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Subdividing Eden: Land use and change in the Bitterroot Valley 1930-1998

E. Duke Richey

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Subdividing Eden  
Land Use and Change in the Bitterroot Valley  
1930-1998

By  
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B.A. The University of the South, 1990

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The Bitterroot Valley (Ravalli County) of Montana is an example of the American West as Eden fallacy that has been a part of the American imagination since the first white settlers arrived in the 19th century. Although Meriwether Lewis said that the Bitterroot was a poor and stoney land, later settlers to the valley tried to make agriculture work on a large scale. Massive sheep herds and heavy logging, as well as a real estate boom built around the idea of growing apples with the use of large scale irrigation, led to a landscape in the 1920's that was quite different than the landscape inhabited by the Salish people prior to the 1840's when the Jesuits established St. Mary's mission. It is my thesis that the land in the valley was not conducive to the modes and the scale of land use that would be employed in the valley for many years. It was inevitable that land use and ownership patterns changed.

During the Depression, times were hard for most people in the valley. Some folks turned to cattle rustling, while others left the valley to find work. Others remained and survived as best they could. Following America's entry into World War II, farmers across the nation entered a decade of prosperity. In the Bitterroot Valley, the demand for agricultural products, namely beef, combined with ten years of above-average rain to allow farmers to prosper through the '40s and into the '50s. The average size of farms increased as the number of farm workers decreased. As wartime demands fell off in the early '50s, though, ranchers and farmers started exploring other ways to fund their operations.

Throughout the '70s and into the 1980's, the number of American farms decreased greatly. In the Bitterroot, the land rich and cash poor farmers had the option of subdividing their lands and selling to newcomers. The growth was unplanned and largely unregulated, so that by the 1990's the environmental problems that came with land use change were serious issues.
Acknowledgements

Two years ago I applied for a grant from the Matthew Hansen Endowment to do some oral history work in the Bitterroot Valley. I wanted to hear people's stories of how the land had been used in the valley over time. I thought it might be useful to use these stories, people's perceptions of land use history in the valley, in some sort of analysis of land use in the valley today. In short, I wondered why some people in the Bitterroot were against planning and if it had something to do with land use in the past. Although I won a grant from the endowment, and did a number of interviews that were very useful to this project, this paper has evolved into more of a bibliographic historical piece about land use and change in the recent past.

In what I feel has to be some force greater than irony, the person who has ended up helping me the most in this project has been Matthew Hansen. When I applied for the Hansen grant, I didn't know a thing about him, and admittedly, know little more now, except that he was a promising young student, with interests very similar to my own, and that he died young. One thing I do know now, is that Montana historians working on twentieth-century land use issues owe Hansen a great number of thanks. His oral history work at the Montana Historical Society in Helena is astonishing in both the number and quality of the interviews. There is a treasure trove of stories on those tapes, collecting dust, and waiting for people like me to put on the earphones and push the play button. In listening to these tapes, I was struck again and again at Hansen's abilities as a listener. He understood that silence was a good thing for people who were remembering aloud the hard times and troubling experiences that had defined their lives. He also understood that land use issues were at the heart of any understanding of Montana's people and their history. His interviews with old timer farmers and loggers in the Bitterroot brought the valley's past alive for me like nothing else could. I smelled horses and cigarettes, and tasted sawdust, and got goosebumps more than once. Listening to those tapes, hearing Hansen's silence, or perhaps his creaking chair as he leaned forward, as if to say, "I'm here. Tell me," listening to those tapes gave me hope that I could tell a fraction of this story; because, listening to Hansen's tapes made me realize that there was a story to tell. Those tapes were full of them, and for this reason, I thank you, Matthew Hansen, wherever you are.

Thanks also to all the people I interviewed, the B&B Dawson Environmental Scholarship Award committee, my thesis committee of Don Snow (who edited this piece
with the precision that only professional editors like himself possess), Dan Flores, and Fletcher Brown, and to Tom Roy, who turned me onto this idea in the first place.

I also want to thank my family. The amount of money my parents have put into schooling me could have had them retired on a beach many years ago. But beaches aren't nearly as important to them as their sons, and I am grateful for the opportunities they have given me. As well, I thank my wife, Sarah, for taking care of me through it all, proofreading everything, making me laugh, and encouraging me to stay home and work this winter when I really wanted to go with her to Snobowl.
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Introduction:

The American West as Eden

Sad to say, they make me admit, when I face them, that the West is no more the Eden that I once thought it than the Garden of the World that the boosters and engineers tried to make it; and that neither nostalgia nor boosterism can any longer make a case for it as the geography of hope.

Wallace Stegner
_The American West as Living Space_, 1986.

When Adam lived in Eden, he lived off the bounty of nature. After he sinned, his conditions of employment took a turn for the worse: he had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. If the fall from Eden had followed the patterns of Western American history, Adam would have carried a further burden: he would have sold the crops he produced at an unpredictable, often disappointing price—or he would have worked for wages.

Patricia Nelson Limerick
_The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West_, 1987

The metaphor of the American West as Eden, offered here by two of the region's more perceptive thinkers, indicates that, in the very least, the idea does not lack significance. Even the neophyte student of history in the West notices early on that the things Stegner mentions—boosterism, engineering, nostalgia, and hope—are very much an integral part of the story Limerick succinctly outlines with the words “nature,” “sweat,” “burden,” “unpredictable,” “disappointing,” and “wages.” In the history of the West, words that on first glance seem positive very often become buried in the more
negative syntax of history’s reality. Engineering becomes burdensome, boosterism becomes sweat, riches become mere wages, and more often than not, hope becomes disappointment. It is not hocus pocus, smoke-and-mirrors magic that takes dreams of the perfect place and transforms them into failure. Simply put, the dreams of what the West can be fall short of the Edenic visions, because the West is not Eden. It is not wet enough. The West is a hard place, as Stegner says, dry and rough, where there is “a way of warping well-carpentered habits, and raising the grain on exposed dreams.”¹ The region’s wettest places, places like the Bitterroot Valley, are still plagued with problems uniquely Western. Much of the precipitation comes in the form of snow, and the cold weather has been known to ruin crops after farmers thought the year’s final freeze was long gone.

It is a depressing story, the tale of real human beings attempting to make the dry land bloom, and it has been told over and over, again and again, from John Wesley Powell’s 1878 *Lands of the Arid Regions of the West*, to Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains* (1931), through the present day in the works of Donald

Worster, Marc Reisner, and Charles Wilkinson. Many readers of Western history tire of hearing it: that treating the earth as a commodity and using technology to do it quickly explain the West’s current problems. Nevertheless, more stories need to be told, because the myth of the West as Eden is more prominent today than perhaps ever before. Stegner may have been right that the West can no longer be an idyllic geography of hope, but it doesn’t have to get any worse, either. Today’s Western Eden doesn’t involve gold, silver, uranium, wheat, or apples. Instead, the modern Edens are lifestyle gardens, where families and retired couples might spend a breakfast together looking out at snow-covered mountains from the warmth of their own log home. It is significant as well that the homes are in a land where tradition holds that nobody, especially government, tells the owners what they can and cannot do with their own property.

Although it is a clichéd image, it is true. It is also true that the West is still not the perfect place to practice agriculture.

The Bitterroot Valley of Montana is a perfect modern example of the Edenic fallacy. For more than 150 years the Bitterroot has had its boosters and engineers, and for just as long, the valley has been

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2 See Worster’s *Rivers of Empire* and *Dust Bowl*, Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*, and Wilkinson’s *Crossing the Next Meridian*. 
an unpredictable and hard place to live. Ravalli County, which encompasses nearly all of the Bitterroot River watershed, is the fastest growing county in the state, yet it consistently has high unemployment and below average incomes. Much of the county’s growth has to do with one simple fact: for whatever idyllic reasons, people want to live there. But the valley is becoming less idyllic for some people, as its open spaces are being subdivided and developed without zoning or planning laws, and its air and water are dirtied. In addition, with environmental change comes obvious cultural and social change.

In this thesis, I will look at the recent history of the valley, and the changes it has gone through in the last seventy years. It is true, as one Montana geographer has written, that “Montana’s Anglo population (which constitutes the vast majority of the state’s non-Native-American population) spent its first 60 years initially occupying the state and the last 70 years adjusting to its limitations.”3 In this paper is the story of the adjustment. Since white settlement, people in the Bitterroot Valley have attempted to get more from the land than the land was capable of providing. The

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valley's marginal soils and limited amount of water were things that many never considered as major factors in turning the valley into an agricultural paradise. Irrigation and clever crop selection would skirt around nature. Perhaps Bitterrooters felt that since the valley was such a beautiful place, life there had to be easy. It was simply a matter of figuring out what worked. Bitterrooters ran large numbers of livestock, practiced unsustainable logging, and have yet to employ an effective land-use-planning process. All are part of the ongoing process of adjustment, which for many Bitterrooters over the last twenty-years, has involved subdividing the land and selling it off in pieces.

Why focus only on the last seventy years? Although the pre-Anglo history and the history of the valley since settlement (1841) are obviously important in comprehending why the land, economy, and social fabric of the valley are the way they are, the earlier history will receive brief review here due to time constraints, and will be examined in greater detail at a later date. Furthermore, for my purposes in describing how the Bitterroot has developed through the present, the last seventy years offer important questions that deserve in-depth analysis. Besides the fact that the valley is
beautiful, why did the growth-induced changes that are so obvious today happen in the first place? And why, if a place is not a perfect garden of ecological and cultural purity, is it offered as such until ruination and despair remove all doubt that it was ever Eden in the first place?

The historical record provides clues.
Salish legend has it that once upon a time Coyote started home toward the Bitterroot Valley from the Lochsa country with Salmon on his back. The streams on the west side of the Bitterroots, in what is today called Idaho, were full of the great pink fish, and Coyote had gone there to bring Salmon to his people on the Montana side. Just below Lolo Pass, Coyote was exhausted from his journey and stopped to rest. Salmon, whom he had wrapped in grasses to keep moist, slipped from Coyote’s back and flopped down the side of the mountain. Coyote chased Salmon, but eventually gave up on retrieving him and headed home empty-handed. Salmon would remain west of the jagged peaks forever. This was how Lolo Pass and Lolo Creek, which originates at the pass, came to be known as tumsumcli in the Salish language, which translates in English to “no salmon.”

In the Fall of 1805, after having passed the “intolerable rout” to tumsumcli with a great effort that left the “Party and horses much

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fatigued,” Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark headed down the same path Coyote had attempted to climb up. The results, along this trail to and from the Bitterroot Valley, were similar in outcome for the Corps of Discovery as for the hero of Salish legend. Near the Montana-Idaho border, several horses tumbled down the mountain like the salmon off Coyote’s back. “The one which Carried my desk & Small trunk,” Clark wrote, “Turned over & rolled down a mountain for 40 yards & lodged against a tree, broke the Desk the horse escaped and appeared but little hurt Some others very much hurt...”5 It was rough country across the routes leading into and out of the Bitterroot, and the historical record is full of stories that indicate as much.

Today, the four main pathways in and out of the valley challenge travelers. Skalkaho Pass on the east side is closed in winter, while Lolo and Lost Trail Passes, to the west and south, can afford questionable travel on any given day between October and April (See Figure 1). Nearly two hundred years after Lewis and Clark’s mishap in the mountains to the west of the valley, the only relatively easy way to enter and exit the Bitterroot Valley in all

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seasons is via Highway 93’s long turn to Missoula from the north, and even that stretch of road has come to be known as one of Montana’s least user-friendly.

The natural barriers that make mountain valleys across the West postcard scenic are what have made, and continue to make, the valleys so hard to enter and leave. On the west side of the Bitterroot Valley are the Bitterroot Mountains, a line of snow-capped, jagged peaks and picturesque canyons stretching the entire eighty-five mile length of the valley. The Bitterroots are the mountains that Coyote and Lewis and Clark crossed with so much difficulty. On the eastern side, fifteen miles across the valley at its widest spot, are the benches, or rolling hills, that give way to the Sapphire Range. The Sapphires are an equally long, but less dramatic range that in any other place would form an incredible backdrop to mountain living. In the valley, though, the Sapphires seem destined to play second fiddle to the virtuoso talent of the namesake range. The geologic irony is that the rolling hills at the base of the Sapphires were once atop the Bitterroots. Indeed, the bulk of both ranges is essentially the same type of rock—a batholith of granite that was formed by magmatic (volcanic) processes deep underground, then uplifted. Both ranges
are the eastern-most pieces of a large formation geologists call the Idaho Batholith. Having slid off the Bitterroots like the top of a cake that has been tilted, the top layer of the batholith covered fifty miles after crashing and crumbling eastward. Today, the easternmost edge of the slab, what geologists call the Sapphire Block, makes up the Anaconda-Pintlar, Garnet, and Flint Creek ranges, all of which are visible beyond the Sapphires to the east from any high point in the valley.  

After the uplift and toppling formation of the Idaho Batholith (Bitterroots) and the Sapphire Block (Sapphires), the valley between the two ridges spent millions of years as tropical rainforest and desert before the onset of ice ages 2.5 million years ago. During that time, glaciers formed in the Bitterroots, several of which reached the valley floor. As they advanced and retreated, the glaciers picked apart the mountains, leaving the scraped and polished look that makes them so picturesque. Millions of years after their formation, the drama captured in the shaping of the range would be of great significance. Pressed against a blue sky in early summer, when patches of snow cover the highest points, these mountains are the

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6 David Alt. *Roadside Geology of Montana*. Missoula: Mountain Press, 1986. Words such as “batholith” and “magmatic” are well defined in Robert L. Bates and Julia A. Jackson’s *Dictionary of Geological Terms*. 
kind one can look at all day. The Bitterroots are mountains that people love to frame with living room windows.

Periodically, perhaps three times between the first and last glaciers, the valley filled with water, then drained, leaving deep deposits of porous sediments one would expect to find in a country dominated by granitic glaciated structures—rock ground to fist sized stones, and smaller pebbles, gravels, and sands. The fill sediments that are today’s flat valley floor and benchlands are remnants of that activity, and it is their makeup that is most important when looking at agricultural possibilities in the Bitterroot Valley. Generally speaking, the agriculture in the valley has always been fairly limited, and the country’s rocky soils are the best explanation as to why. Even with irrigation and a moderate climate (both of which the valley have had since white settlement), the early legions of agriculturists to the valley underestimated the fact that the thin soils of the Bitterroot don’t retain enough of the valley’s already scarce water. Water moves from the sky, through the valley’s rocky ground,

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and down the Bitterroot River like it's going through a sieve. The soil retains little of the water.\(^8\)

Understanding the geology and soils of the valley is fundamental in any exploration of its history. Once one sees that what William Clark called “pore Stoney land” was exactly that, the valley’s long history of agricultural hardship makes sense. Moreover, the soils give clarity in an analysis of the valley’s modern era of growth and development as a lifestyle center for urban refugees and retirees. Just as the biblical wise men built their homes upon rock, the rocky soils of the Bitterroot Valley--soils that were never good for agriculture--have proven most functional as foundations for homes. Clearly, the soils never were those of a fertile Garden of Eden. One interesting indication is botanical: the once abundant Bitterroot flower (\textit{Lewisia rediviva}), for which the valley was named, is most often found in ecotones with well drained-soils made of gravel and sands.\(^9\)

Very few artifacts have been found to indicate the presence of anything more than a scattering of human individuals in the Bitterroot Valley prior to the eighteenth-century. Rock art, all of

\(^8\)Ibid.
which is clustered in the southern end of the valley near the passes at Skalkaho and Lost Trail, show shield-bearing human figures like those found on the Plains and in the Great Basin. Archeologists believe that the motifs, possibly dating as far back as 2,000 years ago, were the work of transients, rather than valley inhabitants. Perhaps the inaccessibility of the valley experienced by Lewis and Clark and others has something to do with the lack of artifacts indicating a human presence. Such a conjecture seems credible when one considers that the Big Hole to the southeast, the Snake River Plains to the southwest, and the wider plains to the east provided easier access and more abundant game for the early gathering and hunting peoples of the region. The Bitterroot Valley was less ideal to people with access to more open areas; therefore, there is less evidence of inhabitation in prehistoric times than in other places in present day Montana.¹⁰

The introduction of the horse to the native peoples of the West changed everything in the region. The people who would become the Bitterroot Salish (the name the tribe prefers to the commonly used “Flathead”) were the easternmost of a number of Salish-speaking

peoples. The band of interrelated people lived in an area that extended from the coasts of the Pacific Northwest to about twenty-five miles east of present day Helena, Montana.\textsuperscript{11} Archeological evidence of the geographical movements of the Salish people supports the culture's oral tradition. The Salish say that before moving to the Bitterroot Valley, they had inhabited lands to the east. John Fahey estimates that the Salish acquired horses from the Shoshoni sometime between 1700-1730, and that according to tribal tradition, soon after the acquisition they were forced to move to the Bitterroot Valley. The reason for the move is not exactly clear, but two reasons are supported in Salish stories and the historical record. Fahey sums it up nicely when he says that the Salish were pushed into

\begin{quote}
the enveloping Bitterroot where high mountains and narrow passes partially protected them from pestilence carried up the Missouri and Columbia Rivers and from Blackfoot raiders skulking from the buffalo plains of the Upper Missouri and the Saskatchewans.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In addition to protection, the Bitterroot Valley provided ample grasses for the increasing herds of horses the Salish were

accumulating through a growing understanding of equine care and breeding. The Salish burned Bitterroot prairies to replenish the grasses. The move to the Bitterroot, though, did not fully protect the Salish from the Blackfeet. Blackfeet horse thieves made regular pilgrimages to steal from the superior Salish horse herds in the Bitterroot, and as late as 1852, trader John Owen witnessed the scalping of another white man by a Blackfeet warrior within plain view of his fort near present day Stevensville.

The Blackfeet threat was real, and it would lead directly to changes that would eventually see the Salish removed from the Bitterroot less than two hundred years after they had made it their home. The changes involved white men and their religion, modes of land use, and ideas of tenure. Between 1812 and 1820, the Iroquois Big Ignace LaMousse and others arrived in the Bitterroot with tales of men in Black Robes and their Great Spirit. They were speaking of Jesuits and the Christian God, but the Salish heard tales of magic. The black-robed men and their great spirit sounded inviting to the Salish, who were looking for any and all possible help in protecting

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12 Fahey, p.6.
themselves from their hated Blackfeet enemies. The Black Robes were surely the answer. By 1839, Big Ignace and eight others had been killed in an eight-year-long effort to reach the Jesuits in St. Louis with the request to send the Salish a priest of their own.

Finally, in 1840, Father Pierre-Jean deSmet arrived for a brief stay in the valley. The next year he returned with two other priests and several lay brethren, including a blacksmith and a carpenter. They built St. Mary's mission, a pine stockade with corner guard houses and a centerpiece church made of cottonwood logs. DeSmet would introduce the Salish to agriculture and beef production. By the spring of 1842, he had traveled 300 miles to Ft. Colville and returned with potatoes, wheat, oats, carrot and onion seed, as well as Montana's first cattle.15 Later, Father Ravalli built the first sawmill, creating his sawteeth from the salvaged iron of an old wagon wheel.16 By 1850 a small number of adventurous men had discovered the Bitterroot Valley and the Jesuit mission there, and had begun using the valley's bunch grasses to fatten cattle in a trade scheme utilizing the Oregon Trail: one strong animal would be exchanged for two sore-footed cattle. The sore-foots were wintered in the Bitterroot and returned to

the trail the next year, rested and stronger. The Anglo oral tradition in the valley indicates that the bunch grasses in the early era were something to behold. Through their use of fire, the Salish had a hand in the richness of the grasses, and were heavily involved in the trail trade. In November of 1850 the Jesuits sold the mission for $250 to one of the traders, the aforementioned John Owen, who reported in 1857 that the Salish had 4,000 horses and 1,000 cattle.

What happened next provides a case study in how the American West changed so quickly in the nineteenth-century. In the same year of 1857 that Owen inventoried the Salish livestock, James and Granville Stuart discovered gold about sixty miles northeast of Fort Owen at Benetsee Creek, which they renamed Gold Creek. By 1860 the first steamboat had arrived at Fort Benton on the Missouri River, and by 1863, a road constructed by the U.S. Army stretched from Fort Benton to Walla Walla, Washington. Known as the Mullan Road, it passed through present-day Missoula. It was estimated that 20,000 people and a million dollars worth of freight would pass over

17 One description is of “rolling seas of Bunch Grass, more than knee high to a tall Indian.” Albert Groff collection in the Bitterroot Valley Historical Society file, SC 1053, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
the road by 1866.\textsuperscript{19} As K. Ross Toole put it, "the mountain region of Montana was really accessible for the first time."\textsuperscript{20} Since mining provided a ready market for local garden vegetables, wheat, and beef, the Bitterroot Valley was affected profoundly. Better roads allowed for increased transportation to the mining camps. With good roads, farming was a fairly profitable enterprise for the valley's few early settlers, including at least two former soldiers from the Mullan expedition.\textsuperscript{21} Mining camps had sprung up across the territory, and miners were hungry enough to pay absurd prices for a marginal product. Wheat that sold for $8 per hundred in the Bitterroot went for $98 per hundred in Montana's mining towns during the early 1860's, while eggs cost two dollars a dozen, and salt was $1.50 per pound.\textsuperscript{22} The production of these goods was possible in the Bitterroot.

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\underline{\textsuperscript{19} } Weisel, p. 72.
\underline{\textsuperscript{21} } Weisel's book profiles men who traded at Fort Owen, including several from the Mullan road building crew. Fred Burr (p.80), for example, who showed his creative streak in the naming of Fred Burr Creek, stayed in the Bitterroot after his service with Mullan. He eventually had 400 cattle, a small herd of horses, a Salish wife, and a tipi, until selling out and moving to Gold Creek. Once there, Burr and his wife built a house for the price of 2 horses and fifty pounds of flour, which indicates the importance of flour in the area's mining camps. Other people followed the reverse route of Burr. Robert Nelson, for example, came to Gold creek from Illinois in 1862. He left there and moved to the Bitterroot in 1865 to begin farming. It might be assumed that Nelson was able to save enough money from his three years of labor to make this move. He undoubtedly heard about the Bitterroot from the freighters who delivered flour, beef, and produce to the mining camps. Robert Nelson papers, SC 577, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
\end{flushleft}
nestled in the few spots with better soils on the alluvial fans at the bottoms of creeks. Furthermore, the earliest farmers along the creeks had all the water they needed because there was no competition for the resource.

What mining activity existed in the Bitterroot during the early days consisted of small-scale placer mining. Not until the late 1880’s and early ‘90’s would any significant operations exist in the mountains surrounding the valley, then many of those, such as the Gibbonsville mines, were across the Idaho border in the Salmon River drainage. One local valley history claims that the White Cloud mine, up Eight Mile Creek toward the Sapphires in the Florence area, mined gold and silver between 1887 and 1896. At its height, the mine may have employed 60 or more people, many of them Chinese. The Curlew and Elizabeth silver mines, up Big Creek near Victor, saw the most intensive mining in the valley’s history. By 1890, seventy-five men worked two ten-hour shifts to produce twenty tons of concentrated ore a week that was shipped elsewhere for smelting. The impacts mining had on the surrounding forests were significant. Photographs of the mine show piles of logs and eroded hillsides. Although a diversion flume of water from Big Creek powered the
concentrating mill, wood was used to support the mine adits as they advanced further into the hillsides.23

While agriculture provided the valley’s first link to the state’s mines, it would be the interconnection between wood products and the extraction of minerals that would cause the greatest impacts in the years prior to the turn of the century. Once placer mining gave way to shafts and a mining industry dependent on labor and technology, the forests along the river bottoms and foothills of the valley (and therefore, the water quality in the valley) were altered drastically. Wood was needed to support mine shafts, most of them more than a hundred miles away in Butte, then later to fire the ovens that smelted ores in Anaconda. John McKinney, who came to the north end of the Bitterroot from Virginia in 1890, two years before the Northern Pacific spur line reached Darby, remembered watching loggers float trees to the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. sawmill in Hamilton. The trees, cut along the east and west forks of the Bitterroot, were ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*). “In them

days,” McKinney said, “they only cut the biggest, finest trees, and those near the river.”

The easy timber in the Bitterroot had been taken out by the 1880’s. By the time the train came to Darby in 1892, whatever timber had been hard to reach earlier was removed with precision. Nearly everything was gone by the turn of the century. By 1904, the whine of the Hamilton mills was quieted when the Bonner Mill east of Missoula expanded and logging operations moved up the Blackfoot River. Extensive logging in the Bitterroot Valley was done for forty years. The legacy of such rapacious action on the land would just begin to make its mark, though, for the very headwaters of the Bitterroot River, lifeblood for valley farmers, had undergone important changes. As trees were floated down the Bitterroot River, soil stability went down the river with them. In addition, the logging operations had left what they didn’t want scattered and piled along the ground. The piles of felled trees and underbrush were unplanned mounds of fuel for forest fire. As McKinney put it: “The loggers wasn’t asked to pile their brush, or clean up underbrush, or anything, and there was lots of dangerous forest fires. There was mighty little

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attention paid to fire protection." The year 1910 indicated that
McKinney was correct. Fires were so thick in the surrounding
mountains in August that on some days people in the valley were
using headlamps to see at mid-afternoon.

The effects logging had on the valley were staggering, not only
in the amount of soil loss and erosion, but also to wildlife. The
historical record provides clues that point to a series of fluctuations
in wildlife populations in the valley as early as 1805. The period
following the logging operations at the end of the nineteenth-century
appear to be a high point in fluctuating bell curves of abundance and
scarcity. Lewis and Clark found relatively little game in the valley
and were under the impression that the Indians there had little food
other than berries and roots. Things were not much different by
the time deSmet arrived. Neither the Jesuits nor Owen describe the

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16 Ibid., McKinney.
examination of the 1910 fires across the Montana-Idaho region, as well as the impact these fires played in
changing National Forest fire policy, see chapter 10 in Bud Moore's The Luchsu Story: Land Ethics In the
18 See Moulton, pp. 187-91. Clark’s entry for September 4, 1805, mentions the Corps’ first meeting with
the Salish, who were “friendly but nothing but berries to eate.” After eating more berries and roots the next
morning (the 5th), Clark mentions no more food until the next day, when he wrote “nothing to eat but
berries, our flour out, and but little corn, the hunters killed but two pheasants only...” Finally, after
entering descriptions of the valley as a stony land full of prickly pear, Clark bagged a “prarie fowl” near
what is today Stevensville, while another member of the party killed a deer. It was not until camped at Lolo
Creek, when they killed four deer, four ducks, and three birds that the men ate well, as they had been
accustomed traveling across the Plains.
Valley as a game-filled paradise. Salish hunters were constantly leaving the valley in search of meat. Then a curious thing happened. Settlers who came to the valley in the days after the gold rush began describing abundance. Fred Edwards, a freighter to the Gibbonsville mining camp in Idaho during the 1890's, said that the Ross' Hole area in the upper valley contained herds of hundreds of elk, and that there were thousands of deer. Moose, he remembered, were "in every swamp and in the brush" of the valley. Another settler, born in Stevensville in 1880, recalled a scene from her childhood there that is an abrupt reminder that the lower end of the valley, for some time, used to be quite different. There were bears all over the place, she said. They were "in the timber near the river and they would come at night and kill the little pigs, calves, and even milch cows." On one occasion, five of the "brown bears" were killed in one night and their skins were hung on the main street of Stevensville. The repugnant smell of the skins was enough to send teams of horses rearing and turning down wind.

There are several possible explanations for an increased animal presence in the valley at the close of the nineteenth-century. First,

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the intensive logging in the 1880-90's may have been significant in driving some animals into the lower parts of the valley. Ponderosa pines are fire resistant, and without fire suppression, usually maintain an understory of shrubs that help wildlife thrive. Moose, for example, love red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*), as do beaver, elk and deer. Black bear, deer, and elk also find western snowberry (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis*), another understory species in the habitat type, palatable. If the pine is logged off, the understory species will be replaced with species of less palatable plants such sagebrush and rabbitbrushes, interspersed with impenetrable brambles of snowberry and other species.31 In addition, to the vegetational changes that took place around the valley as pine was logged, undesirable scrap trees were left in piles, creating a landscape more difficult for ungulates to browse. Under less than ideal circumstances in the higher elevations, animals moved toward the food. By the turn of the century, the best food sources were increasingly in the valley's bottom lands. Fields of oats and wheat were excellent energy sources, drawing increased herds of elk and

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deer into the vicinity of valley farms. Easily accessible food sources may have helped populations expand. In addition, smaller, slower farmyard animals like pigs and chickens were easy prey for bear, cats, and other predators, which had perhaps found quick Salish horses more difficult to kill.

With increased human populations also came an increase in hunters. Photographs from the period show two and three men with five and six white-tail deer hanging from trees by their hind legs. In 1900 each person could legally kill six deer a year in the Bitterroot forests, yet lack of enforcement meant that one could take more. At any rate, hunting pressures kept a check on populations, perhaps decreasing herd sizes. Such pressure, combined with the catastrophic fires of 1910 when the forests around the valley were scorched, must have caused populations to plummet. By 1912, elk numbers were so low in the Bitterroot that truckloads of the animals were shipped to the valley from Yellowstone National Park in order to replenish the area's herds.32

In 1866 an early settler to the Bitterroot named Thomas Harris planted the first fruit trees in the valley. As far as metaphors go, Harris’ action would prove to be a telling one. Just as Adam and Eve’s bite of the forbidden apple led to their loss of innocence, the faith that the people of the valley would put into growing apples by the turn of the century would render them perhaps more world-weary than they wished to be. The crash of the apple economy would eventually tell the world that the Bitterroot Valley was no agricultural paradise.

After railroad tracks were put down by the Northern Pacific in 1888 land sales in the valley took off. Mountainsides that had been covered in pine and had been thick with wildlife were now planted with apple trees. Real estate companies described the valley in Edenic terms for buyers interested in owning a profitable piece of Montana.

After mining tycoon Marcus Daly built his mansion in the 1890’s, developers used his name as proof that investment in the

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33 Harris also brought the first sheep into the valley nine years before in 1857. Fulkerson-Harris family information in the Bitterroot Valley Historical Society file, SC 1053, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
34 For an excellent explanation of the politics behind the coming of the Northern Pacific to both the Missoula and Bitterroot Valleys, see Shirley Jay Coon’s 1926 University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation. Zeisler (see footnote 39) is, of course, very informative in any and all aspects relating to the apple boom.
Bitterroot was a smart one. Real estate companies showed photographs of Daly's house. One picture was labeled "A PALATIAL HOME IN THE BITTERROOT VALLEY," as if the habitations of multimillionaires in the valley were common. Few people in the United States, though, could afford the 22,000 acres of prime river-bottom land Daly developed in the heart of the county as his show place and playground. He employed hundreds of people to breed and train his champion thoroughbred horses and bulls, grow magnificent gardens, or serve his famous guests. Laborers worked as carpenters, baled hay, sorted peas, or did a number of other available jobs.

Daly's influence on the valley is significant. By 1893, he paid 1/6 of all property tax in the Bitterroot and had initiated the drive to bring large scale irrigation to the eastern benches, spending $300,000 in the process: Unlike Daly, though, who possessed enormous wealth, most Bitterrooters were not able to manipulate their lands so dramatically. Upon Daly's death in 1900, one valley farmer wrote a letter to the Ravalli County Democrat that indicates

35 Photo in possession of author.
36 Toole's 1948 M.A. thesis from the University of Montana, "Marcus Daly: A Study of Business In Politics," as well as Ada Powell's self-published The Dalys of the Bitterroot give nice summaries of Daly's own efforts to create an Edenic valley for himself and the hundreds of men and women who worked for him on his Stock Farm.
Daly's influence on the valley was well understood by his contemporaries:

Mr. Daly was the great transformer of the Bitter Root valley. I cannot enter into details. It is only by comparing the condition of our valley now with what it was when Mr. Daly came to it, that we can realize the surprising changes that have taken place since that time. To a far greater extent than anyone else in our valley he has made the "desert to blossom as the rose." I cannot undertake to catalogue the improvements he has made; they are too numerous; most of them are admirable. Nothing in the way of needed improvements seemed too large or too costly for him to undertake. His splendid ditches alone will remain a monument to his memory for generations to come.38

Due in large part to promotional efforts, some of which utilized Daly's name, the valley would boast 350,000 fruit trees by 1900.39 In 1909, the promoters were still trying to sell the image of an agricultural Eden. The following paragraph from one company's promotional pamphlet serves as an excellent example:

On the West side is the majestic main range of the Bitter Root Mountains, while on the East is the secondary range of the Hellgate Mountains. Completely hemmed in and sheltered from heavy winds and rough weather, it seems as though the Creator had taken special pains to protect this gem of His genius and make of it an ideal home for

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38 R. Parkurst, letter to the editor, Ravalli County Democrat, November 21, 1900: p.1.
mankind, where Mother Earth shall yield her fruits and grains in abundance and neither extreme heat nor cold shall annoy.⁴₀

It was obvious before long that such efforts at selling the valley had brought changes. As newcomers moved in, veteran Bitterrooters prepared for what was sure to be an onslaught of activity in the latest land boom. The words of Arthur Stone, written in 1911, fairly summarize the state of the Bitterroot just sixty years after the Jesuits had sold St. Mary’s to John Owen:

Within four years the Bitter Root valley has nearly doubled in acreage. It has not stopped growing. There will presently be acres farmed which are now absolutely wild. The growth of the valley will continue—don’t make any mistake about that. As I journeyed over the old trail this week, I was especially interested in noting that the timber line is being crowded back. Grain fields and orchards lie away up on the hillsides and are extending their line of advance each month. The boom of the dynamite as it blasts the stumps from the old woodland is heard regularly. The pall of the smoke from the fires which are clearing the brushland is the banner of the advancing line of cultivation. The spirit of progress is everywhere at work.⁴¹

The spirit of progress, though, was falsely rooted in what proved to be more a bushel of lies and wishful thinking than a

bushel of apple profits. A massive and serpentine irrigation ditch, sections of which required dynamite to cross fields too rocky to dig, stretched the entire length of the valley.\textsuperscript{42} A photograph in one promotional magazine showed the river, a railroad track, and an empty concrete ditch littered with rock that had fallen from an eroded hillside. The caption of the picture read: “A Pretty View Including Part of a Large Irrigating Ditch.”\textsuperscript{43} The ditch proved to be the snake in the Montana Eden known as the Bitterroot Valley. Once miscalculations in construction and repair costs, as well as deliverable acre feet of water, were realized, nothing short of overnight climate change could fix the situation. By World War I, the companies that had led the development were bankrupt, and the apple boom had gone bust. Left in the dust were abandoned farm houses, row after row of scarecrow apple trees, and that concrete and wooden flume of a snake that had bitten the entire valley.

In his book, \textit{Twentieth-Century Montana: A State of Extremes}, Toole gives a telling glimpse of the state of one Bitterroot farmer after the apple boom during the World War I years. In 1918, Victor

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\textsuperscript{42} Agricultural engineer H. E. Murdock’s “Blasting Ditches”, Circular 55, Montana State Agricultural College Experiment Station (Bozeman, 1916) explains (and documents with photographs) the process of creating irrigation ditches with explosives.
\textsuperscript{43} O. W. Kerr Co., p. 40.
\end{flushright}
Brown sat before the Ravalli County Liberty Loan Council that had been formed to question the loyalty of men and women like him who had not contributed to the patriotic Liberty drives. The drives were serious, with local newspaper ads saying, “A bond shirker is an enemy to humanity and liberty, a traitor and a disgrace to his country.” In an example of what Toole called “appalling evidence of the grossest invasions of privacy on a massive scale,” Brown was asked whether he planned to buy War Savings Stamps or contribute to the War Service League. After answering that he would be happy to when he was able, a member of the council said, “In other words you don’t feel you are able to do it until you pay all your debts.”

Brown’s reply:

Not all our debts; we deny ourselves a great many things we would like to have. We are living in a wreck of a house. The improvements on that place are in bad condition.

The Council’s response: “In other words you are looking toward your own comfort all the time?”

Brown’s trip before the Council speaks volumes about Ravalli County in 1918. In addition to the fact that patriotism and war

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fervor had brought members of a relatively small community to question each other's loyalty publicly, it is quite clear that small farmers were suffering financial hardships at a time when war surpluses had brought many of the nation's farmers a mediocre level of prosperity.

The transcript Toole gives of the County Council interrogation provides an interesting piece of contradictory evidence to the company literature from a few years earlier that praises the merits of agriculture in the same Bitterroot Valley. Promotional literature, such as that quoted above, with its talk of the "Creator" making an "ideal home" with "fruits and grains in abundance," paints a picture of the valley that sounds nothing like Victor Brown's home of hardship, poverty, embarrassment, and hand-to-mouth survival. The apple boom promoters' ability to attract gullible men and women may have been the reason men like Victor Brown were suffering. The crash of the apple companies had created a local depression at a time when Bitterroot farmers should have been able to capitalize on war prices. As one contemporary critic put it: "The census of 1920 shows agriculture at the height of prosperity for most sections of the
country, but the part of the Bitter Root Valley which was affected by
the orchard boom was already in a period of readjustment."45

In 1920, Carlton resident Verda Smith wrote a couple of letters
to friend Bertha Stiles in Spokane that make one thing clear: the
hardships suffered by Victor Brown two years before were shared
by others, and the problems were rooted in the land. Smith’s tone
implies that the person she is writing is familiar with places and
people in the valley, indicating that Stiles may be an example of one
of the many who left the valley between the world wars for a steady
job in Spokane, Seattle, and other regional cities.46 Most importantly,
though, Smith’s letter belies problems of a greater nature, and they
are problems that explain as succinctly as anything how land
ownership in the Bitterroot Valley began to take its current shape.
Verda Smith writes about her family’s inability to pay high property
taxes on poor agricultural lands that are “mostly a sand bar--not
good pasture.” “We have all had problems,” Smith writes, “since the
Betfreund ranches sold about three years ago for $37 an acre. Now
they insist that all the bottoms should be worth that. We own the

45 Sherman E. Johnson. Montana Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 220, “An Economic Analysis
46 For an explanation of dominant migration fields in the West, see John R. Borchert’s America’s Northern
Heartland: An Economic and Historical Geography of the Upper Midwest. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn.
‘Miles McCarty’ place down there and they have it down this year for $4,000. There are no improvements and it would be *impossible* to sell it for $2,500.” Then, as if to reemphasize the theme of hardship, Smith finishes by writing that “Little Lief King got a finger chopped off by Bud and the ax, but the Dr. sewed it on and they are trying to save it.” Two and half months later, Smith put it to Stiles bluntly: “We are sure going to the dogs.” Then, in January of 1921, Smith gives a view of the future of the Bitterroot. “You asked about the Whites,” Smith writes. “They bought the Durnford place, had it plotted and planted in tracts and have all but 40 acres sold to eastern parties. None have come to live on there yet”. The Whites would be one of the earliest of many valley families to see subdivision as the answer to their problems, for unlike little Lief King’s finger, no doctor could perform a miracle in fixing the damage done to the farmer’s hand by any taxman’s ax. Selling out would eventually prove a better option than starvation for a majority of Bitterroot Valley farmers.

By 1930 the mountains surrounding the Bitterroot Valley had cast their shadows on many: rock artists from the prehistoric, the Salish people and their horses, Lewis and Clark, Jesuits priests, John

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47 Excerpts of the correspondence between Smith and Stiles can be found in the local history *More Bitterroot Memories, 1930-1976: A Bicentennial Publication of the Florence Community*, 1976: pp. 64-
Owen, Victor Brown, Verda Smith, little Lief King, and countless others. The people, all of whom had crossed challenging paths to enter and leave the valley, either by foot, horse, train, or automobile, had changed the Bitterroot as players in the long attempt to make it something it was never meant to be: a paradise for men and women earning a living from the ground. Where there had been bear and elk, there were now sheep and cattle; bunch grass had given way to fire, then wheat or less nutritious invader species; the dry scrub benches were now a graveyard of lifeless apple trees; and the creeks and rivers had been pooled and diverted, adjudicated and flumed. Most importantly, though, where there had once been few people, there were now thousands, and all of them sought a way to eat and be sheltered in a place where neither came easy.

Many people—Bertha Stiles among them, perhaps—realized there were easier places to make it than the Bitterroot Valley, so they packed up and left. Some were forced out, such as in the case of the Salish, who were removed north to the Jocko Valley in 1891.\textsuperscript{48}

And yet others, groups of a different breed of men and women,

\textsuperscript{46} Fahey gives a moving description of the actual removal, writing that the Salish “passed through a Bitterroot valley no longer Indian, but crossed by telegraph wires, dotted with brick buildings, its streams bridged by steel and timber, and its lands closed by wire and fencing” (p.254).
would come to the Bitterroot perhaps because of its rugged nature. They were the people--the "eastern parties," as Smith called them--who would buy the White's subdivided, marginal lands. They were also the people, indeed are the people, who get blamed today for changing the Bitterroot Valley. The Bitterroot Valley, though, was never destined to be farm land for more than a handful of fortunate families, and even the better off families didn't have it easy.

Something had to change. As I will show in the following chapters, what changed over the next sixty-five years were the two things that most obviously and realistically could change: land use and land tenure.
Two

Survival of the Largest

If ever there were times when it was apparent to the folks who lived in the Bitterroot Valley that their backs were against a wall, it must have been the five years leading to the Great Depression. Although the metaphorical wall of economic hardship existed nearly everywhere after the collapse of the national economy, men and women in the Bitterroot Valley, once they realized that leaving home was as futile as staying, must have felt their backs especially pressed. For certain, the mountains surrounding the valley were impressive; nonetheless, the view of those wall-like peaks, as seen on a harsh winter night or a dry summer afternoon, instilled little hope of safe passage. In the case of the Bitterroot, the wall of economic hardship was simply constructed. Its foundation was an ideology, summed up best, perhaps, by Joseph Kinsey Howard when he wrote that Montana’s biggest problem historically has been the peoples’ inability to grasp the notion that “you can fit your economy to nature
but you can’t fit nature to your economy.”⁴⁹ In the years leading up to 1930 we have seen several examples of such flawed philosophy in the valley, emphasized in the attempts to graze cattle and plant wheat on thin soils, distribute water over an eighty-mile area of rocky ground, and plant apple trees while cutting pine. The actions support the wall’s crossbeam, a wide, rough board painted with a clear message: an ecosystem stretched beyond its means is destructive for those who live in it.

By the Depression years, the ecosystem of the Bitterroot Valley had definitely been stretched beyond its means. Most of the big trees had been taken from the forests surrounding the valley, as had the capacity for those forests to retain water. Lack of shade during the winter months meant that snow melted away quickly, so that there was more water in the spring and early summer run-off. Farmers were getting less of what they needed when they needed it the most at the dry end of summer. In addition, by 1935 there were upwards of 50,000 sheep and more than 30,000 cattle eating the grasses in the valley and on the hills.⁵⁰ In the uplands on the benches, what had

been lands covered in blue-bunch wheatgrasses knee-high to an Indian, rough and Idaho fescues, or green and Columbia needlegrasses, were now patched together with sagebrush, rabbitbrushes, and other mostly impalatable weeds. In addition, overgrazing added to erosion, as there was less and less vegetation to retain the valley's marginal soils. It should be remembered that all of this action happened in a valley that was questionable as far as large scale agriculture was concerned.

As we have seen in the history of the valley up to the Depression era of the 1920's and 1930's, the wall of hardship was not erected overnight. In simple words, the wall, our billboard of understanding, shows that the Depression in the Bitterroot Valley was in full effect years before the abrupt events of October, 1929.

In the late summer of 1924, Sam Billings, a Forest Service ranger in the area of the West Fork of the Bitterroot River, gained an inkling as to the desperate condition of the people in the Darby area, which was the traditional center of logging activity in the valley. The residents of the once forested upper end of the valley were upon hard times now that there were few trees to cut, and even fewer tree

cutting jobs. Many of them were out of work and hungry. The Forest Service had closed the Pinkham Creek drainage in August of that year due to drought conditions and a well-founded fear that the people living around the West Fork would violate the closure and set the forest ablaze, as some of them had in previous years. One immediately wonders why people in such hard times would add injury to the insult of poverty, but within the question lies the answer. As seen in chapter one, by the turn of the century, there were no more trees to cut, yet plenty of brush to burn. Forest fires meant fire fighting jobs. Jobs meant food. Food meant survival during hard times in a hard land. The people, Billings pointed out years later in an interview, were “poverty stricken most of their lives, and no better off with the land in Pinkham drainage. The soil was white clay, too acid, and in dry summers, there was no water for irrigation.” That summer, fires were started, and the Forest Service was forced to set up seven camps around the area to maintain the closure. Billings went off on horseback, rifle at his side, in order to enforce the policy. After two arrests, threats were made and tensions mounted. Billings returned to his camp one night to find a note that minced few words: “You get to hell out of here or we will shoot up
your camp." After the threat, Billings slept nights with a gun under his pillow until the autumn rains came and nature helped him and the federal government narrowly avert a fire-charred, and perhaps, bloody disaster.52

There were other cases elsewhere in the valley that indicate that the 1920's were less than roaring for Bitterrooters. Fred Wilkerson, a Darby area logger and sawmill worker most of his life, remembered many people leaving the valley during the decade. For some, life outside the valley was less of a challenge than staying put. Wilkerson went to Boise for seven years and didn't return to his home in the Darby area until the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created dam construction and highway jobs in the 1930's, and the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. (ACM) came in later "to log the rest" of what they had left earlier in the century. Wilkerson pieced together work where he could, including jobs with the WPA and ACM. When asked if times had been rough, Wilkerson answered without hesitation: "I'll say it was."53 Fred Thorning, another long time Darby area resident, described the Depression years as a time

52 Ceri Breen. "Sam Billings: Forest ranger of the old school." Ravalli Republic Profiles 78, March 31, 1978, 76a. Billings also mentions a time in the summer of 1940 when people of the Darby area were again thought to have set fires for similar reasons--the need for work--near Painted Rock Dam.

when "lots of people lived on spuds and gravy and wild meat."54

Darby, though, with its disgruntled lumberjacks, wasn't the only part of the Bitterroot facing hard times prior to the 1930's. At the other end of the valley, near Lolo, the Maclay brothers, both ranchers, also remembered challenging times. More than a few valley residents turned to cattle and horse stealing in order to survive. Some of the livestock was stolen for resale, while other animals were quickly butchered in their owners' fields. The meat was taken off into the night by some hungry man to feed his family. Most thieves, though, were profiteering rustlers. Forest Service fire lookouts often saw clouds of dust the rustlers stirred up with other peoples' livestock in their escapes to hideout areas in the interior of the mountains in Idaho, or in the Sapphires on the eastern side of the valley. The Maclays estimated that as late as the 1940's they lost fifty head of cattle in one year to what they referred to as beef cattle black marketers.

For the Maclays and other ranchers, there was a simple explanation for the hard times that led to all the thievery throughout the 1920's and even beyond. Lack of water and poor soils in the

54 Fred Thorning interview by Matthew Hansen, October 6, 1982. OH 429, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
valley made life tough for farmers. Without water, people could not
take care of their livestock, much less grow field crops. Mormon
Creek flowed right through the Maclay property, but it didn’t run
enough water to irrigate one acre. Lolo Creek was no better for
several years on end. Climate kept an already meager supply even
smaller than normal. When asked how they were able to make a
living on the land, David Maclay said, “we weren’t.”

It is important to note that the Maclay farm was large
(approximately 4,000 acres) and that the Maclays were considered
prosperous in the Bitterroot Valley by all who knew them. The
children were college-educated, and the family owned a house in
Missoula in addition to their Bitterroot spread. The Maclay brothers,
unlike many around them, managed to hang on to their lands by
making what living they could in Hamilton, Missoula, Portland,
Oregon, and as far away as Rochester, Minnesota. Along with their
sister Beth, they supplemented their family farm existence with
stints as diversified as that of small-scale logger, laboratory
bacteriologist, county fair organizer, Forest Service employee, and
Mayo Clinic researcher. In addition, they were able to bring in small
amounts of cash from a dozen milk cows, while their own chickens,
pigs, and a few lambs provided food for their family table. They
never once ate any of their own beef. With their large amount of
acreage, they were usually able to raise their own feed for livestock,
which saved a considerable amount of money. But times were still
hard. In fact, in the early 1930's, the Maclays lost their home in
Missoula, and were forced to sell off much of their livestock and
what small amount of wheat they had in order to keep their heads
above water. Even with 4,000 acres to use, David Maclay could
hardly find any decent land. “This is not a productive area,” he said
matter of factly, “it’s full of rock.”55

The Maclays and Fred Wilkerson, with their jobs outside the
valley, indicate the strapped nature of the valley’s economy. One
1939 study suggested that less than 2 percent of land in the valley
during the 1930’s was productive enough to provide for an average­
sized family of four. “There is an urgent need,” the report stated, “for
part-time work off the farm for a large dependent rural population
to supplement farm income.”56 Government records from the era

55 Interview with Sam and David Maclay, conducted in 1972 by K. Ross Toole and Jeffrey Safford, SC
1513, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
56 W. E. Pollinger. “Lands of Ravalli County, Montana, and Some Problems In Their Use and
Development.” Paper submitted at the Portland, Oregon hearing of the Joint Committee on Forestry,
Congress of the U.S., 1939: 9. Census job descriptions can be found in the 15th Census of the United
States: 1930, which is referenced in its entirety in footnote 58 below. Manufacturing jobs included
everything from bakers and glass blowers, to construction workers. Construction workers made up fully 13
confirm such pronouncements. In the 1935 agricultural census, 36.3 percent of the valley's 1,477 farms claimed income related to work off the farm, while 66 percent of that work was non-agricultural.\textsuperscript{57}

Five years earlier, in the 1930 census, the majority of non-farm jobs in the Bitterroot were in manufacturing (234 jobs), transportation (215 jobs), and wholesale and retail trade. There were more than twice the numbers of people in wholesale/retail trade (268 jobs) than in forestry/fisheries (127 jobs), which included loggers, forest rangers, scalers, and teamsters. Jobs in sawmills were included in manufacturing, but judging from the small number of lumbermen, it can be inferred that many of the manufacturing jobs were in industries other than forest products.\textsuperscript{58} Furthermore, the number of valley farms that were at least partially supported by money from jobs outside the valley (Missoula and elsewhere in the Northwest) is hard to say, but it was undoubtedly significant.

According to the census of 1930, there were about 2,300 people, age ten and over, engaged in agricultural work in the valley. The number made up 60 percent of the total labor force. No

\textsuperscript{57} U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1935.
unemployment figures are given, but Pollinger estimated that 16 percent of the valley’s population was dependent on some form of public relief by the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{59} It is quite feasible that many Bitterrooters had neither relief nor work, and simply chose to scrape along by any means necessary. Many of the agricultural workers, though, as noted above, had other jobs to supplement what little they could get from their land. In fact, the number of people working full-time as farmers in the Bitterroot Valley between 1930-35 was approximately just 38 percent of the total labor force.\textsuperscript{60} What is most important is how the land was used by the 38 percent. As will be seen below, the lands in Ravalli County were increasingly used for managing livestock.

Of the million and a half acres in Ravalli County, 19.9 percent (304,336 acres) was classified as farmland in 1935. The large majority of the “farmland” was pasturage for the valley’s 80,000 sheep and cows, while only 22 percent was harvested cropland. The majority of valley land was woodland and scrub. In the early era of settlement from 1850 to 1910, the range was unfenced, and livestock

\textsuperscript{59} Pollinger, p.14.
\textsuperscript{60} 64 percent of agricultural workers (60 percent of all valley workers) had no off farm income. 64 percent of 60 percent = 38.4 percent. These numbers are taken directly from the \textit{15th Census of the United States: 1930} and the \textit{U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1935}.
had grazed across the valley floor, moving in and out of the open public lands. In a method of transhumance, the cattle ranged in the foothills and higher elevations in the summer, while lands closer to the ranch were stocked in the fall and winter. By 1910 the valley floor was almost entirely fenced, as apple boom settlers and other private landholders laid claim to much of the benchlands that had previously been grazed freely. Marcus Daly alone had fenced nearly 20,000 acres on his Stock Farm prior to the turn of the century. As Wyckoff and Hansen point out in their study of the Madison Valley east of the Bitterroot, high wool prices between 1915 and 1926 initiated the increases in sheep herd sizes across the West. By the 1930's, "conditions for disaster" were in place, as fescue and wheatgrasses were replaced with rabbitbrush, grama grasses, and sagebrush. The pounding of the grasslands into an unproductive and compressed hardpack full of invader species was made worse in 1934 by one of the most severe droughts on record. That year, the Taylor Grazing Act attempted to restrict grazing on federal lands, which made up 71 percent of the area in Ravalli County. As the valley floor and benches were fenced, and federal lands were
restricted legislatively, large livestock owners needed large land holdings to have a chance at survival.\(^{61}\)

One type of livestock did not need a pasturage area as large as sheep and beef cattle. The dairy cow fit well into ranch-centered management schemes that were developing prior to the 1930's. Herds were cared for in smaller areas, even sheltered barns for much of the winter, and fed hay and grains grown in the valley's irrigated areas. By 1932, the Bitterroot led the state in dairy production, and the creamery at Stevensville helped assure that the finished product competed well in regional markets.\(^{62}\) Most of the valley's milk and cream was consumed locally in the Bitterroot and Missoula valleys, as well as in Butte and Anaconda, while dairy products exported to Spokane and other western markets were predominantly butters and cheeses. The valley creameries became important intermediaries between the cow and the consumer. As early as 1925, the valley's


reputation as a decent dairying land was solid enough that Kraft Cheese established a creamery in Victor.\textsuperscript{63} The creameries were busy places during the 1930’s, as nearly a third of the valley’s cattle were dairy cows producing more than five million gallons of milk a year. Most importantly for our purposes here, though, is to examine what types of land use patterns emerged with the development of the larger dairy industry.

Typically, there were three types of dairy farms, all of which grew their own feed. The largest dairy operations were on farms of 260 acres or more, with about 60 acres of alfalfa, 200 acres of hay, and the rest in partly irrigated land and dry pasture. The farms had anywhere from 20-80 cows. Medium-sized farms usually had between 15-20 cows on 120 acres of alfalfa, grain, corn, and pasture, while the smaller operations had fewer than 15 cows. The majority of Bitterroot dairy farms, though, were sheep operations with nine or ten dairy cows as a side business.\textsuperscript{64}

The great majority of crops were grown to feed livestock. Over 300,000 bushels of mostly spring wheat and oats, and 42,541 acres (62 percent of all valley cropland) of hay harvested in 1935 indicate

that the soil tilled in the valley was mostly for the benefit of the cow and sheep owners. As Johnson put it in 1932, "Raising hay and grain for the market on irrigated farms is gradually being discontinued except as crops complimentary to dairying or sheep and cattle raising."\(^{65}\) Agriculture in the valley consisted mostly of livestock ranches or livestock feed farms. There were, of course, exceptions to the rule. Some 4,000 acres remained as apple producing lands, while nearly as many acres were planted to peas. In addition, more than 5,000 acres were planted to sugar beets, one of the few crops fairly well-suited to the porous soils in the lower part of the valley. Sugar beets were a labor-intensive crop that was first planted in large numbers in 1928 when the American Crystal Sugar Company paid valley farmers to plant beets. As one farmer remembered, the sugar beet topping work provided ample work for migrant Mexican workers. Such evidence seems to reinforce the idea that beets were a larger corporate venture.\(^{66}\) Other evidence of the sugar industries' attempts to utilize the sandy soils of western Montana is evident in the fact that the Great Western Sugar Company built a $1.5 million-

\(^{64}\) Johnson, p.18-19.
\(^{65}\) Johnson, p. 15.
processing plant in Missoula in 1915. However, it moved during World War I when the company was unsuccessful in getting local farmers to grow beets on a large scale. War prices for wheat at that time had proven to be a seductive enough temptation for area farmers that hundreds of beet factory jobs were transferred from Missoula to Colorado.⁶⁷

Many farms during the Depression offered mere sustenance to the poor families who lived on them. A milk cow, chicken coop, two or three pigs, and a vegetable garden provided a bare amount of food and a small amount of cash for a family fortunate enough to be supported by a job in town or outside the valley. Eighty-five percent of valley farms had at least one milk cow, while three-fourths had poultry, and nearly half the farms kept a pig. It wasn't fancy living, but it was better than going hungry, and all indications are that the majority of people in the valley lived a marginal lifestyle. By the middle part of the decade, 81 percent of the farms in the valley were smaller than the average farm of 206 acres, while a full one-third of the valley's total acreage was in only 34 farms. Land ownership patterns shed new light on Fred Thorning's statement about people living on wild meat and homegrown potatoes during the Depression.

Such lives, where most families “just kind of lived so so,” were not rare in a land where a few families owned a majority of the land. As the Maclay family example shows, though, the bigger farms were not immune to hardship, either. “She was,” as Thorning said of the Depression, “a pretty rough time” for all.68

In the Fall of 1935, an event occurred in the Bitterroot Valley that would bring change like few events in the history of the valley ever would. The event would be on par with the arrival of DeSmet, the discovery of gold, and train tracks reaching Darby. One night Gomer Lockridge was bragging to a few of his neighbors about his gas-engine-powered Delco 32-volt light system, which illuminated his house and farm at night. It had revolutionized his life. He was now able to make repairs in the dark after supper, or spend an evening reading without straining his eyes. One of his neighbors had read an article about President Roosevelt’s idea to electrify rural America through the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), and he suggested that the men attempt to bring electricity to farms all over the valley. At first, the others laughed, figuring there must be a catch if the federal government was involved, but within one year a

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68 Farm statistics can be found in the *U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1935*, while Thorning’s comments are from OH 429.
group of them, including Lockridge and his neighbor, had applied to
the REA as the Ravalli County Electric Co-op. It would be Montana’s
first rural electricity co-operative. They received a loan of $1,000 per
mile of power line, based on being able to provide electricity to 3
people per square mile, and planned to stretch their lines across 125
miles in the valley. By 1937, a contractor out of Spokane was
installing poles and stringing wire to and from what would be the
first substation at Tucker’s Crossing by the Bitterroot River. Then, on
Jan 14, 1938, the lights went on. Lockridge and two others went
down to the substation at eight o’clock that evening to flip the switch.
Lockridge recalled one of the men whispering “my God” over and
over once he saw the valley houses lit. Lockridge’s wife Helen
remembered that the REA “opened up a new world,” especially after
she had a refrigerator, then an electric iron.69

Although Stevensville and Hamilton had had steam-powered
electricity for years, valley farms were in the dark until the REA.70
Electricity helped rural Bitterrooters (the majority) make discoveries
that would have long lasting consequences. First, there were the

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69 Pat Zeiler. “The man who helped light up Bitter Root farms.” Ravalli Republic Profiles 78, March 31,
1978, 26a.
70 “From 1894 on the stores had electricity, there were two or three street lights, and the churches were
wired—there was not always enough power to serve the latter.” In Stevensville Historical Society’s Montana
differences in the homes, where the drudgery of farm life, especially the lives of women like Helen Lockridge, was alleviated considerably by the magical gift of power carried over buzzing wires. Once people had the proper appliances, it was no longer necessary to cook with wood, haul food to and from the ice house, lift buckets of well water by hand, or carry the ice, water, or firewood to the house.71 A 1933 study found that Montana rural homemakers, on average, worked a 63 hour week, nine of which were outside the house helping with the farm. The remainder of the work—preparing meals, washing and ironing, carrying water and tending fires—took 53 hours, or twice the amount of time spent in leisure activities such as reading or letter writing.72

Besides making changes within the farm households, electricity also provided advantages for farm production. The 1935 and 1945 agricultural censuses didn’t go so far as to mention any farm implements, machinery, or consumer products used on farms. The


\[\text{\textsuperscript{71} For an excellent description of what life was like in Depression era rural America before electricity, see Robert Caro’s “The Sad Irons” (chapter 27) in The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982: 502-515. Caro uses a study done during the era that concluded that the average family of four on an American farm used 73,000 gallons of water a year, and that, on average, wells were 253 feet from a house. In order to pump this much water by hand and carry it to the house involved putting in 63 eight-hour days and walking 1,750 miles over the course of one year.}}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{72} Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 271, “The Use of Time by Rural Homemakers in Montana,” by Jesse E. Richardson (Bozeman, 1933): 19.}\]
1954 census did include some of the information. More than 600 Bitterroot farms had electronic milking machines, nearly 300 had electric powered feed grinders, and another 27 owned electric pig brooders by the middle of the century.\(^\text{73}\) Hand milking alone could take up to two hours for 20 cows, and it had to be done before daylight, so that daylight hours could be maximized out in the fields or at other jobs off the farm. In one year, a milking machine could save an average of 28 man-hours per cow.\(^\text{74}\)

At the time of America's entry into World War II, a clear pattern of land use and living had emerged in the Bitterroot Valley. Land was predominantly either pasture for sheep, beef and dairy cattle, or it was cropland used to grow livestock feeds. People lived mostly hand to mouth, hanging onto their lands by any means. For some, survival meant leaving the farm, perhaps even moving to a different part of the country in order to make ends meet. For many, survival meant going in debt to mechanize the farm in an attempt to increase production capability. For others, survival meant forest arson and the jobs that followed. Some survived by stealing cattle. At


any rate, for those who managed to survive the Depression until the onset of war and better weather at the end of the decade, the Bitterroot Valley would prove for a short time to be similar to the place the boosters had lied about a half-century before. War and the country's appetite for beef, followed at the end of the war by its appetite for wood products, would create for a short time the closest thing to an economic Eden the valley would ever see. But a war-spawned boom in beef and lumber would prove to be nothing more than one destructive force giving birth to another.
Three

Ranchers and Loggers
Joined at the Ecological Hip

Montana in 1940 was the kind of state that a country at war desperately needs. Not only were its mountains full of timber, but there were metals under the ground, and many tons of beef walking upon and eating the grasses above. In addition, there were plenty of people looking for work. Along with the Great Plains states, Montana was the only state in the West to lose population between 1940 and 1943, as thousands headed farther west in search of high paying airplane, ship, and other wartime manufacturing jobs in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco and Los Angeles.75 Montana's population declined 16 percent (90,000 people), while the populations of many western states increased. Considering that Washington, Oregon, and California grew 39 percent during the war years, it comes as no shock when historian Michael Malone writes that

no other period—not even the gold, copper, or homestead boom eras—ever witnessed such dramatic population shifts in Montana as did World War II. Reminders of this fact are still found in the

thousands of Montanans who remember their arrival in the state during the war and by the tens of thousands of people who wistfully attend "Montana Day" picnics in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Spokane.\textsuperscript{76}

The population shifts were greater, of course, in some parts of the state than others. Eastern Montana was especially hard-hit with outmigration. In general, though, western Montana stayed at a fairly stagnant population level during the war and the years beyond, as outmigrations nearly equaled the numbers of those who moved to the region. Demographers usually attribute the pattern to a marked increase in the number of jobs in the forest products industry through the 1940's, but there were also sizable increases in employment in public administration, education, and other services.\textsuperscript{77}

The demographic generalizations for Western Montana are exemplified in the Bitterroot Valley. In the decade between 1940 and 1950, population in the valley stayed nearly the same, increasing by only 123 people, while the labor force increased in the same period by a mere 63 people--and all from a population hovering around 13,000. Since there are no figures for 1945, or any


of the war years for Ravalli County population, it is hard to say if the numbers fluctuated greatly between the censuses.

The most important change for the Bitterroot during the war years, and one with obvious long-term implications, involved land use. Although farm size increased by an average of 62 acres between 1935 and 1954, the total number of farms decreased, as more than 200 farms were either enveloped by bigger operations or became idle. The pattern is clear: as some farms faltered, others grew. Moreover, the diminishing number of farms affected farm and ranch employment. Jobs in agriculture dropped 12 percent between 1930 and 1950—meaning that there were fewer people working larger plots of land. The shift indicates a land use pattern that by necessity involved less maintenance and manpower, combined with higher profits to cover the costs of increased landholdings. It was a land use pattern tailor-made for livestock. The success of the shift was influenced by many factors: cheap lands for expansion, good weather, the growth in national demand for beef, large-scale mechanization,
and most importantly, perhaps, safety valve jobs in other sectors of the local economy.\textsuperscript{78}

Land ownership patterns changed significantly across the state during the war years. A 1947 study showed that the price of Montana real estate nearly doubled between 1940 and 1946. "There are indications," the report said, "that the prices of Montana farm real estate have not yet reached a peak."\textsuperscript{79} Indeed, acreage prices in the Bitterroot would more than triple in the next nine years, from $31.68 per acre in 1945, to $99.51 in 1954. At the same time, the number of farms smaller than the average went from 83 percent to 92 percent.\textsuperscript{80} As a few farms and ranches enlarged, the majority of Bitterroot landowners lived on smaller plots of land that were increasingly of higher value. The increases were influenced by several major factors.

First, the 1940's were wet years for the valley. Precipitation levels at Hamilton during the decade, for example, were 14.6 inches


\textsuperscript{80} U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1945, 1954.
above the ten year average. Instead of the yearly average of twelve inches, the average during the 1940's was 13.2 inches a year.\(^{81}\)

Second, most of the land in the valley was non-irrigated cropland. In the dry years of the 1930's, when the acreage was completely useless and unproductive, many acres of land were abandoned to become the property of the county until back taxes were paid. Once the rains came, much of the land was bought by the farmers and ranchers who had survived the Depression. "The price of irrigated land," the aforementioned report stated, "increased less than other types, partly because it had not been depressed as much as other types by the long period of drought."\(^{82}\) As Malone put it: "Montana had fewer farms and ranches, but those that had hung on during the lean years were rapidly growing in size, moving toward mechanization, and increasing in value and income."\(^{83}\)

Income across the state increased by 188 percent between 1940 and 1948, much of it due to cash revenues on livestock and livestock products that amounted to more than $134 million.\(^{84}\) By 1945, livestock sales in the Bitterroot were over $2 million, or 44

\(^{82}\) Thompson, pp. 9-10
\(^{83}\) Malone, p.309.
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
percent of all farm products sold in the valley. The wet years of the 1940's grew healthy fields of rich grasses and grains that allowed farmers to increase their herds and cash in on the growing demand for beef. The demand is the real key to understanding the equation, for without a ready, willing, and able economy to consume large amounts of beef, the Bitterroot's ample grasses during the '40s were of little use. It was indeed fortunate for those who gained economically from the beef boom that mother nature seemed to cooperate with ten years of above-average rain. Demand for beef, though, must also be put into perspective. Farm expansions and increased land values likely would not have occurred without a rise in demand for meat. In 1936, during the throes of the Depression, America's annual meat consumption averaged 68.9 pounds per person. Consumption would decline to 62.3 pounds by 1939. After America's entry into the war following Pearl Harbor, the number would more than double, and by 1942 meat consumption nationally averaged nearly 140 pounds for each American. By 1944, consumption would peak at 153.5 pounds, hovering around the 150

85 U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1945.
pound mark for two more years. Who was paying for the increased consumption? The easy answer is that the U.S. Government was buying huge amounts of meat to feed hungry soldiers. In fact, though, government purchases accounted for only a small percentage of the total amount of meat that was sold during the war. In 1943, for example, meat production reached 24.5 billion pounds. Military consumption was 3.4 billion pounds (1.9 billion pounds of which were beef and veal). Other Government purchases totaled an additional 2.4 billion pounds, meaning that more than 18 billion pounds of meat were bought and consumed by the civilian public in that one year.87 Included in this number, of course, were some of those 90,000 former Montanans who were riveting airplane wings in Los Angeles, or welding submarine hulls in Oakland. Americans with well-paying factory jobs were eating better than they had in many years. By 1946, California consumed more Montana beef than any other state in the country. To a significant degree, Californians helped Montana ranchers mechanize, then expand their lands and their cattle numbers to unprecedented levels.88

88 Malone, p. 320.
By the 1940's many Bitterroot Valley farmers and ranchers, with expanded acreage and less help, were utilizing a new kind of horsepower on their farms. No longer were teams of work horses--animals that had pulled and hauled hay, logs, and people, or threshed grain for a century in the valley--the only means by which traditional farm tasks might be accomplished. Mechanization, namely the gasoline-powered engines in tractors and pickup trucks, helped farmers in the Bitterroot became as efficient as possible in their efforts to produce during wartime need. In the parlance of the war era of the 1940's, efficiency meant speed and the effective use of all manpower.

The first tractors had been brought into the valley during the apple orchard boom by the ditch building companies, and the first automobile had rolled into the valley during the same era. By 1930, more than twenty jobs in the valley were related to automobile sales or gas station work. It was not until the war, though, that

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89 Donald R. Bosley's article "Horsepower" in Montana: The Magazine of Western History (Autumn) 1977: 72-9, opens with this apt quotation: "So rapid and complete was the passing of the work horse from the farm and ranch scene that now, only a few decades later, its one remaining legacy seems to be the term "horsepower," a purely arbitrary term used to express the drawbar and power take-off rating of a tractor engine."

90 Zeisler discusses the orchard companies' shiny red automobiles, used to impress potential buyers, as well as machinery used in ditch construction. Thorning states in OH 429 that the first tractors in the valley were brought in by the University Heights orchard construction crews. He also says that he used horses on his farm until 1945, when he was able to buy his first tractor.

considerable numbers of gas-powered vehicles made a large impact on land use in the Bitterroot. One man on a tractor was much faster than a team of horses and the two men usually needed to care for them. Moreover, manpower that was replaced by the new efficiency could be better used elsewhere. As far as the horses went, another use could be found for them, too.

By 1944, Bitterrooters were selling their work horses to the meat packing houses in Butte, where the animals were slaughtered, butchered, canned, and sent overseas as part of the Christian Rural Overseas Project. What had been the Bitterroot's horse power--animals with names, personalities, and various strengths and abilities--had become useless as anything but food for hungry mouths in war-torn Europe.92 Between the 1935 and 1945 censuses, total horse numbers in the valley dropped 22 percent, while the nineteen year period between 1935-54 saw a 40 percent decrease in the number of farms reporting any horses or mules. In the meantime, farms in possession of a pick-up truck had gone from not being reported in 1935 to 51 percent and 70 percent of all farms in

1945 and 1954, respectively. During the same period, total tractor numbers increased by 991 machines.\textsuperscript{93}

The removal of literal horsepower had important impacts on land use, for within those cans sent to Europe, something besides horse flesh had left the Bitterroot Valley. It is a startling image, but undeniably true, that when men and women in France, or West Berlin, ate those cans of horse meat, they literally consumed the self-sufficiency that had so long characterized many of the Bitterroot's struggling farmers. The energy that had fueled horses in the valley had in the past been grown from valley fields in the form of hay, oats, barley, winter and spring wheats, and other small grains.\textsuperscript{94} The energy for tractors and trucks, on the other hand, was brought in from elsewhere in the form of expensive combustible fuels. The purchase of petroleum products was a new expense for area farmers, to the tune of nearly half a million dollars year by the early 1950's.

With fewer horses to feed, there was more food for other livestock. In the same nineteen-year period that saw a 40 percent

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1945; 1954.}

\textsuperscript{94} Once again, the Maclays provide an appropriate quotation: speaking of the years prior to W.W.II, Sam said their farm was "balanced in the sense that we raised the feed for the livestock, and we could feed the livestock. And there was very little cash required; because, we had the horses to do that job, and I suppose
decline in the valley's horse population, cattle increased by 66 percent, or nearly 20,000 head. In addition to the decline in horses, other range lands and winter hay piles were freed up for larger numbers of cattle by an astonishing 81 percent decrease in sheep during the same period.95

The reduction of horses had another major impact on farming and ranching in the valley. Using horses had meant preparing the team in the morning and taking care of that team throughout the day. The work took anywhere from four to five hours every time the team was hitched and used. The daily chores included feeding and watering, shoveling manure from stalls, and hitching and unhitching harnesses and bridles. It doesn't take much of an imagination to picture the light bulbs that must have lit up in Bitterroot Valley farmers' heads once they realized that tractors could offer them greater production capabilities in a fraction of the time. Five hours a day gave a rancher thirty-five extra hours a week to do other things,

that, well, we got some of the feed off the place, some personal food and some of the gardens raised a little." 

95 Wayne D. Rasmussen, in Readings in the History of American Agriculture, Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960, says that the national decrease in horses and mules between 1920-46 was 15 million animals. This freed up land that could then grow feed for an equivalent number of livestock. "Year-to-year changes," he says, "in the total feed supply have been about as influential as the shift to mechanical power in their effects on livestock production for human use" (p.285).
such as increase his cropland, or supplement his income with off
farm work.96

A 1982 interview with a tired old farmer named Gard
Lockwood provides a wonderful window into what Bitterrooters
thought about farming and logging toward the end of the war.
According to Lockwood, in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s his wages as a
farm worker were $45 a month, whereas loggers in the valley at the
same time were making $40 a day. “We [wage laborers on farms]
would be laughed at and all,” Lockwood said, but he continued
working the land with a tractor rather than a saw. As a small
landowner working for larger operations, Lockwood continued to
scrape out a marginal existence.97 Clearly, the attitude for many men
in the valley seemed to be to make money while it was there to be
made. Logging provided just such an opportunity. For men who were
out of work in agriculture, the increased logging acted as a safety
valve to keep them employable in the valley. For some of the larger
ranching operations, the rebirth of valley sawmills helped provide
needed income once the war time beef boom began declining. David

96 Bosley gives a detailed account of the human energy involved in using and caring for a team of work
horses. He includes a description of how horses were used in various farm tasks. John T. Schlebecker, in
Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972, writes about the revolutionary changes
the tractor brought to the American farm.
Maclay intimated that the only way he was able to keep his family ranch operational during the late 1940's and into the 1950's was by logging his own timbered lands, or other lands he could buy cheaply. He summed up the early 1950's in the valley well, when he said:

The trucking business really came in since the second war and so did everything else. They cracked this back country open. Wasn't anything. That's how I can afford to keep the ranch during the end of the '40's and the early '50's. I could buy land that was really alright, covered with timber, for fifty cents and a dollar an acre, and somebody would take his dozer, and they'd go crack a road in there, and they'd take the timber out, and I'd make money. And of course I spent it all, but that was the only way we made the ranch go in the '50's.98

There were other Bitterrooters who both farmed their own lands and worked in the rising wood products industry of the '40s and '50s. Fred Thorning was one of those. By the early 1950's he was working the night shift at a Darby sawmill, then spending the daylight hours working on his farm in an attempt to hang onto his past. His explanation of the shift in modes of livelihood was simple: "In 1952 wages were good and cattle prices were good. After that it continually got worse." The supply for the demand of beef across the

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97 Lockwood interview. As well, Wilkerson, OH 426, said that he made $40 a day in 1953 working as a logger.
country was finally being met, and prices were being forced down from their all-time war-influenced highs. In 1952 Montana ranchers sold their beef for $24.89 per hundredweight (cwt.), while the average price over the next five years was just $15.30.99 Clearly, the beef boom of the war years and early '50s was slowly but assuredly busting. Still, the 1954 census indicated that livestock was the number one agricultural product of the Bitterroot Valley. With a total of nearly 50,000 cattle, livestock and livestock product sales of almost $4.5 million made up 69 percent of all farm production sales in the valley. The increase indicated a 15 percent rise from the previous census. Obviously, all of the $4.5 million did not come from the sale of beef cattle alone. A good portion of the money, for instance, was generated by poultry production or through the sale of the remaining horses and mules, pigs, or sheep. The majority of the money did, in fact, come from cattle. Eighteen-percent of the Bitterroot cattle in 1954 were dairy cows that generated $1.3 million dollars in milk and cream sales. In addition to dairy products, it can be safely inferred, from an analyses of the agricultural census

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98 Maclay interview.
population numbers of cattle and non-cattle livestock, that beef cattle brought in a significant number of the remaining $3 million in sales. The numbers must be put into perspective. Throughout the war years, ranchers had increased their output and their expenses through mechanization, enlarging their lands and increasing their herds. Then the bottom started falling out of the beef market, and many were left scrambling for a way to make ends meet. As we have seen, David Maclay bought some land and cut its trees, while Fred Thorning found a night job in a mill planing those same boards.

In the short run, it was fortunate for Bitterroot ranchers that they could benefit from the national demand for timber that came into play during the war, then blossomed with housing construction increases and foreign exports in the early '50s. As they looked for ways to keep their expanded cattle ranches afloat in the wake of a bust in beef prices, Bitterroot landowners increasingly turned to cutting the trees on the private lands around their valley homes. The linking of beef and timber interests, where the latter supported the former, had complex and fascinating ecological interconnections. In

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the long run it would also prove destructive. Forest products sold from valley farms and ranches—including lumber, pulpwood, piling, poles, firewood, and more—increased 344 percent between 1945 and 1954. As the number of farmers and ranchers who cut the forested areas of their lands increased, so did the problems. Areas that once provided park-like fields of summer pasture were now stumped, and the ground was hardened by the sun and less likely to produce ample grasses in the future. In addition, wildlife were pushed farther into the hills. The most obvious change pertained to the river. Many of the lands that were logged during the era were private holdings along the Bitterroot, where ponderosas and their willow understories grew along the banks above cottonwoods. Green and scented with pine, the groves housed woodpeckers and herons, bald eagles and osprey. The trees also held together the banks and sandbar jetties that slowed the river as it made its way to the Clark Fork. Once the trees were logged, heavy grazing followed. Some of the richest soil in the valley disappeared down the river. Regarding the river bottom and that activity during the 1940’s and ‘50’s, one valley resident said

provides several nice graphs on pages 488 and 492 that illustrate the rises in per capita consumption of the various timber products between 1877-1980.
"That place will never be the same. It washed away." The problem with logging and increased water run-off on rivers, such as the Bitterroot, was the loss of the black cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*). It is a primary successional species that needs fresh sand in order to become established. If rivers are running fast and meandering less, fewer sandy beaches are established; therefore, cottonwood stands diminish. If there are no primary successional species such as cottonwood, then ponderosas and other secondary trees can’t be established. It is a cycle that is hard to reverse, and the result is a river that seems out of control.

Bitterroot ranchers, although they may have contributed to the rising number of trees that left the valley on the backs of trucks, are not to blame fully for the valley’s logging-related problems in the 1950’s, ’60s, and beyond. Most of the forest land that was harvested during the war years belonged to Anaconda Copper Mining Company. It was cut by contractors and their crews, then shipped to Bonner for sawing. The logging crews were made up of Bitterroot Valley residents, the men who laughed at Gard Lockwood because they

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made as much in a day as he made in a week. Between 1940 and 1960, jobs in timber related industries, including mill work, increased significantly. Although two of the three census records between 1940-60 do not break the numbers down, jobs in forestry and manufacturing, which would have included all aspects of the industry, increased 218 percent. By 1960 logging related employment could have accounted for about two of every ten jobs in the valley. Regardless of the exact figures, the industry had grown significantly. Some timber crews were small, while others had up to 150 men, but they all had one simple objective: get out as much wood as possible. Loggers on the crews were hired by contractors who had bid and won the right to log a section of ACM land. The contractors bussed loggers up muddy roads, then paid them by the amount of board feet they cut per day--about $4,000 worth of work a year, before the advent of chainsaws in the early '50s. After the introduction of chain saws, wages and the amount of cut nearly doubled overnight. Fred Wilkerson made it clear what type of cut

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104 The first chapter of Ray Raphael's excellent book *Tree Talk: The People and Politics of Timber*, Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1981, is one of the best short summaries of American logging history in print. Raphael spends several pages discussing the link between gasoline power and forest depletion in the middle of the twentieth-century following the introduction of chain saws, caterpillar tractors, and logging trucks.
he and his fellow loggers were after when he described the logging that took place on ACM land in the East Fork area of Rye Creek in the 1950's. "We didn't do no selective," he said. "We took everything." ACM had no plan ever to go back into the area. As Wilkerson put it, "they [ACM] was done when they was done." In fact, after they had logged out Rye Creek completely, the company was done. In classic cut-and-run fashion, ACM traded the destroyed land to the Forest Service. Wilkerson's story makes something else clear. Although the land was ACM's, destruction of the privately owned forests of the Bitterroot in the 1940's and '50's was done by men who lived in the valley. Their income was proportional to the amount of forest they destroyed. With 20/20 hindsight, Wilkerson decried ACM's practices, but he spoke volumes about the mindset that he and others had had during the actual logging: "We didn't think nothin' about it, just went ahead and done it."105 There had been bills to pay and mouths to feed.

After the private lands were hammered, the contractors, corporate logging's hired guns, began illegally inching onto the public domain above the valley. David Maclay recalled some loggers' ethic. Up until the '40's, he said " I know of several places where the

105 Wilkerson interview.
timber was skinned off public land. They just stole it. ACM stole a lot of it. I could put my finger on several forties and one hundred and sixties they stole."\textsuperscript{106}

Eventually, the corporations and their contractors began logging legally on public lands. In 1943, the Forest Service sold the timber along Laird Creek in the East Fork drainage below Rocky Knob in the Sula area. According to Champ Hannon, a Forest Service employee at the time, the Laird Creek sale was "one of the first sales when we started cutting Forest Service timber."\textsuperscript{107} Two years prior, G.M. Brandborg, the Regional Forester, had approved a plan that would allow 7.5 million board feet a year to be cut from the Bitterroot National Forest. The plan called for many regulations that generally made logging the lands too expensive for contractors. In response, loggers either cut public lands illegally, or concentrated their efforts through the 1940's and '50s on private timber. By the early '60s, however, private timber was gone. In 1962, after men like Brandborg had retired, the National Lumber Manufacturers Association lobbied and pressured the chief of the Forest Service to increase the allowable cut on the Bitterroot from 7.5 to 18.3 million

\textsuperscript{106} Maclay interview.
board feet. The Forest Service then outdid itself and sold more than 25 million board feet.\textsuperscript{108} Private lands and the public sale of timber combined to include some of the largest total cuts imaginable. One report claimed that the average cut for the Bitterroot area in the years from 1961-66 was 85 million board feet, enough to keep open eight sawmills and three post-making operations.\textsuperscript{109} For some of the years, Darby alone had three mills, each running at least two shifts, as well as a planing mill. “If the mills,” a retired mill worker said in 1982, “would have stayed on the route they were going there for a good number of years, I don’t think the Bitterroot could have sustained the amount of timber that was being cut.” There was no question about it. The Bitterroot could not and did not sustain the cut. When asked if the timber industry had declined, the same ex-mill worker answered simply: “Yes. Yes. They got no timber left here. That’s the main reason.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{107} Champ Hannon. OH 2, Montana State Historical Society.
\textsuperscript{110} The number of sawmills in Darby during the timber boom of the fifties and sixties is brought up again and again in interviews with people from the south end of the valley. Thorning mentions that his mill ran two shifts of 16 employees each shift throughout the late fifties and into the sixties. Nancy Motley (Personal interview, Hamilton, Mt., Feb. 22, 1996. Notes in possession of author) also talked of the number of mill jobs in Darby during the era. First quotation is from Thorning, and second is from Wilkerson.
By the end of the next decade, Bitterroot ranchers would be one of the more vocal groups to decry the corporate clearcut logging, aided by the Forest Service, that they saw as the ruination of their own water quality. "Nature," a rancher told reporter Dale Burk in 1969, "previously controlled runoff and regulated it naturally. Now the water is coming down in the early spring, at the least desirable time." The rancher warned of dire consequences: "The point where the farmers are seriously threatened has already been reached, and the farther we go into disrupting that watershed from here on out, the more critical it will become." \(^{111}\) Burk published a series of articles that brought notice to what he called "the Clearcut crisis" on the valley's public lands. Most letters to the editor during and after the series indicate that many people in the valley agreed wholeheartedly with the charges that were being leveled against the Forest Service. "The image of the Forest Service," one Hamilton resident wrote, "once considered the champions of the forest, is sinking to a new low, and make no mistake about it, some really hostile attitudes are forming." \(^{112}\) Burk's articles had a monumental impact on the valley, then the nation. U.S. Senator Lee Metcalf, a

\(^{111}\) Burk, 26-29.

\(^{112}\) Keith J. Evans, letter to the editor, Missoulian, November 21, 1969.
native Bitterrooter, called for an investigation. In 1970, a Senate report titled “A University View of the Forest Service” made headlines. The report, conducted by a team at the University of Montana, and headed by Forestry School Dean Arnold Bolle, was bold in its pronouncement:

It would appear to us that at this time any approach to public land management which would de-emphasize a broad multiple-use philosophy, a broad environmental approach, a broad open-access approach, or which would reduce the production of our public land resources in the long run is completely out of step with the interests and desires of the American people.¹³

By 1976, after concerned citizens in other parts of the country raised similar outcries against the Forest Service, Congress passed the National Forest Management Act.¹⁴

Although water runoff increased as a result of clearcuts, it is only fair to reiterate that grazing had advanced exponentially into the valley’s riparian areas since the war years. Both logging and grazing had impacted the Bitterroot River valley watershed. Between 1950 and 1960 economic insult was multiplied by environmental

¹³ Burk’s appendix gives a clear and succinct summary of the Bolle Report on pages 150-3.
¹⁴ Wilkinson, p.142.
injury, as the valley’s population decreased and unemployment grew.\textsuperscript{115} The summation of the two factors was a tableau that looked bad for anyone concerned with the future health of the land. In the middle, surrounded by the chaos of an eroding ecosystem, stood a rancher. He was not herding cattle from horseback, nor was he tending his morning coffee beans over a campfire. Instead, he was leaning against a pickup truck, sipping instant coffee from a Styrofoam cup, scratching his head, and wondering how in the world he was going to survive.

Four

The Significance of Three-tenths

It has been established that the lands of the Bitterroot Valley were never truly Edenic. In addition, as the previous chapters have shown, land use practices through the 1950’s were less than sustainable. Nevertheless, the story of land use and change in the valley to this point is but a distant echo to those of us in the present who have stood in the middle of the valley at the close of the century, surrounded by cul-de-sacs, basketball goals, Winnebagos, and barking dogs. Although they are audible, the voices that told the story up to now seem far away--perhaps up one of the canyons of the mountains--and almost out of sight. The world the voices inhabited, one of cattle auctions, 4-H meetings, and plenty of elbow room, has all but vanished to suburban America in many parts of the valley. Today, as the Bitterroot Valley of old is swallowed piece by piece, it takes a good deal of imagination to conjure up the valley as it was just thirty-five years ago. It was thirty-five years ago, though, that should be imagined if one is attempting to understand the recent past and how it shaped the Bitterroot today; because, it was
then that the Bitterroot Valley most clearly began the metamorphosis of modern change that has given the valley the look it has in 1998.

In review, one approach to continued existence for Bitterroot ranchers in the fifteen to twenty years prior to 1960 was supplemental logging of their lands. As is the case with most people who harvest trees in the West, valley farmers eventually realized that the crop rotations for pine and hay differed greatly. Cutting trees was nothing to be counted on more than once in a lifetime, whereas hay came back every year. In addition, logging affected water quality and supply and exposed already fragile soils to greater destruction. At times, too, the effects of logging were just plain ugly. By 1964, money generated from forest products off the valley's farms had fallen 34 percent in ten years.\textsuperscript{116} Ranchers must have realized that the selling of their small reserves of timber was not the ultimate panacea for long-term farm survival. There would have to be other means. The rest of this paper is the story of how those other means, namely the subdivision and sale of land, came to exist in the forms that we know today.

If anything could be learned from the past in the valley, one solution was, at least, predictable: when times are hard, expand and mechanize, or sell out to someone who will. Before the war, electricity and the REA had expanded valley irrigation to new levels that had been unattainable with ditches and flood watering systems. Irrigation pumps, powered by the new electrical lines that crisscrossed the valley floor, had pushed the Bitterroot’s number of irrigated acres from approximately 60,000 in 1935 to more than 106,000 in 1954. Expansion accelerated following World War II. By the end of the 1950’s, airplane technology, namely the development of aluminum and other durable, lightweight sheet metals, led to the best irrigation systems farmers had ever seen. Ravalli County became one of the state’s leaders in wheel line irrigation systems by the end of the decade. Usually driven by gas engines mounted on long, lateral pipes and supported by large wheels, the mobile water sprayers were connected by flexible hoses to a main pipeline or ditch. Their impact was felt immediately in the valley. In the decade between 1954 and 1964, the number of irrigated acres in the

Bitterroot more than tripled to 340,000, while small grains and hay production, as well as cattle numbers, reached an all-time high.\textsuperscript{118}

Increased irrigation had important environmental effects on the valley. By 1966, one report on agricultural resources in the Bitterroot stated that “Over-irrigation during the spring water abundance contributes to raising the water table and in many cases causes water logging of about 10,000 acres of our more productive agricultural lands.”\textsuperscript{119} Water logging did not refer to flooded fields of standing water. Once the water table rose, plants were drowned just below the surface. An agricultural bulletin from the 1930’s had warned Montana farmers to keep an eye on their well water levels, a good way to indicate whether crops were on the verge of drowning. “Usually the first field indication that the water is getting near the surface,” the bulletin said, “is that the crops continue to grow well through the summer without irrigation.”\textsuperscript{120} It was as if an enemy lurked in the depths of the ground, yet the enemy was more often the farmer’s savior than his destroyer.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{118} U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1954; 1964.
\item \textsuperscript{119} BVRDC, p.16.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 255, “Seepage and Drainage of Irrigated Land,” by H. E. Murdock (Bozeman, 1932):4.
\end{itemize}
Prior to the war, what nutrients that went back into the valley's soils were deposited by the sheep and cattle grazing on the land. During later years of increased output demanded from farms, nutrients were scattered along the ground by the hand of man. The nutrients were pulled from a bag, and they were in the form of laboratory-concocted chemicals. During the war era, the use of commercial fertilizers increased greatly on a national scale. The total amount used in 1945 was 95 percent more than the amount used prior to the war.\(^{121}\) It was not until the 1954 census that commercial fertilizer use was recorded. That year, more than 400 Bitterroot farmers scattered 16,000 acres with chemicals, the majority of which, of course, were used on hay and cropland pasture. By the next census in 1964, fertilizer numbers had gone through the roof: acreage fertilized with commercial products had doubled to 34,000, and the money spent on the products had tripled to more than $300,000.

At the same time that valley farmers were putting artificial fertilizers on their land to encourage production, they were

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beginning to use other chemicals to rid the land of undesirable plants or weeds. Historian Richard White has succinctly defined weeds as the "generic name for plants already well adapted to be pioneer species on the very lands disturbed by the farmers' plows or by the grazing of their domesticated animals."122 In the case of the Bitterroot, one of the valley's most pernicious weeds, spotted knapweed, was first found growing on the disturbed shoulder of the highway in the spring of 1936. Some believe the seed had been introduced through feed mill sweepings that had been fed to pheasants the previous winter, while it is just as likely that the seed hitched into the valley on a car fender or tire.123 Regardless, by 1964, knapweed, goatweed, leafy spurge and cheatgrass brome covered large overgrazed and otherwise exhausted areas of the valley floor.124 It was in that year that another census showed a first when it reported that Bitterrooters had used chemicals on nearly 6,000 acres in their attempts to kill the weeds. The first mention of herbicides in the census report, though, should not imply that valley farmers and ranchers had never made attempts at weed control

prior to the 1960's. David and Sam Maclay said in 1972 that they had probably spent $35,000 over a twenty-five year period trying to control weeds, and that in recent years it was as much as $2,000 a year. In the case of the Maclays, at least, the lands that fed their livestock had been overgrazed and weed-infested for decades.125

The raised water table and the increased use of chemicals in the '50's and '60's are relevant today. As the valley grows, so do the numbers of people pumping their household water from the ground. In addition, with a water table that has been drawn higher and higher through irrigation, leaky septic tanks are more likely to pollute the water supply.

The irrigation and fertilizer increases during the 1960's happened on the fewest number of farms in the Bitterroot Valley since the 30's. Following the patterns of land use that had been established after the apple bust, the farms that existed in the mid-1960's were fewer, but bigger. In fact, by 1964 average farm size had increased 33 percent in just ten years.126

All of the numbers and percentages seem to mask the human elements of the story, but in fact the social dynamics were most

124 BVRDC, p.17.
125 Maclay interview.
telling: Irrigation, fertilizer, and herbicides allowed a small number of people to expand their farms as their neighbors quit the business. It was the Bitterroot Valley version of the rich getting richer, except that most everybody was going broke. The question was one of speed and timing.

Along with all the other thousands of numbers from the 1964 Ravalli County census data, there is one number, a decimal, actually, that begins to tell the most important story of all for anyone interested in the recent history of land use in the valley. It is the number 0.3. Three-tenths does not seem like it could be an important number in anything, perhaps, outside the Olympics, the Kentucky Derby, or an event involving explosives. It certainly does not seem as if it could be of any service to the historian dealing with hundreds of years of change over more than a million acres of land. But in the decimal is buried an atomic amount of power for anyone seeking to explain when the Bitterroot Valley began to move from being a land of ranches to being a land of ranchettes in the last three and a half decades. In 1964, the percentage of land in the Bitterroot Valley that was classified as farmland was three-tenths less than it

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had been in the previous census. Somewhere in the valley, three-tenths of what had been farmland was now something else.

For the first time in the history of farming in the Bitterroot, the percentage of valley land in farms had stopped increasing. It was the beginning of a significant pattern. In the thirty years following 1964, the number 0.3 and the 1 percent drop it represented would seem laughingly minuscule, as the acreage of farmland in the valley dropped 53 percent and the population doubled.127

In 1960, the Bitterroot's population was smaller than it had been ten years before. But such a trend would not last long. During the new decade, Ravalli County would be one of only twelve Montana counties to experience growth.128 An immediate explanation for the growth is that the timber industry brought new workers into the valley with the increased production during the 1960's clearcut era. But such a conclusion is wrong. Logging, especially clearcut logging, had become highly mechanized. The days when bunkhouses full of men were a necessity to harvesting timber were gone. Male unemployment in the valley actually grew during the large timber

cuts of the 1960's, while female employment increased by 40 percent. Most of the jobs women gained during the '60s were in the service sector. Some, of course, were in the lower paying retail trade industry, which increased its slice of the employment pie by fifty-percent. But better paying jobs increased, as well. Work in health services and education, fields traditionally employing large numbers of women, ballooned 386 percent and 85 percent, respectively, during the decade.129

A study done by the Bitterroot Valley Resource Conservation and Development Project in 1966 provides a clue as to why the changes--reduction of farmland, increased population, the rise in service sector employment--were beginning to occur. “There has been,” the report stated, “an increase of persons 55 years and older with a corresponding decrease in people 15-29 years of age” in the valley.130 The population increases in the 1960's, then, were of an altogether new kind, and they would affect the land use patterns in the valley in a new way. Unlike settlers of the previous eras, most of the people moving into the valley in the '60s were not coming to


130 BVRDC, p.21.
work the land. In fact, some of them were not coming to work at all. They were arriving to spend their retirement. The people bought and refurbished abandoned farm houses with back tax payments and elbow grease, or they were building new homes on abandoned farmland. Many moved onto old apple orchard plots that had been divided into neat ten-acre tracts at the turn of the century during the apple boom.

Others came to start a new life, and perhaps create business opportunities in what they saw as a nice place. “Nice” might be defined in different ways by different people. Doris Milner, a well-known environmental activist in the valley, moved with her husband and children to a hillside near Hamilton in 1951 after her husband landed a coveted job as a microbiologist at the Rocky Mountain Laboratory. Although they were not part of any real estate boom, the Milners were pioneers of a new sort to the mountains of the American West. With her husband’s Ph.D. in tow, the Milners could live anywhere in the country in 1951, but they moved to the Bitterroot for lifestyle reasons. Once they saw the valley, they were sold on it. “It was really attractive,” Doris recalled. “It was near wilderness. The river was here, streams for fishing. It was a
magnet." For Doris and her family, "nice" meant wildness and natural beauty. Other people defined the valley as "nice" for different reasons. In 1965, the Ranuzzi family moved from Los Angeles to a ranch up Sleeping Child Creek and relocated their mail order bookstore to the old Mountain States telephone building in downtown Hamilton. "Recent race riots," a newspaper article said, "and the pressure of anonymous threatening phone calls" had caused the couple to move from California. "The Ranuzzis are convinced," the article went on to say, "from on-the-spot observation that the Los Angeles riots and vandalism sprees of three weeks ago were Communist-inspired and directed." The specific nature of the Ranuzzi's business, Poor Richard's Book Store, sheds light on why the Ranuzzis may have received threatening phone calls, or sought a remote home in Montana. Poor Richard's sold books and pamphlets with titles such as "Machine Guns and Gunnery for Machine Guns," "Small Unit Tactics," and "Explosives and Homemade Bombs."  

As the numbers of people who moved into the valley grew in the last half of the 1960's, those hoping to profit from them grew as well. In 1964, the state classified 511 acres in the Bitterroot as

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“Suburban tracts, Villa Sites, Orchards, etc.” In the eight years following that report, the number under the same heading increased by more than 13,000 acres, 87 percent of which were subdivided parcels under forty acres. Most of the acreage was owned by Montanans (72 percent from Ravalli County, 22 percent from Missoula, and 6 percent from other counties), but 45 percent of the property owned by non-Montanans in 1973 was owned by Californians. Although there is no way to know for sure, one has to wonder: were some of the World War II Montana outmigrants finally coming home?

By the late 1960's, some concerned citizens in the valley realized that regulations were going to be necessary in order to control the growth they foresaw in the valley’s future. Just as the Forest Service would be regulated after the outrage that accompanied Dale Burk’s articles, some valley residents felt that the people buying, selling, subdividing and building across the Bitterroot needed some limits put on their activities. In 1966 a planning board was organized in Hamilton to explore the possibilities of regulation in the county. But the board could do nothing legally, and subdivision

continued at a rapid pace. One report stated, in fact, that the noticeable subdivision explosion in the eight-year period was ignited in 1966-67. As with most booms in the West, by the early 1970's, some players in the Bitterroot subdivision explosion wore the mask of deception.

Take the case of the Hamilton real estate broker who bought the Corvallis area ranch of longtime residents Virginia and John Hawker. Desperately broke after years of struggling to make their livestock operation succeed, the Hawkers sold on one condition: that their land would not be divided into sections smaller than five acres. Six months after signing over their farm, the Hawker's learned that their property was being sold in 27 lots ranging in size from 0.9 to 1.8 acres. They felt cheated. Unfortunately for the embarrassed couple, the subdivision was named Hawker Lane Estates.

In 1973, the state legislature passed the Montana Subdivision and Platting Act, which required platting, filing, and public review of all proposed subdivisions. Landowners, however, continued to use loopholes to avoid subdivision review. The act allowed for various

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135 The Ravalli County Subdivision Inventory. p. 8.
exemptions that essentially made the law useless. Essentially, any subdivision over twenty acres in size did not require review. Furthermore, family members could transfer parcels to one another, and “occasional” sales (defined as one sale of a division of land in any twelve-month period) were allowable. Through the use of family exemptions, a man and his wife, along with three children, could split a piece of land of at least 100 acres into twenty-five parcels without any government review. Ninety percent of the land that was subdivided in the state was done without review, so it can be assumed that it happened all over the Bitterroot Valley.

It certainly happened with the Hidden Valley Ranches subdivision near Florence. In 1977, Wilbur Hensler, working through a realtor, subdivided 1,400 acres of his family’s 6,000 acre ranch into 71 parcels of 20-25 acres. Many members of the Florence community immediately raised an uproar. How could the area’s school and fire department handle an influx of more than seventy families? The school district and the fire department took the county to court, arguing that the 20-acre rule was not fair to the community. The fear

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137 The Ravalli County Subdivision Inventory, p. 16.
was that schools would be overcrowded and that subdivision roads
would not be maintained well enough for the safe travel of busses
and fire trucks. The case went to the Montana Supreme Court. The
community won, but it was a brief victory. Hensler, as if seeking to
cut all ties with the community that had fought his plan, simply went
through the back door using exemptions and occasional sales. He
expanded 14 of the 20-acre parcels into 46 more separate
homesites.  In cases like Hensler's it is easy to turn the landowner
into the greedy villain in the black hat. In reality, though, Hensler
was just like many of the valley's ranchers, who more than likely
subdivided as an economic last resort.

Bob Cook, another sheep rancher in the Florence area at the
time, claimed that sheep ranchers saw subdivision as the only way
out after the government made it illegal to eradicate coyote and fox
with the poison 1080 in the early '70's. Cook argued that his losses
went from 30-40 sheep a year to 600 a year after government
regulation.  In spite of the fact that most of his range had been
destroyed decades earlier, or that much of his land was covered in

139 Anthony L. Hadley. "The Montana Subdivision and Platting Act: A Suggestion for Legislative
weeds, Bob Cook used government regulation as the excuse for why he considered selling out. Blaming the government was often easier than facing the reality that agricultural markets were weak while the real estate market kept saying "sell." In the Hensler case the reality was that the ranch was the family's savings account--their retirement fund. Since the soils and market conditions for agriculture in the Bitterroot were not getting better, the selling of bits and pieces of their lands was a more realistic option for many valley ranchers than bankruptcy and an empty cupboard.

Some people were outraged at what they saw as personal greed at the valley's expense in subdivisions such as Hidden Valley. Newspaper headlines ("Victor Wants Controls On Area Subdivisions," "Petitions Protest Hamilton Subdivisions," or "Petition Aims at Protection") from the 1970's show that subdivision and planning arguments in the county were newsworthy events and a major part of the valley's political discourse. The cover letter on one petition spoke to the point: "The Bitterroot can no longer tolerate speculators whose concern for the present and future well-being of the valley go no further than the pocket book."^{141} In 1973 Ravalli County hired a

\^{141} Newspaper articles in Missoulian, Dec. 18, 1973; March 2, 1974; and Sept. 22, 1974, respectively. Quotation from March 2 article.
planner, and by 1976, there was a Comprehensive Plan, but as the county’s current planner, Tim Schwecke, put it, that first plan and the 1981 plan that followed it said very little. Indeed, both plans had an overall tone that seem as if the writers were trying to appease the planning opposition. It may, in fact, have been the case, as sixty percent of the county’s citizens had to approve of a plan for it to pass. As Schwecke said, that tone wasn’t enough. “The planners back then,” he said, “were tarred and feathered and shown the county border.”

As the population grew in the valley, the attitudes of Bitterrooters became of increasing importance with respect to land use issues. By the mid-1970’s, there was a conservative group of the valley’s residents who harbored anti-government sentiments. Some of the group’s fears were rooted in a distrust of the government regulation of private property rights. Many ranchers, for example, while bothered by the urbanization, or development of their rural homeland, wanted the freedom to do as they pleased with their property. It was only fair that one landowner have the same opportunity for a comfortable retirement or economic advancement as another. Meanwhile, people like Doris Milner, who had lived back

east and seen what could possibly happen to the Bitterroot, saw value in controlled growth with proper planning. By 1980, though, after a huge increase in population through the ‘70’s, county residents had failed repeatedly at controlling themselves. While developers used exemptions to create neighborhoods in cowfields up and down the valley, there was still no legal comprehensive plan.

The fight to develop a plan--legal guidelines to growth--would dominate the political debates in the Bitterroot Valley throughout the 1970’s, ‘80’s, and ‘90’s. As with many environmental issues in the West, the planning and growth arguments were characterized by the Catch-22 scenario of changes brought by growth and development--what many believed to be unsafe changes--versus the fiscal necessity faced by farmers and ranchers who were land rich and cash poor.
Five

Growth As a Matter of Self-Control

Local government regulation of private land use is a rationally motivated but largely failed attempt at applied environmental ethics.

John Wright
Rocky Mountain Divide: Selling and Saving the West

Between 1920 and 1970, the number of American farms fell from 6,500,000 to 2,700,000. It was a national trend levied by many forces, but one fact was undeniable: technological advances had made it easier for fewer farmers to grow more of the nation’s food. In 1985, Time magazine ran a cover story about beleaguered farmers, then musicians rocked a stadium full of college students, bikers, and weathered men in green John Deere hats at the first Farm Aid concert. The plight of American farm families was clear. They were a threatened and endangered species.

By 1985 the decline of the American farm was old news in the Bitterroot Valley. Unlike farmers and ranchers in the middle of Iowa or Kansas, Bitterroot farm families had an alternative to total

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economic disaster. The mountains surrounding the valley, sculpted by glaciers millions of years before, were works of art that had been newly discovered. Bitterrooters could sell their land to a real estate agent, or they could subdivide it on their own. Very few of them thought any longer in terms of expansion, mechanization, or crop diversification. The measures were too expensive. Ranching in the Bitterroot was looking more and more like a hobby for rich people.  

By 1980, the number of jobs in retail trade in the valley surpassed every other category of employment, including the nearly equal sections of agriculture and transportation. For the first time in the valley's history, there were more people selling things for a living than there were people growing things. By 1990, the number of people working in retail would outnumber those in agriculture by six hundred jobs. Furthermore, employment in finance, insurance, and real estate increased more than 400 percent in the two decades leading up to 1990. By that year, there were more than twice as many men and women handling money, or selling insurance and

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145 As Thomas M. Power points out, “Nationally, almost 80 percent of the income received by beef-raising operations comes from nonfarm sources.” See Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search for a Value of Place. Covelo, CA: Island Press, 1996: 186. In the case of the Bitterroot, Marcus Daly provides an early example of this trend. Daly’s mining operations funded his Stock Farm. In the modern era, interviewee Hal Herring spoke of one ranch job where he had worked for the heir “to the Pepperidge Farm fortune.” This ranch was later sold to a woman from Georgia whose family had “made a lot of money in the
property in Ravalli County than there were people working in the woods or in mills. It can be assumed that many of the jobs were in the real estate business. At any rate, the extractive industries seemed to be raising white flags. During the same period, population grew 74 percent, and the average dollar value of land increased by more than a thousand dollars an acre. Clearly, from an economic point of view, the Bitterroot Valley in 1990 had changed greatly since the Depression.146

The environmental impacts on the valley following the subdivision and development boom were most prevalent in regards to the area’s water resources. As early as 1973, two hydrologists warned that building in riparian areas posed a serious contamination threat to the valley’s water supply, and therefore to its wildlife and human populations. “Along many of the creek bottoms,” their report noted, “the water table is so high as to seriously impair the operation of septic drain fields during some periods of the year and may pose a definite hazard to those who might use ground water for domestic

purposes in those areas." Extensive irrigation had brought the water table up, now that water was vulnerable, as building in the floodplain and alongside creeks increased. In fact, rivers, streams, and creeks, like views, were seen as amenities to Bitterroot property buyers. Properties alongside water were considerably more expensive than properties that were not. Real estate ads, in addition to describing a house or a piece of land, might say "with creek," or simply "creek" in describing choice properties. Home builders wanted to be able to enjoy what they had bought. It usually meant building dangerously close to the flowing amenity.147

Since the valley's groundwater supply is recharged by the Bitterroot River and its tributaries, county officials realized early the importance of keeping septic leaks or overflows out of the valley's floodplains, especially that zone along the Bitterroot. Their hands were somewhat tied. Without a legal comprehensive plan, sanitation guidelines were (and are today) the only real planning regulations in the valley.148 The 1972 planning report for the Hamilton area admitted as much, when it stated that "Land use in Ravalli County is

presently being planned to a degree by the Ravalli County Board of Health and the planning board.” Having a sanitation law as the main form of planning regulation is problematic because it can’t stop construction. Technically, investors could build a skyscraper on the floodplain, but they weren’t allowed to hook up any toilets. Serious hypothetical questions can be posed: if the county can’t stop someone from building five feet from a creek, how can it expect to keep the owners of that house from putting in a septic tank, or for that matter, throwing buckets full of waste into the river once their home is constructed? In the early ’70s, the County Sanitarian tested nearly 200 wells in the Hamilton area, twenty-five percent of which showed contamination from faulty septic systems. “Chlorination of the wells,” the county said, “in most cases removes the contamination for the present. However, areas with high ground water can expect continued water well problems.” Much of the valley had high water as a result of the increased irrigation following World War II. In the Hamilton area of 1970, a majority of the residents within the city limits were included in the number of people considered to have water problems. Only 41 percent were hooked into the Valley Water

148 Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Committee and Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development Area, Inc. (RC&D). The Bitterroot Futures Study: The Bitterroot Futures
Company line and the city sewer, while the other 59 percent had wells and septic tanks.\textsuperscript{149}

The hypothetical situation posed above, wherein people are denied septic permits by the Board of Health yet build homes and install their tanks anyway, actually happened in the early 1980's. One example, what developers "envisioned as a unique plan," turned into a costly quagmire for the county in a $5 million lawsuit. The Bitter Root Skyport, twenty-two 20-acre plots, was developed on 600 floodplain acres along the river. Airplane owners were going to be able to land on a private airstrip, then taxi up to their homes, all within view of the river. But there was a problem: the Board of health denied the developers any septic permits. Although the county did agree to allow an expensive community sewage system, it was a cost none of the developers had expected, so Sky Port began falling rapidly to earth. Another problem came to light when two couples built homes with illegally installed septic systems. The two houses now sat on the floodplain, with bathrooms waiting on a non-existent sewer, and airplanes waiting on a non-existent runway.\textsuperscript{150}

\textsuperscript{150} Mike McNally and Christine Johnson, "Developers sue Ravalli officials for $5 million," \textit{Missoulian}, April 28, 1982: 21.
While the problem of septic contamination of wells, the river, and the valley's groundwater supply were the major environmental issues on the wet west side drainages and along the floodplain, development offered other problems on the dry eastern benches. Due to the area's general lack of water, Victor hydrologist A. E. Engel dubbed the eastern side of the valley the Heartbreak Hills for their ability to wreck a property buyer's bank account and sanity. Nearly all of the groundwater on the Sapphire side of the valley had been captured in fault and fracture zones in the bedrock during geologic upheaval. Some of the long-held water was 200,000 years old. In a 1984 essay titled "Beware of the Bitterroot lure," Engel estimated that an average home on the eastern benchlands must drill a well 200 feet before striking an even questionable water source--a pocket of water in one of the fracture zones. "In much of the Heartbreak Hills," he wrote, "half the holes drilled to 250 or 300 feet, or deeper, are dry or merely damp. Another one-fourth yield a frustrating trickle of a few gallons a minute and may go dry tomorrow or in the next couple of years." Regardless, land on the eastern side of the valley sold because it was relatively cheap compared to bottom lands. Plus, it was isolated. "Sometimes," Engel went on, "there is the
feeling water is everywhere underground in this garden of Eden" as 
real estate agents or developers promise so much water a minute 
from a well. It was simply not true. Engels’ advice: buy land high on 
the east side only on the condition that you drill a successful well, 
which he defined as any well that hits water in less than 200 feet, 
and produces at least ten gallons a minute year round.151 

One piece of advice Engel doesn’t stress is that anyone who 
chooses to build high on the east side of the valley should make 
certain lifestyle choices in order to live there. Lush lawns, huge 
gardens, long showers, and Saturday afternoons spent washing the 
car may be how the majority of America uses water, but such uses 
are infeasible in the scrub country of the Bitterroot. Hal Herring has 
lived high on the eastern benches for years. He and his wife rent a 
house that has been for sale the whole time they have lived in it. 
Their well produces seven gallons a minute. Herring recalled the time 
a realtor showed the house to a young couple. After the couple 
worried out loud that they would not have enough water to put a 
sprinkler in the yard, the realtor paused, then said, "It’s a million 
dollar view." Another time, Herring’s bedroom window was open and 
he heard another realtor showing a middle-aged couple the lot next 

door. She told them that the area had extremely high producing
wells. "That's a bald-faced lie," Herring said, recalling the incident.
"That's the apple booster rising up in the lady." The couple, from
Marin County, California, eventually bought, came to the valley,
"worked hard" and built a house, then ran out of water. The house
now sits empty. What they didn't understand, Herring explained, is
that "You can't have a yard. You live in Montana at 4,000 feet in a
sagebrush flat, and you are just not going to have a golf course kind
of yard."\(^{152}\)

As population in the valley increased, it became more and
more apparent that decisions made by individuals around water
issues could affect the health and livelihood of the entire valley
community. Often, different sets of values, or environmental ethics,
combined with varying degrees of ecological understanding, led to
headlines in local papers that indicate the new kinds of issues facing
the Bitterroot. The Skyport subdivision controversy, like Burk's
expose on clearcut logging, exemplified the importance of the notion

\(^{152}\) Hal Herring. Personal interview, Corvallis, Mt., March 5, 1997. notes in possession of author. The
Louis and Rich Kroft letter, SC 305, Montana State Historical Society, provides a wonderful example of
how newcomers to the valley bring their ideas about water. In 1993, they wrote a letter to friends and
family that said, "We are so enjoying the peace and tranquility of this little valley, but we have not
forgotten about Arizona and California. As soon as the thermometer dips down a little more, we will pack
up and head for the warmer climes. Then, when the buds burst forth in the Spring, we will drive back to our
that we all live downstream. Skyport, though, was different in that its harms were more hidden. Leaky septic tanks, literally hidden underground, seemed less of a problem than swaths of clearcuts and increased erosion, because the dangers were not visible to everyone.

Another controversy in the early '80's would exemplify the problem differently. In the summer of 1984, the chairman of the Daly Irrigation District board of directors, along with two other men, filled twelve unmarked barrels with xylene from a tank they were not authorized to access. They illegally transported the barrels, then stored them in preparation for what appeared to be the dumping of the toxic chemical into the irrigation system. Xylene, one of the men explained later, was the easiest way to kill the moss that slowed water flow in the ditch. After they were caught, he said that, although he realized that xylene killed fish and invertebrates, he felt that the district could keep the chemical in the ditch until the system could be flushed and sprayed onto alfalfa fields, where it did no apparent damage. Others disagreed, including the administrator of the Daly Ditch's Environmental Management Division, who said, "It's [xylene] pretty destructive. You can't let it go back into state waters."

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home in Montana to mow that acre of lawn....eat those red raspberries....freeze those plump strawberries....and enjoy the harvest of a big garden!"
Another official said that forty percent of the ditch water was lost underground, which meant that it ended up in people's wells. “These headgates,” the man said, “were built 50 or 60 years ago. Every one of them leaks. Every drop of water in that canal goes somewhere.”\textsuperscript{153}

The situation exemplified how a lack of understanding for one's own land use practices can become a dangerous proposition for one's neighbors.

Subdivision development on what had been the open spaces (albeit fenced) of agricultural lands or abandoned orchard scrub on the benches also affected wildlife. Since twenty-acre plots were not subject to review, it was faster for a developer to go larger than smaller with plots; therefore, housing was often spread out instead of clustered. Fewer buffer zones were left between people, their fences, their dogs, and the elk and deer that had used much of the lower elevated lands for winter range. The “systematic division,” biologist Terry Berkhhouse writes, “of large parcels of land into mini-ranchettes might be more problematic to wildlife than other uses.” He cites a study done in Lolo, where it was found that white-tail deer, mule deer, and elk were displaced and pushed into higher elevations by

\textsuperscript{153} For the full story, as played out in the media, see Greg Lakes' two stories: “Officials say little about herbicide probe in Bitterroot,” \textit{Missoulian}, Aug. 1, 1984: 12, and “Herbicide order sparks confrontation,”
the development of the Rodeo Ranchettes subdivision. Meanwhile, money generated by the sale of hunting licenses, funds that were originally intended to reimburse farmers for crops eaten by wildlife, was being used to field complaints about wildlife--complaints made by people living in Montana's new subdivisions. One official from the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks explained that he simply did not have the personnel to respond to all the complaints of deer that were eating people's tulips or emptying their dog's food bowls out on the back porch.

Increased human backcountry use also impacted the experiences of others in the backcountry. As numbers increased in the valley bottoms, so did those people accessing the areas surrounding the valley. In interviews, several valley residents mentioned the "toilet-paper" line at about the one mile mark up the canyons. Beyond that line, things seemed a bit more wild. Bud Moore, born in the Bitterroot in 1917, summed up seventy years of exploring the country surrounding the valley when he wrote: "When I first saw Elk Meadows the mystique of the grizzly prevailed. Then

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came bands of sheep followed by cattle, and now it's big clear cuts and cans." One interviewee said that the biggest change he saw in the ten years between the late '80s and '90s was the number of people who accessed the backcountry for hunting via a motorized vehicle. In a very eloquent explanation, he explained how he believed that the Desert Protection Act in California drove many motorheads out of that state and into less restrictive places like Montana. "Most Montanans I've talked to," he admitted, "would rather shoot their elk off a snowmobile and get home quickly. But when you have 500 people that do this....that's one thing. When you have five thousand, it's a little wilder." "Wilder" in this case, of course, referred to human-generated frenzy. "If I had my way," the man finished, "they'd gate every road and you'd have to walk" in order to access public lands. According to Jim Fournier, a life-long Lolo resident and retired Forest Service employee, there are too many gated roads as it stands. He remembered how wonderful life was in the 1950's when he had one of the only four wheel drive vehicles in the Lolo country. "Now," he said, "with so many four wheel drives, they have to shut everything off." For Fournier and

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others, the loss of access to wilderness was a huge lament, creating a sense of lost freedom.$^{158}$

The senses, or perceptions of what different people in the valley believed regarding certain issues, played a major role in the land use changes that took place in the Bitterroot Valley over the last three decades. The perceptions were important for social and cultural reasons. How people interacted and dealt with one another as neighbors changed as land uses changed. One of the more comic examples was illustrated in 1979, when a developer sued a rancher because of some signs the rancher had cleverly placed along the property line prior to an “open house.” In clear view of Sleeping Child Estates, the affidavit claimed, Hamilton area rancher Jack Evans had posted one sign that announced a future hog farm and a second sign announcing the existence of a nearby rifle range. The developers claimed that the signs damaged their business.$^{159}$

Perceptions about land use and change were relative to experience. In October of 1972, for example, college student Tina Torgrimson drove down Highway 93 and into the heart of the

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$^{157}$ Herring interview.


Bitterroot Valley. "The Bitterroot," she wrote, "had gradually changed since my childhood." Torgrimson noticed houses that had sprung up along the hillsides and in fields. Realty signs were everywhere. The worst part though, for Torgrimson, was what she found on the land that she had lived on as a child. What had been her own personal playground was now "a gaudy motel-restaurant-bar complex" that "would soon have neon signs and a golf course."160

What Torgrimson found in the valley—construction, population increase, and tackiness—was relative to what she had known. For others, moving to the valley from back east, or from the west coast, the Bitterroot was still a pristine place in the 1970's. Newcomers to the valley during that era recall a place with open spaces and rural atmosphere. Rick Torre, a well known valley rock climber, came to the Bitterroot in 1975 from Connecticut. "I liked what was here," he recalled. "There was great opportunity for climbing that was not very well known. It was fairly secret." Torre also remembered how free it felt to drive around the back roads in the valley looking for abandoned farm houses that could be rented cheaply.161

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an avid fly-fisherman who moved to the valley from Kansas a year before Torre, put the feeling he had for the Bitterroot of the '70's in very simple words. “The mountains,” he said, “gave me strength, and the rivers ran clear and had lots of fish.”\textsuperscript{162} By 1993, when Miller and Torre were already lamenting change in the valley, there were still others who saw only greatness in the Bitterroot. Californians Louis and Rich Kroft, for example, bought a place in Corvallis during a trip traveling around the West in 1993. In a letter to friends and relatives, they described the valley as having “an old-fashioned country atmosphere with all the amenities of the city.” After pointing out that they had met many Californians, the Kroft’s give a description of the valley that sounds similar to that given by the O. W. Kerr Company in 1909\textsuperscript{163}:

\begin{quote}
The beauty of the countryside is incomparable. This small valley is bordered on both sides by mountains, so we have the view of the Bitterroot Mountains from our living room and a view of the Sapphire Mountains from our kitchen.\textsuperscript{164}
\end{quote}

The Krofts’ letter attracted enough attention that it ended up in the Montana State Historical Society less than five years after it was

written, so it is not beyond reason to think that it may have attracted some of their friends or family to the valley. If not, perhaps some of their fellow Californians saw ads like the one in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1992: “Had enough? Try Montana,” followed by the phone number of a Bozeman realtor.165

It is apparent from the different perceptions that the Bitterroot of the 1970’s could have been described as a place that was both out of control, and pristine. The dichotomy of perception, based on where people came from and when they came to the valley, is a very important factor to consider in the analysis of land use and change in the Bitterroot Valley. What some people saw as issues at a given point in time were not very alarming to others. In other words, one motel with neon lights was not as noticeable to someone from a place with a thousand motels and ten thousand neon lights. For outsiders, one solitary motel may have even added to the quaintness of the valley. When the motel was built in what had been your family’s field, though, it had an altogether different meaning. The motel example should not implicate that old time Bitterrooters always saw problems where newcomers saw beauty. In fact, the roles were often

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163 See page 25 of this thesis for quotation.
reversed, as old Bitterrooters decried new residents who were vying for responsible development through the organization of groups such as the Bitterroot Citizens for Sensible Growth (BCSG). Ruth Applebury, a Ravalli County Planning Board member in 1978, said of the BCSG at the time that the core of the group "is made up of persons who have moved to the valley recently and now want the doors closed on newcomers." The implication here was that only old-time Bitterrooters could decide what was and was not sensible. "Natives" should be handling the door. Applebury, who had been accused of a conflict of interest as a board member since her son owned a surveying company, stated her views on development very plainly in her defense of the infamous Hensler subdivision: "Wilbur Hensler," she said, "couldn't make a living farming it, so when Reely Brothers offered to buy the land and sell it as a housing development, what choice did he have?"166

Understanding the varying perceptions in the valley, and their fluctuations through the years, is key to understanding how uncontrolled development was allowed to go on in the Bitterroot through the 1970's, '80s, and into the '90s. As agriculture became

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165 Classified ads, July 26, 1992, Los Angeles Times.
less and less of a feasible economic possibility, subdivision and
development increased. Invariably, as some people became disgusted
with development, or were economically unable to remain in the
valley, they moved away. Those who gained politically in the
Bitterroot were the people who remained. They were generally pro­
growth and opposed to planning and regulation. Often, they were the
people who stood to gain the most from development. Ultimately,
many of them ended up on the planning board itself. Of the board
members in 1978 who were neither retired or listed as “housewife”
(7 members), there was a realtor, a building contractor, a banker, an
insurance man, two store owners, a gas station manager, one
“rancher and businessman,” and four full time ranchers. Although
their occupations may not establish that the board was pro-growth.
their voting record and interviews with the board members do.
Board member Shirley Ebel said that she wanted to see development
continue in an “orderly” manner. “Orderly” doesn’t quite sound the
same as “responsible.” Darby rancher Stan Boone said. “You have to
look at who’s leveling the criticisms [against the board]. They
generally come from the liberal segment.” 167 Pro-planning residents
of the valley. the liberal segment Boone undoubtedly referred to, felt

167 ibid.
as if they had no representation on the board. Steve Arno, a founder of BCSG, said that his group was founded "as a result of the utter frustration" many people felt after attending planning meetings.168

Montana sociologist Patrick Jobes explains well how the phenomenon occurs in places such as the Bitterroot where a select group of people can end up controlling the political climate:

Rapid in and outmigration creates a structure of leadership composed of the small minority of residents who remain in the community...This leaves practical local political decisions, like land use planning and schools, to be settled largely by powerful or unrepresentative local interests...Democratic action in the community requires knowledgeable action by residents. Most of the knowledge is idiosyncratic and specific, the kind of information that comes from living in the same place and dealing with the same issues and the same people year after year. This is the Politics of Community. It is this level of politics which disappears with high migration, leaving local decision making to a few powerful interest groups.169

In the Bitterroot, as seen in the make-up of the 1978 Planning Board, the powerful interest groups Jobes refers to did exist. They were composed of the same people who have run planners out of town since the planning office was established, and have kept the county's

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planing regulations soft to the present day. Moreover, it was the same interest group of landowners, realtors, builders, and business people who elected Hamilton realtor Bernie Swift, an avowed opponent of land use planning, to the state legislature in 1983.

Bernie Swift's continued re-election to the District 64 House seat is an excellent example of what Jobes referred to as an unrepresentative local interest taking political control. Nowhere was it more apparent than during the fight to reform the 1973 Subdivision and Platting Act during the 53rd Legislative Assembly in 1993. A Bitterroot study that same year reported that eighty-five percent of surveyed residents in the valley felt that there was uncontrolled growth in the county. In addition, sixty-two percent felt that the lack of planning in the Bitterroot was the most pressing and important issue facing local government. With such numbers, one might expect that Representative Swift would have gone to Helena and fought to reform the very law that had plagued the valley with subdivision problems for the previous twenty years in the form of lawsuits, contaminated wells, overcrowded schools, and bumper to

\[\text{170 From Hadley, p. A2, is Applebury on planners: "We had a bad experience with a planner three years ago. What we need is a layman that can act as a moderator between the planning board, the county commissioners, and the public."}
bumper traffic. To the contrary, Swift became one of the state's more vocal opponents to changing the law, calling the new bill a "planner's delight" that "would make Montana much like the communist nations that are fighting for their freedom." What Swift referred to as communistic was the state's attempt to leave part of Ravalli County's private open space a bit more intact. The reform bill was written to close the 1973 law's loopholes and make any subdivision less than 160 acres subject to review. In some ways it was an attempt to legislate an environmental ethic that said that open space was healthier for Montana's land, and therefore better for Montanans. What Swift saw was the government taking away the freedom of a poor rancher to have a comfortable retirement. The anti-government rhetoric, then, was rooted in fears about lost income. For Swift and many other land rich/cash poor Montanans, the fight to reform subdivision law was a fight about the bottom line. It was a fight about money and financial security.173

Due to the emotions and characters involved, the fight to reform the Montana subdivision law was a fascinating political battle.

The story starred men like Swift and his fellow Republican Bob Gilbert of Sidney, fighting like cats to keep the bill from passing. In addition, there were pro-reform activists, like Missoula student Carter Calle, who worked late hours in Helena developing strategies for a fight that many in the state had labeled as useless. On the sidelines, were groups such as the Montana Audubon Society, who saw reform as positive. As well, there were those like the “Flathead Vigilantes,” who called the state house during the debates and threatened to shoot someone if the bill became law.\textsuperscript{174}

Without a doubt, though, the biggest character in the drama was the land itself. It was cut and scarred, eaten and trampled, abused and left to wash away, but there was just enough of it left that was still not subdivided. Some hope remained for the land. Amidst all the vagaries of politics and back room deals, the image of the land is what got the bill through the houses of the 53rd Montana Legislature. The majority of men and women in that body, partisan politics notwithstanding, were not blind. If they didn’t see subdivision and urban sprawl across the ranches of their home towns, they could see it on their way to Helena along the outskirts of Bozeman, Great Falls, Billings, Missoula, Whitefish, or nearly

\textsuperscript{174} Calle, p. 36.
anywhere else they cared to look. Any way one approached the center of the state, it became increasingly apparent that Montanans had two options: they could make some changes to how they subdivided land, or they could blame Californians until the old Montana was nothing but a dream. Once the bill for reform squeaked past Gilbert and Swift, it looked as if Governor Marc Racicot would do the unimaginable in signing a bill to law for subdivision reform. On April 6, 1993, the governor did just that.

The story is far from over. If history has taught Montanans anything, it should be this: when it looks like the land, or what is collectively known as the environment (i.e. air, water, wildlife), has won a victory, look again. Since a bill does not become law until the governor signs it, developers went to work. In the one week that the bill sat on the governor's desk, 29,000 acres in Gallatin and Park counties alone were subdivided under the 20-acre rule of the 1973 law. In Missoula, where the county usually saw two subdivision parcel filings a day, officials received 200-300 a day during that same week. A new term was used to describe the subdivisions: "Racicot's Ranchettes."^{175}

^{175} Calle, p.90.
The Bitterroot valley, of course, would have its own flurry of activity, but one developer beat the rush. Local businessman Harold Mildenberger, who had acquired some of the valley's best lands the previous year, when he purchased nearly 19,000 acres of the Daly Stock Farm, had seen the writing on the wall. The week before the bill got through the legislature, Mildenberger's attorney showed up at the Ravalli County courthouse with 348 twenty-acre parcels created from the Daly lands. His client, who had sold more than 10,000 acres of his timbered land (30 million board feet) to a logging company in January, wanted to subdivide 6,600 acres. "I had nothing in mind," Mildenberger said, "than to beat that law. I just don't personally agree with the state of Montana regulating the ground on the ranch." In fact, Mildenberger may have had something else in mind all along. Four years later, in 1997, he and one of his partners, the renowned investor Charles Schwab, announced plans for The Stock Farm, an exclusive equestrian and golf club on 2,600 acres. Memberships, it was announced, including horse stables and rounds of golf on a Tom Fazio designed course, would be limited to about 350 memberships. It was to be an exclusive affair and rumors

circulated that golfer Tiger Woods and actor Kevin Costner had been seen in Hamilton. Regardless of the validity to rumors, one could be sure that Charles Schwab and Wilbur Hensler ran in different circles.

Big money lends itself to the kind of development that most Bitterroot subdivision developers could never imagine. In many ways, The Stock Farm may end up being one of the better things that could have happened to the 19,000 acres of undeveloped, open-space on the Daly estate. When one considers that it may have otherwise been divided and sold in its twenty-acre tracts to 348 different developers and as many ideas, Schwab's and Mildenberger's plan sounds reasonable from a local environmental and social perspective. The developers realized the value of open space, so their design called for a clustering of all homes on a 661-acre area. They hired consultants to figure out where buildings and the golf course should go in relation to winter elk range. They announced plans to put more than a thousand acres into an easement to protect that range. They also hired a local log home company to build the buildings and homes, as well as enlisting the Bitterroot Native Growers, Inc. to oversee the growing and planting of some 30,000 native plants and trees to be used on the development. Compared to most
"development" in the valley, one could almost hear the relief in the voice of current County Planner Tim Schwecke, when he said of the project, "We've been trying to promote something like this for a long time. In this case, the property lends itself to it." The property did lend itself to the new type of use. What had been an exclusive ranch and horse farm for more than a century was now a subdivided golfer's Eden.

By 1992 less than sixteen percent of the Bitterroot Valley was considered farmland. As subdivision development increased into the last decade of the century, an inversely proportional drop in farm lands and production had followed. Although a large number of cattle (42,367) still roamed the open spaces between the newly sprouted neighborhoods in the valley, their numbers indicated a 22 percent drop since the previous census. In addition, the amount of cropland harvested and small grains threshed dropped 20 percent and 51 percent from their 1980's totals. Valley farmers now spent more than three million dollars annually on livestock feed. The livestock industry, although it still accounted for 85 percent of the valley's agricultural production, dropped to its pre-World War II levels. Agricultural production in the valley was a fraction of what it had been. Instead of sugar beets, or wheat, oats, and apples, beef was joined by log homes as the important things that the Bitterroot grew.
It was obvious in 1992 that land use in the valley had changed significantly in ten years, not to mention sixty.\textsuperscript{178}

Land use was not the only thing that became noticeably changed by the 1990's. New perceptions about the valley emerged. A 1993 study, for example, showed that 65 percent of the respondents who worked in the agricultural, timber, and mining sectors in the valley felt that their biggest problem was that resources had been locked up by environmental activists and that planners were trying to limit their economic advancement.\textsuperscript{179} The argument sounds distinctly different than Sam Maclay's explanation of his problems in 1972, when he said that much of his 4,000 acres was just a lot of rock that could grow next to nothing. It also sounds different than Fred Wilkerson, who told Matthew Hansen in 1982 that he and other loggers in the 1940's, '50s, and into the '60s "didn't do no selective. We took everything...we didn't think nothin' about it, just went ahead and done it." According to the men who saw the valley change, indeed, participated heavily in that change, environmental activists had nothing to do with the Bitterroot's lack of work in agriculture or logging. By the 1990's, a good number of Maclay's and Wilkerson's

\textsuperscript{179} The Bitterroot Futures Study: The Bitterroot Futures Forecast Narrative Report, p. B-10.
successors had forgotten some long held notions that earlier
generations in the valley had understood very well: the land was
never very good to begin with, and it was not made any better by a
hundred years of grazing. Moreover, the logging industry was non­
existent because everything worth cutting had already been cut. As
Fred Thorning put it in the early ‘80s regarding the valley’s logging
at that time: “Some of those logs today wouldn’t even have been used
for fencerrails, hardly. Now they are haulin’ in bushels of them. It’s
kind of pathetic.” Did Thorning mean that it was pathetic what his
generation of loggers had left their sons, or that the sons’ generation
had even bothered to call logging a profession?180

Understanding the concept of changed perceptions may be the
key to understanding why the Bitterroot in 1998 still has the useless
1981 Comprehensive Plan, why the Ravalli County Fair is budgeted
more county money annually than the planning office, and why the
valley is considered beyond hope, by many who live there, of ever
being a remnant of its former self.181 “To blame local environmental
protection,” writes economist Tom Power, “for depressed wages or
unemployment that is caused by international competitive pressure

180 Maclay, Wilkerson, and Thorning interviews.
is not only unproductive; it seriously misrepresents the actual economic choices we face." In the case of the Bitterroot, international competitive pressure did play a role in depressed wages, unemployment, and changes in land use. Decline in beef sales, for example, made ranching less profitable, just as the opening of various Third World logging operations affected the timber belt of the Pacific Northwest. International competition is just part of the equation that resulted in change for the Bitterroot. Other factors in the equation were marginal soils, large numbers of livestock, and unsustainable logging on the area's forested lands. The result of market forces and a decreased productive capacity from the land was fairly simple. Bitterroot farmers and ranchers could subdivide or perish. Faced with such a predicament, should it come as any surprise that Bitterrooters chose to survive? Although subdivision and growth meant that the valley's environment might change atleast as much as it's culture, when one considers that agriculture wasn't paying the bills--and had not been for most of the valley's history--it becomes clear that changes were inevitable.

The interesting point, and perhaps the key in an analysis of the importance of perception, is that Bitterrooters continued to blame

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182 Power, p. 60.
outsiders, environmentalists, and the government for the changes. As Power goes on to say, the misrepresentation of fact entertained by the people who blame environmental protection for a place's problems "may be a useful political strategy for those who would milk economic fear to mobilize support for intensified natural resource extraction and toxic waste disposal."\(^{183}\) Although there are no known efforts to dispose of toxic waste in the Bitterroot, Bernie Swift's fight against subdivision reform in Helena in 1993, including his comparison of planning with communism, seems to be the same thing. When one considers the number of valley wells being contaminated by leaky septic tanks, combined with the fact that the major form of environmental protection in the valley can only happen through land use planning, Power's point is exemplified in the Bitterroot Valley. With no usable comprehensive plan, and anti-planning politics espoused by the political leadership, the Bitterroot has poisoned itself. Instead of one dump, the valley has hundreds, perhaps thousands, spread throughout the porous valley floor that was created several million years ago.

What are the chances that Ravalli County will limit itself and pass a plan relatively soon that actually works to keep the valley

\(^{183}\) Ibid.
residents from destroying their homes? Not likely. "The destruction of 'place'." writes John Wright. "is so institutionalized and bears such a veneer of normality or even inevitability that to challenge it is to appear out of step with the 'real' world." In the Bitterroot, challenging the destruction caused by unregulated growth means staying put and fighting, which few people are willing to do. "I think what's going to happen," says County Planner Schwecke. "is that for a long time to come, this valley is going to be better than where people are coming from, and because of that, we are always going to have new people coming in. It's going to transition and the people who are seeing what's happening are going to move to some other place. Meanwhile, the people moving here think everything is great. We are in a transitioning period. Transitioning into what I'm not sure."

The historical record makes the transition clear. In 250 years the Bitterroot Valley has gone from Salish horse country, to a place where people struggled to make ends meet by working in agriculture and logging, to a subdivided amalgamation of homes and ranches. The Bitterroot has become a place where subdivision and development concerns are paramount issues in county politics. The

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184 Wright, p. 252.
185 Schwecke interview.
provision referred to in the newspaper clip below was to make smaller the subdivided parcels subject to review. The paragraph presents the major Bitterroot political issue of the late ‘90s succinctly:

Although the provision received 83 percent support in a random mail survey of 400 Ravalli County residents earlier this year, organized opposition by Realtors, ranchers and livestock associations emerged recently. The most common complaint is that the provision would limit a farmer or rancher’s ability for a comfortable retirement by limiting the development potential of their land.\textsuperscript{185}

The importance of subdivision development, population growth, and the environmental, social, and cultural consequences that go with it depend on one’s own perspective. It is undeniable that the Bitterroot Valley has changed and is still changing. The garden has been subdivided. Whether or not an Edenic place is being destroyed or created, though, is in the eye of the beholder.

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