. From Butte down to Thompson Falls, the river was a dump for timber treatment plants, packing plants and paper mills, and even raw sewage made its way into the water. Fish were scarce, if they could be spotted at all; one account describes periods in the 1950s and 60s when, in certain, highly-polluted stretches, scientists couldn’t find *any* for years at a time, and it wasn’t until then, the 50s, some 80 years after mining began in earnest on the Clark Fork, that the Anaconda Company even *began* to check the pollutants it poured into and along the river. By then much of the most serious damage had already been done. Throughout the 70s and 80s, rain periodically flushed metals from tailings piles scattered along the river’s banks, contaminating the water and causing mass fish kills, where at least ten times the river’s surface was a blanket of fish, dead from poison, floating belly-up.

* * *

But even in mining’s most frantic early years, people were drawn to the river for more than its extractable resources and economic potential. In Missoula and Thompson Falls, Arlee, Sandpoint and Stevensville – virtually all over the basin – residents turned to the waters for solace, sport, and sustenance. They skated on them in winter, fished and

swam and floated them in summer. One Missoula woman, identified only as C.A.A., chronicled her float trip down the “Bitter Root River” in the “Bitter Root Girl” for *The Weekly Missoulian* in 1883. Her account, which appeared on the paper’s front page on September 7, gives us a feel for how wild the river must have been at that time: Its clear water brimming with healthy native fish (“the doctor caught twenty trout in just a few minutes...the river water is very transparent, and objects could be seen for twenty to thirty feet”); its banks still largely unpopulated (“during the four days spent on the river we did not see a white person and hardly a house”); and its woods vital and uncut, dense with trees and wildlife.

But in some respects, too, these century-old descriptions and sentiments seem remarkably familiar. We recognize the musings about the waters’ mysterious appeal, the expressions of awe and wonder, the gushing exclamations over the invigorating beauty. Even as the worst havoc was being wreaked on the Clark Fork, humans cultivated relationships with and around it. There was a loving quality to how people talked about the Clark Fork and its tributaries, even then. This “river-love” is complicated, because it exists side-by-side with a century and a half of destructive behavior, much of which continues in some form today. But perhaps, in some ways, it’s the Clark Fork’s wounds that make it all the more important, even precious, to the people who call this basin home.

* * *

In the pages that follow, western Montana writers illustrate this sense of connection, this so-called river-love, again and again. Their stories, while varied in scope,

subject matter, texture and tone, all seek to explore human experience in, on, and along the Clark Fork and its major tributaries. It is our hope that together, these written words will have the power to transform a river from its physical existence—water flowing over sand and rock—into a dynamic, vital and even spiritual force in the daily lives of those who know it.

So what, then, is the story of the Clark Fork River? It's true that the scars of its past are impossible to ignore. Clearcuts line the Clark Fork valley and those valleys of its tributaries, including the Bitterroot, Flathead and the Big Blackfoot. For one hundred miles, starting near Butte, a chain of sites on the Clark Fork collectively holds the distinction of being the largest Superfund site in the United States. The Clark Fork River itself, for at least a hundred miles, is scarred with piles of tailings including slickens, the worst of the piles, where no vegetation can grow at all, and which, in heavy rain, spout toxic metals into the river. And today, it is estimated that some 6 million cubic yards of mining and smelting wastes have accumulated behind the Milltown Dam, forcing some local residents to pump in fresh water out of fear of the river's contaminants.

But the story has more to it. The Clark Fork has always been central to people's lives in the valley – economically or physically, perhaps, but also emotionally and spiritually. Granted, it may be a sort of love-hate relationship: the same culture that has so consistently and violently degraded and disregarded the river's health has produced individuals and communities that value it so enormously.

Above all, the pieces in this collection are written testimony to the complexity of this relationship. They come from a variety of sources: local newspapers and public records, personal and family histories, books by authors living and dead, published and

private memoirs. But all of them help shed light on that elusive connection between people and place, between people and rivers—a connection that goes beyond livelihood, beyond economics, and beyond physical proximity, to another realm entirely—that of inspiration.

Can it be: The Clark Fork—the polluted, dam-choked, drawn-down, beaten-up Clark Fork—is actually *inspiring*? It appears that despite years of assault by the double-edged sword of abuse and neglect, we still value this river. We are drawn to it for some reason, however mystifying; we crave a fix, it would seem, of what the river possesses. We go there seeking some intangible, magic combination of sight, sound and feeling that strikes an equally intangible part of us, a magic that has been the subject of songs as long as there have been singers, of poems and prayers since there were people to write and speak them.

But the question remains: what *is* it about a river, the Clark Fork or another, that inspires? What is it that calms us, cleans us, pacifies us, and renews us so that we feel better, somehow, just having been near it? Perhaps this: it is reassurance, however conscious or subliminal, however false or true, of nothing less than life enduring. In times of joy or despair, flood or drought, a river is a kind of mirror, reflecting at once our memories and our shame and our hope for the future. Just as a dry riverbed is somehow heartbreaking, haunting, a flowing river is a promise; it promises us that the world is going on, that life is going on, in essence, that *we* are going on. And that, absolutely, is a story worth telling.

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