2000

There's going to be hell to pay? an evaluation of tourism in Whitefish Montana

Diana L. Di Stefano

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Di Stefano, Diana L., "There's going to be hell to pay? an evaluation of tourism in Whitefish Montana" (2000). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 8441.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/8441
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission 

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: ____________________________

Date: Dec 5, 2000

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
THERE'S GOING TO BE HELL TO PAY?
An Evaluation of Tourism in Whitefish, Montana

By
Diana L. Di Stefano
B.A. Colorado College, 1993

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
The University of Montana
December 2000

Approved By:
Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School

Date

1-19-01
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dan Flores, Dave Emmons, and Norma Nickerson for their guidance and patience. I feel truly privileged to have been given the opportunity to work at the University of Montana.

My appreciation also extends to my family: Joan, Lew, Anne Marie, and Skaia Di Stefano. Their support was invaluable.

This thesis is dedicated to Alina Keyser, a friend, who left this world too soon.

Louisville, Colorado
December 2000
Hal K. Rothman, history professor at UNLV, argues that tourism is a “Devil’s Bargain” for towns that have exchanged traditional extractive industries for tourism in *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century* (1998). Instead of strengthening local economies, he believes tourism rewards corporate outsiders and unravels solid community networks. Is tourism truly a “Devil’s Bargain” as Rothman suggests, or a logical and lucrative economic adjustment? This examination of Whitefish, Montana, provides some answers to this question.

Whitefish started out like many towns in the West. The first white settlers farmed, hunted, and logged. Then the railroad entered the picture, and Whitefish grew from a few cabins into a town. What made Whitefish different than many other Western towns was its early inclusion of tourism into its economy. Certainly Whitefish’s proximity to Glacier National Park inspired the locals to invest in tourism, but their dedication to projects—most notably the Big Mountain ski area—were tangible choices made in this direction. In Whitefish tourism produced a more stable economy and community.

What makes Whitefish important is not that it has managed to be a tourist town without the cost of losing its small town feel, but for what it suggests about tourism in the West. Perhaps tourism is not the evil that so many perceive it to be. Especially important is to understand the alternatives to tourism. Although similar to traditional extractive industries, in that it relies on resources like snow and open space, tourism has the potential to give towns used to boom-bust economies two seasons of solid work year after year. Again, when evaluating tourism it is imperative to remember where this town would be without it.

Like any community, Whitefish has problems. It has more minimum wage jobs that have little opportunity for advancement than is ideal. The town’s popularity has increased real estate prices. Overall, however, the millions of dollars that pour into local businesses, the solid economy that will only grow if predictions of tourist numbers are accurate, and the quality of life in Whitefish, prove that the incorporation of tourism can be done well.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................... 1

Chapter One:
Nostalgia: A Lopsided View of History ............... 4

Chapter Two:
Why A Ski Town? ........................................... 21

Chapter Three:
Choices or Concessions? ............................... 47

Chapter Four:
Whitefish: The Last Best Place to Live? .............. 64

Conclusion:
Debunking the “Devil’s Bargain” ....................... 86

Bibliography ............................................. 93
Ed Schenck and George Prentice were in trouble. Three weeks before the scheduled December 19, 1947, opening of the Big Mountain ski area in Whitefish, Montana, they were out of money. They still needed to pay workers and finish construction of the lodge. The two promoters and investors, both from Great Falls, Montana, had a very bad feeling when "the word went around that there was going to be an indignation meeting at 8:00 P.M. in the Odd Fellows Hall." Of the $70,000 raised to start the area, $40,000 had come from local investors. Now, the money was gone, the project unfinished, and the locals upset.

Schenck and Prentice's fears only increased upon arrival at the meeting. "There must have been nearly 100 townsfolk sitting around the outside of the hall, and they were the quietest, longest-faced chamber-of-commerce crowd" Schenck had run across. When Shirley Lincoln got up and not only closed the doors but locked them too, Schenck and Prentice prepared themselves for the worst. Instead of hearing the expected attack, however, they watched Brad Seeley, the president of the Chamber-of-Commerce with bewilderment and then understanding. They had all just "walked right into the most powerfully earnest money-raising session the town had ever seen." With so much invested, with the building almost completed, the only choice that made sense to the town was to rescue their project. That night the townspeople

---

1 Edmund Christopherson, "They Bet Their Shirts on Skiing," The Saturday Evening Post 222 (March 4, 1950): 110-114.
bought another $6000 in stock. The Big Mountain opened officially on December 14, 1947, a few days early, thanks to some unexpected snow.

What compelled the people of Whitefish to support a ski area and the repercussions of their actions will be the focus of this thesis. More than just a case study, this project strives to reveal that when tourism replaced the railroad it had positive effects on the quality of life in this small, Rocky Mountain town.

What makes Whitefish exceptional is not its success as a year-round resort but for what it suggests about tourism in the West. First, Whitefish's story does not mesh with conclusions that some historians, most notably Hal Rothman, make about western tourism. In his recent book, Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West, Rothman insists that large-scale tourism does not benefit locals as much as it does outside corporate investors. Besides the economic relationship, Rothman employs healthy doses of nostalgia to judge tourism. He also critiques its degenerative impact on small-town culture.

Rothman's book contributes some helpful case studies and interesting ideas; it does not do justice, however, to the complex nature of tourism in the West. This thesis will first evaluate his research, then other historians' work, in order to build a better set of criteria for examining western tourism.

Ibid., all quotes, p.110.

Next I will look at Whitefish’s history. I will mainly use newspaper articles, interviews, secondary sources, and economic and labor statistics to reconstruct Whitefish’s development. Finally, I will discuss the implications of Whitefish’s history for other Western towns. The purpose of the final discussion is to contribute to a better analysis of Western tourism in general. A clearer set of criteria is a vital contribution due to tourism’s prominent place in the West. Economically and socially tourism shaped and will shape Western development; this means historians need to carefully choose how to study it.

Whitefish started out like many towns in the West. The first white settlers farmed, hunted, and logged. Then the railroad entered the picture, and Whitefish grew from a few scattered cabins into a town. When the railroad began its decline after World War II, Whitefish sought economic alternatives. It chose tourism. Whitefish’s development mirrors that of many western towns that had only one big business in town. Whether the railroad, timber, or mines, when these businesses crashed, the towns faced hard times. Whitefish’s successful transition from a railroad town to a resort is a persuasive argument for Western tourism – not just for economic reasons – but social ones as well. A study of Whitefish demonstrates why historians need to ask careful questions before they make conclusions about this industry.
A departure from celebratory narratives is the hallmark of the New Western History. Historians such as Patricia Limerick and Richard White have demonstrated that the West’s history is much more than tales of daring explorers and hearty pioneers. Incorporating aspects of social, cultural, and environmental history into re-interpretations of the West has resulted in an explosion of valuable scholarship. Although studies of Western communities and their accompanying industries are not necessarily new, the types of questions asked have grown more sophisticated.

Examples are historians who look at the problems Western communities confront when faced with the decline of extractive industries such as mining and logging. Although many once thriving communities are nothing but ghost-towns now, others have survived the boom-bust cycles typical of extractive industries by opting to find new industries or markets to revitalize their economies. Mining towns like Aspen and Telluride, Colorado, became successful tourist spots. Jackson, Wyoming, jumpstarted its flagging ranching industry by building a ski area and promoting the area’s “western” hospitality. The implications of these transitions provide many avenues of analysis.

Earl Pomeroy, one of the first historians to explore the economic importance of tourism in the West, writes about the relationship between the tourist and the “toured upon.” In
Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America, published in 1957, is still an insightful contribution to studies of tourism in the West from the late 1880s to the 1950s. Pomeroy begins by describing what the tourist meant to Westerners: "He himself is a crop, and he is more than that; he is a link to the rest of the world that their souls need as well as their pocketbooks." Pomeroy recognizes the relationship between Westerners and tourists; the tourist was cultivated by Westerners, and in turn, the tourist provided the Westerner with not only self-definition but with a value of place – literally and personally. He writes that the tourist,

never simply tours through the West: he changes the West when he looks at it, . . . because Westerners change the West into what they think he wants it to be or, with less commercial intent, even change themselves into what they [the tourists] think he is.

Pomeroy, in his ensuing text, reduces what sounds like a complicated topic into a lucid chronology of process.

Pomeroy identifies the completion of the transcontinental railroad, in 1869, as a definitive moment for tourism in the West. "[E]ach newly completed transcontinental railway shortly bore a trainload of eastern excursionists peering through Pullman palace-car windows at the remnants of the frontier." Whether they came in private cars or on package tours, wealthy Easterners and Europeans traveled west. During the late nineteenth century well-heeled tourists required luxurious accommodations. The railroads often provided not only the transportation, they built

---

the hotels too. In the 1880s, opulent hotels like the Del Monte in Monterey, California, and the Antlers and Broadmoor hotels in Colorado Springs, catered to tourists who demanded warm baths, scenic carriage rides, and mineral water. “Elsewhere in the West there was hardly a mountain, a seaside cove, or an eruption of foul-tasting water that did not nourish ambitions” of building resorts.

Simultaneous with the development of luxury resorts, Americans re-evaluated their perceptions of the natural environment. As wide-open space became scarce, its cultural capital increased. Pomeroy emphasizes the point that as more Easterners sought to escape the malaise of urban living, Westerners provided them with dude ranches, nature cruises, carriage rides to Yosemite, guided hunting, and pack trips. Many Americans, like Theodore Roosevelt, regarded the West as the last bastion of the rugged, outdoor, masculine lifestyle personified by the cowboy. Thus, the railroads made the West accessible, the Westerners provided the accommodations, and the West itself provided the scenery.

Pomeroy pinpoints the 1920s as the next critical moment for tourism in the West. The automobile changed tourism irrevocably. As the middle class grew and people had more money and leisure time, the automobile replaced the train as the preferred mode of travel. “The tourist might still be more prosperous than the American who stayed at home, but the automobile represented a new democratization of vacation travel.” Middle class tourists had different expectations than their wealthier predecessors, and
once again the Westerners adapted to their needs. Roads built in the 1930s brought them in droves and campgrounds and motor courts sprang up all over the West. Pomeroy regards southern California and Las Vegas as especially bizarre, amorphous places that changed rapidly to accommodate tourists' fickle tastes.

Pomeroy's discussion ends with tourism in the 1950s. He notes that as people become more mobile the demarcation between urban and rural life became less distinct, and the difference between East and West less noticeable. "The tourist merges into the average American as the places that he tours merge into the average America. The tourist likewise, as Easterner, comes to affect what passes for Western or outdoors habits when he is at home, or in his own section." Similarly, as Westerners themselves become tourists in the West and elsewhere, the differences between tourist and toured-upon become less clear. But even as these lines blurred, Westerners recognized how necessary tourism was to their economy. "[T]ourists are an essential part of the West, the West that is, the West that was, and the West as Westerners like to think it was," Pomeroy wrote in 1957. Although tourism's relationship with the West was not as obvious as the region's partnership with extractive industries, it was a long established one.

Hal K. Rothman's most recent work, Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West, is in many ways the

---

1 Ibid., first quote, p. vi; second quote, p. vii; third quote, p. 7; fourth quote, p.27; fifth quote, p.130; sixth quote, p. 221; seventh quote, p. 231.

sequel to Pomeroy's study. Due to the praise Rothman's book has received, any evaluation of tourism should take it into account. Richard White calls it "a breakthrough book." Gerald Nash considers it an important contribution to the growing work on tourism in the West.

Rothman lays out his thesis in the introductory paragraph:

Tourism is a devil's bargain, not only in the twentieth-century American West but throughout the nation and world. Despite its reputation as a panacea for the economic ills of places that have lost their way in the postindustrial world or for those that never found it, tourism typically fails to meet the expectations of communities and regions that embrace it as an economic strategy. Regions, communities, and locales welcome tourism as an economic boon, only to find that it irrevocably changes them in unanticipated and uncontrollable ways. From this one enormous devil's bargain flows an entire collection of closely related conditions that complement the process of change in overt and subtle ways. Tourism transforms culture into something new and foreign; it may or may not rescue economies.

Rothman continues by pointing out that, "The capital that sustains these interests comes from elsewhere, changing local relationships and the values that underpin them and their vision of place." When tourist towns rely on outside sources of income for development they lose control of their communities.

Rothman's critique of tourism is founded on its ability to impact what he perceives as, "another West, rural, rooted, and increasingly challenged by changing economic conditions, ..." The "Devil's Bargain" is realized when "local control, becomes institutionalized by large-scale forces of capital, and then grows to mirror not the values of the place but those of the traveling public." When Western communities adopt tourism to

---

Rothman: see dust jacket comments.
"maintain community fabric," they instead experience a "diminishing . . . of their sense of self and place."

Rothman's argument is powerful and persuasive. It does not tell the whole story, however. Patricia Limerick's essay "Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West,"7 considers other aspects of studying tourism. Limerick warns historians to beware the temptation of "casting the tourists . . . as boorish, invasive, repellent and insensitive." She argues that the relationship between locals and tourists needs to be looked at from both sides. Furthermore, the fluid identity of tourist towns, created by the desires of the tourists, produce unusual environments (though not necessarily demonic ones). Whether they take the shape of a Bavarian village or a cowboy town, the impacts on these communities begs to be understood from the standpoint of how they build up or undermine local culture.

Limerick also wonders if tourism is the answer for towns whose economies are on the ropes. "Given the instability and even decline of the conventional, rural western enterprises, given the economic troubles afflicting mining, logging, ranching, and farming, does not the lesson of history point in the direction of tourism?"8 Extractive industries' boom-bust cycles create weak communities. Tourism, she writes, seems to be a

---

5 Gerald D. Nash, review of Devil's Bargains for Western Historical Quarterly 30 (autumn 1999): 373.
6 Rothman, Devil's Bargains, first quote, p.10; second quote, p.10; third quote, p. 15, fourth quote, p. 16; fifth quote, p. 17; sixth quote, p. 16.
viable alternative - the only choice anyway that offers reliable sources of income while simultaneously protecting the environment and local culture. Limerick recognizes that tourism generates problems such as pollution, irresponsible development, and elevated costs-of-living. Still, she regards it as a stabilizing influence for towns that have been riding the extractive industry roller coaster.

Anne F. Hyde's essay "Round Pegs in Square Holes: The Rocky Mountains and Extractive Industry," also contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between tourism and its past. She argues persuasively for Rocky Mountain exceptionalism:

I define this region to include Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and parts of Utah and Idaho— in other words, all the states or parts of states that have a significant chunk of both the Continental Divide and sweeps of high plains running through them. Water, politics, human use, and geology make these geographic features inseparable and grant them the power to create water, fur, precious metals, coal, and vacation resorts. The presence of tremendous mountains in combination with high plains has made life in the area distinctive, especially the culture and society that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Hyde continues to point out that, "[t]wo major features make it [the West] distinctive: the inhospitable but spectacular nature of mountains and high plains, and the overwhelming presence of extractive industries, which has created a variety of peculiar adjustments in society and culture."

She identifies similarities between the ski industry and more traditional extractive industries such as mining, logging,

---

Ibid., first quote, p. 16; second quote, p. 28.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
and ranching. "We can trace important similarities among the fur trade, mining, ranching, and skiing, largely because all of them are intricately connected to high mountains and plains." Too,

These industries emerged in extremely isolated areas, developed rapidly, were characterized by intense urbanization and industrialization, and relied on non-Anglo labor for most of the work. Perhaps most significantly, they all came about both because of and in spite of the Rocky Mountains.

Furthermore, these industries depended on the infusion of outside capital for start-up costs. Small towns like Aspen, Colorado, first courted investors interested in mining its rich deposits of silver, and then extra-local sources to fund its ski area.

... [I]n the 1940s, when Aspen's silver fortunes had faded completely, local boosters recognized its potential as a national ski resort, but did not have the capital to build it. Walter Paepcke, a Chicagoan ... provided the necessary millions to build ski lifts, lodges, and hotels.

Hyde points out that though small Rocky Mountain towns relied on this type of outside investment, they often resented the outside control. "Especially in volatile western industries, where bust followed boom with both suddenness and inevitability, eastern capital was a mixed blessing." The investors' involvement created an unbalanced dynamic of power, in which the corporations could make decisions that drastically affected the community.

The continuous involvement of extra-local interests belies the common myth that "the West had been a quiet place, where little men built an economy and loved the land, only to have Easterners destroy it or lock it up." Rather, the transient and erratic populations of Rocky Mountain towns meant a disregard for the land.
Most people went to the Rocky Mountains to make a quick killing and leave. They had no regard for land whatsoever and, indeed, considered it a barrier to their instant wealth. Land captured resources—whether precious metals, coal, furs, beef, mutton, water, or ski trails—and the task of the individual was to pry them from the land. Most people found themselves unequal to the task and only by becoming employees of large corporations or subsides of the federal government could they succeed.

This lack of attachment to the land meant a weak social fabric as well as a legacy of bad environmental practices. Mining and logging left behind polluted and denuded landscapes, whereas corporate skiing taxed local infrastructures and produced rapid and poorly planned development that destroyed fragile alpine habitat.

The final point to be drawn from Hyde’s work is recognition of the conflict of interest between the old and new industries. "... [T]he entire region has experienced tension between traditional extractive industries that bored mountains out and tore them down and the tourism that worshiped the mountains."10 Currently, many of the problems in Western communities arise not from outside corporate involvement - a long-standing phenomenon; instead the issues revolve around differing opinions about how to use the land.11 Ranchers and loggers perceive the economic uses of land differently than ski businesses. Ranchers and loggers complain about the changes in their communities brought about by an increase in tourism. The important point is that it is most

10 Ibid., first quote, p. 95; second quote, p. 95; third quote, p. 96; fourth quote, p. 96; fifth quote, p. 107; sixth quote, p. 108; seventh quote, p. 109; eight quote, p. 110; ninth quote, p. 96.

11 The recent controversy over Clinton’s Roadless Initiative is a current example of this.
often the tourists, seasonal residents, and transient workers who they resent, not the corporations.

For miners and loggers, extracting as much as possible with the least amount of effort results in strip-mines and clear-cuts. Federal projects leave vast tracts of land contaminated with nuclear waste and lethal chemicals. These businesses conflict directly with the goals of a resort town, which are often to capitalize on the unblemished beauty of its natural surroundings. When these industries co-exist they contribute to the lack of social cohesion that concerns Hyde. It may also account for some of the chameleon-like qualities of Western communities that Limerick finds so prevalent.

The first area of disagreement between Rothman, Limerick and Hyde is Limerick's conclusion that tourism is a better choice than other industries. Rothman believes that tourism's attendant problems overwhelm any advantages it brings to a community; Hyde regards it as so similar to extractive industries that it will produce the same problems. Rothman's arguments, however, for a "before" and "after" tourism, tangle the competing theories of these scholars too. Hyde, who does not see tourism as a departure from traditional economic organization in Rocky Mountain towns, would argue against its detrimental effects on "self and place." Her argument for continuity, though without perhaps the satisfyingly moral conclusions Rothman provides, is a better jumping-off point for looking at tourism in ski/resort towns.
Perhaps the greatest weakness of Rothman's thesis is that he attempts to cram all tourism in the West within its parameters. Comparing tourism in Aspen and Las Vegas is interesting to be sure; however, because of the differences in their locations, origins, growth patterns, and even choice of tourist activities (skiing vs. gambling) any broad sweeping conclusions are bound to be full of holes. Hyde's argument for Rocky Mountain exceptionalism allows for a more nuanced examination of tourism in the West. Because tourism manifests itself in many shapes and forms, all-inclusive analyses of communities are problematic. These problems include the actual economic viability of a place before tourism, the quality of life of inhabitants, the environmental impacts of tourism versus other extractive industries, and to what extent the scripting of self and place in a tourist town is actually detrimental to community fabric. Hyde might argue that adopting a "Bavarian" or "Western" theme gives a cohesive identity to mountain towns that had none.14 Hyde's and Limerick's studies at least are more true to New Western history's theories of complexity.

Rothman's book is helpful, but he chooses to judge tourism in the Western United States from a limited set of criteria that only include local control of tourist enterprises, development, and growth in small/rural communities. His analysis does not address environmental questions fully. He also does not examine the standard of living of people in the community, their

14 David Emmons has some interesting ideas too about the lack of a true mountain culture in the Rocky Mountains (conversation with author, spring 1999).
continual reliance on outside investors for a stable economy, or how tourism is perceived by more than one group of people. Locals who have prospered or who believe their communities retain special qualities are missing from his analysis. He also does not look at alternatives to tourism and their potential impacts on communities. Hyde’s and Limerick’s questions and analysis provide a more sophisticated framework for studying tourism. Together, however, all their works demonstrate ways to evaluate and understand tourism in the twentieth century West and beyond.

In terms of evaluating tourism, two additional books are particularly helpful. They will form the foundation of my conclusions about tourism in Whitefish, Montana. The first, Thomas Michael Power’s *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: the Search for a Value of Place*, recognizes the dangers implicit in tourism, but also its potential.

If a community adopts a helpless beggars-can’t-be-choosers attitude and passively accepts any and all tourist proposals, tourism may well someday consume it. But if the community cherishes its amenities and has the confidence to protect them, it can lay the foundation for local entrepreneurs to develop compatible, dispersed tourist businesses that help vitalize the local economy.

Important to the success of tourism is preservation of the features that attracted visitors in the first place, a factor not present in extractive industries. However, while acknowledging that tourism has an environmental impact, it is important to ask, Compared to what? Backpackers and hunters may be so numerous that they start to damage the land and wildlife in a particular area, but they will probably never have as disruptive an impact as clear-cutting millions of acres of forest has had. Although

---

white-water rafters and other recreationists can have various environmental effects on rivers, it’s hard to imagine any recreational use having as great an impact on America’s rivers as large-scale dams, flood control, channelization, irrigation diversion, and agricultural chemical runoff.

Tourism, recreation, and vacation-home developments definitely have environmental impacts that should be avoided where possible. But one has to look at other urban or industrial uses to which land may well be put before concluding that tourism is the threat rather than economic growth in general.

Power recognizes that, “[r]esort towns such as Aspen, Colorado, and Jackson, Wyoming, have almost completely transformed and swallowed up their “original” communities.” So like Rothman he sees that, “[l]arge-scale tourism is not just another economic activity, with it can come cultural change and the physical transformation of a community.” But the success of tourism as a replacement economy, when done right, balances out these impacts. He cites the example of Dubois, Wyoming, which with the close of its lumber mill, decided to capitalize on the fact that it, is home to the largest bighorn sheep herd in the country. . . . The director for economic development in Fremont County claims that this area ‘may be one of the few places in the country basing our economic revitalization on wildlife and wild-land rehabilitation.’

The immediate results of building a National Bighorn Sheep Interpretive Center and a commitment to land protection have been interesting indeed.

In the years following the mill closure, real income in Dubois grew by 8.5 percent per year while the Wyoming economy showed almost no real growth and the national economy grew at less than a third of this rate—hardly the doom that proponents of feeding the landscape to the mill had forecast.14

14 Ibid., first quote, p. 235; second quote, p. 221; third quote, p. 220; fourth quote, p. 164; fifth quote, p. 164.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Power chose Dubois to demonstrate that the right kind of community direction can be good for the environment and the economy. Juxtaposed against logging and the mill, it is difficult to regard the emphasis on bighorns and protecting their range as a "Devil's Bargain" in terms of community or environmental loss.

The second useful book is *The Tourist City*, edited by Dennis R. Judd and Susan Fainstein. The book is a collection of essays that primarily deal with tourism in big cities like Boston and Orlando. Their emphasis on large cities does not preclude its usefulness to my analysis. They discuss certain questions for evaluating tourism that are relevant to tourism in cities and smaller communities alike. They ask,

How should we evaluate the effects of... tourism on local populations? Do citizens benefit from tourist amenities, and is there equitable access to facilities? Does tourism maintain or undermine the local culture? Do tourist and indigenous uses support one another and intermix, or does the tourist bubble constitute an isolated, secured fortress for outsiders? Is the relationship between resident and visitors respectful, or does it demean the providers?

Other questions that Judd and Fainstein consider include whether the increase in the cost of living has matched wages, how much of the profit made by those involved in tourism has been reinvested in the community (roads, public services, etc.), if service jobs created by tourism lead to managerial positions, and if local small businesses benefit. Finally, they acknowledge that "reaching conclusions about the desirability of tourism as it affects culture ultimately boils down to a highly subjective
hierarchy of values."\(^{16}\) I believe that Sorting through those values can ultimately only be done by those who live in the community itself.

Oral histories and interviews present insights into how residents view their communities. Alessandro Portelli argues in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History,\(^{17}\)* that "one of the reasons why oral history has been sometimes less welcome in some circles is that it has disarranged many accepted truths." He continues: "Rather than replacing previous truths with alternative ones, however, oral history has made us uncomfortably aware of the elusive quality of historical truth itself." He questions whether historical truth in fact exists. He believes that "an aspiration toward 'reality', 'fact', and 'truth' is essential to our [historians'] work [for] though we know that certainty is bound to escape us, the search provides focus, shape, and purpose to everything we do."\(^{18}\) Portelli notes that interpreting the subjectivity of oral history requires sensitivity. In fact, for Portelli, the quality of subjectivity is what makes oral history so precious and fascinating. With that in mind, I look to the subjective and personal stories of the people in Whitefish to further illuminate the troubling conclusion that Rothman makes in his analysis.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., first quote, p. 17; second quote, p. 33.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., first quote, p. vii; second quote, p. ix; third quote, p. ix.
One last historigraphical point concerns nostalgia. John Tosh's book *The Pursuit of History* explains that nostalgia is a poor framework for historical analysis because it "interprets it [historical change] in one direction only - as change for the worse." The main problem with nostalgia is that it presents a "very lopsided view of history." Viewing the past as better than the present requires that many of the negative features of the past be glossed over or ignored. This makes the past seem simpler than the present - in direct conflict with the historical complexity advocated by the New Western historians.

Tosh warns historians that nostalgia "is not only an unreliable guide to the past but a basis for pessimism and rigidity in the present. Nostalgia presents the past as an alternative to the present, instead of a prelude to it." Tosh concludes that "historical awareness should enhance our insight into the present, nostalgia indulges a desire to escape from it." If history is to be used as lessons for the future, nostalgia seems particularly problematic. For instance, Rothman's declensionist approach, that claims the West was better off before corporate tourism, seems very close to Tosh's "lopsided view of history." Certainly the lesson to be learned from changes in the West are more intricate than that tourism is bad.

If the economic success of the West is tied to tourism, surely a search for the advantages tourism can bring to a community is worthwhile. Whitefish is the case study I will use

---

to evaluate the impacts of tourism on a Western community. What Rothman leaves out of his analysis guides my work as much as what the others suggest be incorporated into a project of this type. The theories and ideas discussed in this chapter will direct my study and contribute to my conclusions.
CHAPTER 2:

WHY A SKI TOWN?

What compelled the people of Whitefish to support a ski area when its economy had always depended on the railroad? Although the timber industry and Great Northern Railway contribute to Whitefish’s history, today only the stories about the founding of the ski area take on legendary proportions. People remember how much of a community project the ski area was. Local dollars as well as local pride got it off the ground. Mike Muldown, a lifelong resident remembers with pride that, “the Big Mountain became one of the few ski area in the country whose genesis was initiated and completed by locals.” Stories about clearing the runs in summer, skiing in the winter, and drinking in the Bierstube - the mountain’s bar - at night contribute to the social fabric of Whitefish. An overview of Whitefish’s past clarifies the processes involved in this community’s relationship with its ski area.

Whitefish, located in the mountains of northwest Montana, owes its existence to the Great Northern Railway’s decision to make it a Division Point in 1903. Prior to the railroad’s arrival, white settlers in Whitefish relied on logging and farming for economic stability. Though the lumber business did well in the area, employing at least 215 men by 1906, it was really the railroad that consistently provided jobs to the town.

1 Jean Arthur, Hellroaring: Fifty Years of Skiing on The Big Mountain (Whitefish, MT: Whitefish editions): 16.
2 The Whitefish Pilot, first edition, 1908.
By 1907, the Great Northern paid out $150,000 to Whitefish workers.

Railroad jobs brought people to town. By 1910 the population rose to 1479. Residents enthusiastically settled down to town development and promotion. Anxious to bring more businesses to the area, the first issue of The Whitefish Pilot, published in 1908, listed a “program for Whitefish in the coming year.” Number one on the list was to “advertise Whitefish Lake as a resort.” Blessed with a beautiful lake, the residents recognized their town’s potential as a summer resort. Two years later, the Whitefish Pilot published its first “Boosters Edition.” Members of the Boosters Club unabashedly dedicated themselves to the growth and promotion of their community. By 1916 they felt confident declaring that Whitefish was “the Fastest Growing and Most Progressive Little City in the Constellation of Bright Stars that Stud the Sky of Hope in the Great West.” True, Whitefish’s population experienced slow and steady growth during its first few decades (1910-pop. 1,479; 1920-pop. 2,867); however rather then a successful diversification of the town’s businesses the railroad remained the most powerful economic force.

The people of Whitefish did not just work; they also played. In the 1930s the people of Whitefish picked up skiing - a sport
that was gaining popularity around the country. Plentiful winter snow lured Whitefish residents to the mountains surrounding their town. Prior to the twentieth century people had mostly skied for transportation during the long, snowy winters; several factors, though, turned skiing from a practical adaptation to winter into a participatory sport. A brief look at the early history of skiing in the United States explains this occurrence.

Though most skiing in the United States was strictly a means of transportation it gained popularity as a sport in the United States at the start of the twentieth century. Norwegian immigrants who came to work in the logging industry at the turn-of-the-century started ski clubs all over the United States. Improved equipment and new techniques also came from Europe. College Clubs in the 1910s and 1920s introduced more Americans to the sport. By the 1930s on the East Coast ski trains took athletes to the mountains on weekends. Ski clubs, ski films, better equipment, and races all contributed to skiing’s popularity. Perhaps the most significant advancement that popularized the sport was the development of towropes and lifts. Skiing up may have been virtuous, but it was skiing down that was fun.

The sport of skiing became widespread in the 1930s. The Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, New York, in 1932, contributed to skiing’s growth. Ski areas like Sun Valley, Idaho, known for its movie star clientele, added glamour to the sport. Trouble in Europe during the 1930s affected skiing in America. A contingent of Swiss and Austrian ski instructors immigrated to the United
States; the lessons they offered encouraged more Americans to try
the sport.

In Whitefish the first skiers ventured up the mountains in
the early 1930s. Lloyd “Mully” Muldown, a Whitefish skiing
legend, remembers when he and his friends hiked up Hellroaring
Mountain, always looking for new, more exciting ways down. Lyle
Rutherford remembered that, “’It was fabulous skiing because
there was no timber’ . . . Forest fires of 1910 and 1919 cleared
the slopes of brush and trees.” Mully and his friends organized
the Hell-Roaring Ski Club and spent weekends skiing and roughing-
it at a primitive cabin they built in 1935. Many of the skiers
worked for the railroad during the week and skied on weekends.
They improved their cabin, and in 1937 they acquired a Special-
Use Permit from the United States Forest Service to set-up a
towrope.

World War II disrupted play in Whitefish. Three ski club
members joined the Tenth Mountain Division and patrolled the
Italian Alps on skis for the duration of the War. Whitefish men
fought on all fronts, found jobs in war industries, or stayed on
with the railroad. While the war-effort jump-started the
economy, the cabins and mountainsides of Whitefish stayed empty.

After WWII people worried there would be another depression
like the one after the Great War. In Whitefish the idea for a
ski area was in part stimulated by these fears. Clearly the
people of Whitefish enjoyed the recreation possibilities in their
area. They also believed that the snow in their area was
exceptional enough to draw non-residents to Whitefish to ski. Not so clear, however, was how to market their idea. The lake attracted a fair number of visitors, as did the fall hunting season; however, the people wanted more. Locals were not the only ones interested in the financial possibilities of a ski area. The Great Northern Railway Company recognized its potential too.

Sun Valley, Idaho, inspired Whitefish and the Great Northern. The popular and glamorous ski area near Ketchum was a model of what the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce and the Great Northern had in mind. In March 1946, representatives from the railroad traveled to Whitefish to look for a suitable site. Mully and some of the more intrepid Chamber Members took the Railways “ski experts” to look at the slopes around the Valley. When Mully showed them his beloved Hell-Roaring, however, their response was discouraging. Earling Strom, a railroad representative, went so far as to call it “‘God-forsaken bush country.’”¹⁰ Then Mully took the representatives to Glacier National Park, only about 25 miles from Whitefish by rail or road. Within the Park the investors found what they were looking for in Heaven’s Peak. In order to build in the Park the railway needed a Special-Use permit from the Department of the Interior. The Government denied them the permit and the railroad dropped the project.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.
¹¹ Dave Walter, from the Montana Historical Society, suggested that the permit was likely denied due to a history of conflict between James J. Hill and the Park Service (conversation 16 October 2000). It also seems
The railroad decided against investing in what seemed to it too risky of an enterprise. The people of Whitefish did not abandon their dream, however, and continued to look for investors. When two entrepreneurs, Ed Schenck and George Prentice, rolled into town with a plan and $30,000 in start-up costs, Whitefish residents wooed them with the Valley’s ideal terrain, deep powder, and eager attitude. In 1946, the partnership between town and the mountain began. Schenck and Prentice started Winter Sports Incorporated and sold $40,000 in stock to local investors. They took the money and used it to hire locals to clear runs, improve the Forest Service road that led to the ski area, build a lodge, and install towropes. Whitefish residents volunteered much of the labor needed to build the area and get it completed on schedule.

Just two years after Big Mountain opened in 1947 The Whitefish Pilot wrote about the area’s continued devotion to boosting their town and Big Mountain.

For the man who would like to work in vacation-like surroundings the year 'round, opportunities exist in . . . dairy farming, poultry raising, truck farms and so on. Further development of unlimited vacation facilities is both necessary and profitable. 12

Whitefish’s promotion of tourism began in 1908. By 1949, with its ski area open, it had the potential to be a year-round destination spot.

---

12 Probable that the permit was denied because it did not mesh with the Park Service's ideas about development in the Parks. To my knowledge, Badger Pass, built in the 1930s in Yosemite National Park, was (and is) the only ski area in a National Park.

Concurrently with the ski area’s construction the railroad lost much of its business. Subsequently people lost jobs. Whitefish, like other railroad towns, suffered due to the decline of the railroads in Post-War America. Trucks that drove on the ever-improving interstate highway system captured most of the freight market. At the same time much of the railroad’s passenger traffic now traveled by family car or airplane. The growing insignificance of the railroads meant Whitefish needed a replacement economy. With the ski area already in place, and the hope that business would grow, the locals shifted gears. Instead of trying to revive the railroad, they continued to build and invest in Big Mountain. Key to the town’s decision to promote skiing was its already successful summer season. If Whitefish could make a name for itself as a year-round destination spot, tourism had the potential to keep the city’s economy afloat.

Their investment paid off due to skiing’s upward trajectory in Post-War America. American’s interest in skiing had to do with several factors. First, many of the men who skied for the Tenth Mountain Division stayed involved in the sport upon their return from the War and worked to promote and open new areas. They were instrumental in the founding of Aspen’s ski hill in 1946, and even later, Vail in 1962. A surplus of cheap equipment left over from the war also made it easier for people to try the sport. Most importantly was the leisure boom in the 1940s and
1950s. By the mid-fifties more than a half million people skied annually in the United States.\footnote{John Henry Auran, \textit{America's Ski Book} (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966): 50.}

Big Mountain was not alone. In the late 1940s ski areas started popping-up all over the Northwest United States. On January 23, 1949, Spokane's \textit{The Spokesman-Review} ran an article titled, "New Equipment and Accommodations Are Being Installed Throughout the Northwest."\footnote{Tom Ellis, "New Equipment and Accommodations Are Being Installed Throughout the Northwest," \textit{The Spokesman-Review}, January 23, 1949: 7. Article located in Montana: Big Mountain File, Flathead County Library, Kalispell, MT.} In it Tom Ellis wrote about the growing popularity of skiing across the country and the fact that, "[t]he Pacific Northwest is . . . coming into its own as a winter sports center, . . . All Northwest states, British Columbia and Alberta have ski centers that are planning important expansions." All over, "new enthusiasts are learning how to schuss and side-slip, herringbone and christiana, traverse and snowplow." One of the important changes in skiing that made it more appealing to people in this era were the improved lift systems. "Where tow-ropes were once considered effete luxuries, chair lifts are now being installed, like the newest, the 3220-foot Constam T-lift on . . . The Big Mountain' near Whitefish, Mont." Ellis wrote that, "Great Northern division point as Whitefish is, it lords it over many towns for mid-winter accommodations, because Pullman cars can be parked in the extensive yards to lodge those who overflow the hotels and motorcourts . . . "\footnote{Ibid., all quotes, p. 7.} The accommodations at Big Mountain did not
compare to the luxurious ones at Sun Valley. Still, the area gained popularity.

Whitefish worked hard to present a certain image to the outside world. *Montana Treasure Magazine*, a magazine that promoted the “people, industry, and places” of Montana, picked Whitefish as its “City of the Month” in the Spring of 1951. The article titled, “Whitefish – the Vacation Town,” reads much like the Chamber of Commerce insert mentioned earlier. “The residents of Whitefish consider themselves pretty lucky people because in their town vacation time is all the time.” The importance of promoting year-round tourism was a key element in Whitefish’s strategy. In the summer-time visitors could swim, boat, fish, and golf. In the fall, hunters “will find plenty of wild game available in the Whitefish area.” As an additional bonus, “[w]inter feeding grounds in nearby Glacier National Park, as well as other restricted areas, assure a protected game refuge and vastly improves the hunting in adjacent areas.” The article goes on to praise Whitefish’s “year-around vacation and recreation program with enlarged skiing facilities at Big Mountain.”

Though the article leads with all the recreation possibilities found in Whitefish, it makes sure to include the importance of the railroad and logging industry.

. . .[T]he Great Northern Railroad add considerable[sic.] to the town’s payroll.

From the time the townsite was carved from virgin forest in 1903, lumbering has been an important industry and

---

17 The golf course in Whitefish opened on May 24, 1936.

29

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the nearby sawmills offer employment to many men. Flathead and Lincoln counties also furnish nearly one-half of the total commercial Christmas trees.

Owing to the geographical location, dairying, small fruit growing and all types of market gardening are the main types of farming.

Whitefish’s railroad/extractive industries were still very much a part of the economic make-up of the town in 1951. The article is clear, however, that tourism would be an important part of Whitefish’s future. Proudly it states, “the 20 chair lift, built at a cost of $43,000, will be increased to 30 or more chairs to handle the thousand of visitors who will visit the Big Mountain this summer.” Best of all, “[t]he work on the lift was done locally and the chairs were built by the Whitefish Machine Shop.” Compared to other ski areas, the Big Mountain was “one of the finest . . . in the country.” As an added bonus, “Toni Matt, internationally known skier, is again conducting the ski school which ranks as one of the best in the nation.” Without a doubt Whitefish was intent on making a name for itself in the expanding recreation and tourist industry.

A “Travel Talk” article in The Spokesman-Review in 1953 finds that the special charm of Whitefish had to do with the locals themselves.

The entire town of Whitefish ‘works at’ making the mountain a success. Even before skiing was begun there in a big way, the area was famous as a summer resort. Whitefish Lake and its surrounding pine-clad trails claimed many an eastern businessman. While he fished, the family swam or picnicked along the sandy beach of the picturesque lake. . . .

——

"Whitefish the Vacation Town,": first, second, third quotes, p. 2; fourth quote, p. 3; fifth, sixth, seventh quotes, p. 6; eighth quote, p. 7.
Montana, long one of the nation's most scenic states, is now making a bid for winter sports lovers.\textsuperscript{19}

Norman Kurtz, secretary of the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce, addressed the Whitefish Rotary Club in February of 1957, in a talk titled: "'Where Do We go From Here?'"\textsuperscript{20} He began by pointing out the types of problems that had to be overcome in order to ensure successful tourism and responsible growth. 'Progress is made when citizens of a community work together to accomplish things rather than when things are allowed to happen by themselves.'\textsuperscript{21} He urged the audience to think about city planning. The town's government was ill designed to address issues related to tourism and population growth. Furthermore, Kurtz exhorted local businesses to do more to encourage local youths to stay in the area. Kurtz feared that if the young people left Whitefish in search of better opportunities the town would lose its tight-knit feel. Though he did not present any specific suggestions his message was clear: irresponsible growth would destroy the existing community. His comments indicate that people in Whitefish were very aware of the impacts tourism could have on community identity and relationships.

Whitefish residents identified with the twin images of timber and railroad. Early settlers nicknamed Whitefish "Stumptown" because of the bristle of stumps left behind when they cut down trees to build the town. The local historical


society, still attached to these images, was called the Stumptown Historical society and dedicated itself to preserving railroad history and memorabilia. The social cohesiveness and economic success of everyone in this pre-tourist community, however, was largely a myth. During the first part of the century, for instance, white railroad families constantly clashed with the poor prostitutes, transients, drunks, and Japanese people who accompanied the railroad's presence. The instability of the timber business meant logging was never a reliable source of income. Later, with the decline of the railroad, young people left Whitefish for college or jobs in the cities. The anxiousness expressed by residents to preserve the community and their attachment to the railroad and timber business were a symptom of something other than tourism's impacts. They reflect a reaction to drastic economic and demographic changes all over the rural West.  

The nature of the railroad and the erratic timber business never encouraged community cohesion. Attached to its twin economic symbols anyway, and with valid concerns about how to incorporate large-scale tourism into its economy, Whitefish was acknowledging a problem not singular to western tourist towns but to many small towns in the 1950s. The big city beckoned, and unless Whitefish could come up with a solid job market that encouraged young people to stay, whatever town integrity existed would be further compromised. The town's economic ambitions led

---

1 Ibid.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
it to tourism. Its desire to create a solid community dictated the trajectory of its growth.

In 1957 Schenck and some Chamber members presented a proposal for development on Big Mountain. The two-year plan included more lifts and runs. It also involved improvement and expansion of the existing lodge and facilities. Big Mountain's plan banked on projections about the ski industry in America. Skiing appealed to people who wanted to get outside to play in the winter. It also had a glamorous, social side to it that attracted people. The chance to wear sexy new fashions, better equipment, and slope-side amenities drew people to the mountains. The number of skiers nation-wide grew from 1,584,250 in 1960 to 2,448,000 by 1963. Whitefish had taken a gamble on the ski industry; the numbers encouraged Big Mountain to improve its facilities.

Chamber secretary Norm Kurtz, in the interview he did with the Great Falls Tribune in 1957, "called Big Mountain the finest potential ski resort in the United States and said it could be developed to the point where it would be better than most famed European resorts." The growing number of skiers in the United States, "increased about 16 per cent a year the last seven years and in five years it is estimated more than 7,000,000 persons

---


Bogner stretch pants came to the United States in 1955.

will be actively interested in skiing." Schenck and the Chamber recognized the potential Big Mountain had to tap into this resource, but knew it had to upgrade facilities in order to attract skiers. Schenck pointed out that his "Figures show that in the area served by Great Northern Railway a potential 1,200,000 skiers would be interested in spending time at Big Mountain, . . ." In addition to that, "more than 1,200,000 potential ski and train travel customers in the eastern states could be interested in a Big Mountain vacation trip . . ." The trends indicated that "one out of 10 skiers takes at least one two-week ski vacation annually." The new facilities would also serve summer visitors. Schenck believed the "summer potential of the proposed development would be realized in small conventions, meeting and tourist attraction." He projected that the cost to complete the construction would be $1,500,000.¹⁶

Though the Great Northern Railway had backed down ten years earlier, its interest in the Big Mountain was renewed in 1957. The *Great Falls Tribune* reported that "following an inspection of the ski area last weekend with Gov. J. Hugo Aronson, John M. Budd, president of the railroad said: 'We definitely are interested in the expansion possibilities of Big Mountain.'"¹⁷ Budd continued by saying the "plans of the railroad are to 'advocate winter recreation in Glacier National Park and the Big Mountain Area in connection with their advertising promotion.'"¹⁸

---

¹⁶ All quotes and figures are from "Big Mountain Expansion Proposals Would Double Capacity . . ." *Great Falls Tribune.*
¹⁷ "GN Considers Expanding Big Mountain Ski Resort," *Great Falls Tribune,* March 19, 1957.
¹⁸ Ibid.
The Great Northern hoped to rescue its passenger service. Sun Valley's continued profitability to W. Averell Harriman and the Union Pacific encouraged the Great Northern to make an offer. Expansions required money, and so Schenck and Big Mountain eagerly accepted the railroad's loan of $65,000.

Ever try a do-it-yourself project with a mile-high mountain? The citizens of Whitefish, Montana, did and they showed the world how to turn a back-yard mountain into a really profitable enterprise.

Looking for ways to 'firm up' their town's summer tourist trade into an all-year proposition, Whitefish businessmen cast their eyes toward Big Mountain...

Big Mountain Ski Resort is a community project in every sense of the phrase. Whitefish citizens sold stock throughout the Flathead Valley to raise funds...

It was just ten years ago last December that the Big Mountain Ski Resort opened for business. Since then, . . . both business and accommodations have gone from good to terrific. Ed Schenck, who has managed the project from the beginning, says tourist trade has increased 16 times during the ten years of the resort's operation.

And no wonder, because Big Mountain Ski Resort is really a first class job."

By taking a loan from Great Northern, the skiing industry in Whitefish jumped from a mostly locally owned and managed business to one with extra-local investors whose interests could differ from those of the community.

Gone were the days of clearing brush by hand and installing locally made lift mechanisms. As business at Big Mountain soared, plans became more ambitious. At the annual Big Mountain Stockholders meeting in 1960, Schenck reported to the Missoulian Sentinel that the corporation "showed a 23 per cent gain in dollar gross over the previous year." Furthermore, Schenck

---

"Great Northern Railway has approved loan of $65,000 to Big Mountain," Great Falls Tribune, January 21, 1960. Whitefish File, located at Montana State Historical Society, Helena, MT.

"Backyard Mountain," Pacific Powerland (Spring 1957).
announced that the corporation has recapitalized at $600,000 and registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission for the sale of common stock. Plans for expansion were expected to “foster an upward trend in the corporation’s business” due to the increased capacity of the lifts and number of rooms available. The improvements included “an increase in lift capacity from 500-600 to from 1,400-1,600; an increase in lodging space from 66-120; an increase in dining facilities from 100-250 . . . slope area to be tripled, parking area enlarged 50 percent and rest room facilities expanded many times.”

Schenck also projected that the 1960 season would require 75 to 80 employees, compared to 50 in 1959. A 1960, report showed that,

[b]usiness at the Big Mountain ski resort so far this year shows a gross gain of 71 per cent over last year’s record operations, . . . Norm Kurtz, a director of the resort, said, ‘this gain is especially significant in that it comes on top of an over-all gain last year of 43 per cent. . . .’"

That November, the new 6,800 foot lift was up and running. Also new was an annex built onto the ski lodge that doubled the number of rooms at the resort and included a new dining room. Replacing the “Big Mountain Ski Lodge, formerly a rustic building known primarily for its Bierstube,” was a “sprawling, modern center . . . [with] . . . housing and guest activities.” Big Mountain had a new ski shop as well.

52 Ibid., all quotes and statistics.
A follow up interview to "They Bet Their Shirts on Skiing" appeared in *Western Seasons* in 1962. Ed Schenck said he believed he had won his bet on the Big Mountain. "Yes, I'd say that we've definitely won our bet. I think we now have one of the finest ski operations in the country." He attributed the success of Big Mountain to the growth of the ski industry and the support of Whitefish residents. Another factor that contributed to this success was who was skiing. "When I started skiing," remembered Schenck, "the guy with skis was regarded as a real daredevil, a real nut. Today, most of our clientele is comprised of business and professional people." Schenck accounted for this shift: "higher incomes, more leisure time better clothing, better equipment, and, above all, expert instruction have made the sport boom."

Building the double chairlift in 1960 was necessary to keep up with the demands of the increased number of skiers. Schenck pointed out "that unless we could offer a run with a vertical drop of 2,000 feet and a chairlift, we just couldn't attract many serious skiers." The public wanted more than just skiing. This prompted the remodeling of the lodge and dining facilities. Schenck commented on their plans to offer summer activities too, such as skeet shooting, trail rides, and a heated swimming pool.

The interviewer brought Schenck back to the original article, asking: "The *Post* played up The Big Mountain as a kind of community project. Is this still true today?" Schenck

---

"Edmund Christopherson, "They Bet Their Shirts on Skiing," The *Saturday Evening Post* 222 (March 4, 1950): 110-114.
replied, "'Very much so. . . Practically everything which you see here has been done with local labor and the backing of the people of Whitefish. . . One of our greatest assets has been the cooperation and enthusiasm of the folks around Whitefish and Kalispell.'" Schenck explained the important role the railroad and United States Forest Service played in Big Mountain's development:

For the past five years the Great Northern has been helping us finance major improvement and participates in publicizing the hill. While we're giving credit, I'd like to say that the U.S. Forest Service, which leases us the hill on a special use permit, has been very helpful over the fifteen years we have been operating.35

For example, Schenck recalled that when they started to build the area in 1947, the Forest Service was so impressed with their progress that they contributed $15,000 towards improvements on the road. Volunteers from Whitefish then donated their labor in order to get the work done.36 According to Schenck, the spirit of cooperation that existed between the town, the mountain, railroad, and Forest Service, and the growth of the ski industry in general ensured Big Mountain's future.

For Whitefish, the 1960s seemed to be the point of Rothman's Faustian exchange; that was when the ski area passed into extralocal hands and development boomed. Yet the interview with Ed Schenck did not reveal any trepidation about this transition or the future. By the mid-seventies, when Whitefish's population

---

34 "They bet their shirts on skiing . . . and won," Western Seasons (fall 1962): 11 and 20.
35 Ibid., first and second quotes, p.11; third, fourth, fifth, sixth quotes, p. 20; seventh quote, p. 11.
36 Christopherson, "They Bet Their Shirts on Skiing,"; 113.
hit 3,349," city concerns also focused more on how to maintain and manage tourism, not quell its growth. The city council and mayor, all part-time positions, did not have the time or knowledge to deal with issues created by tourist related development. Charles Abell, a member of the special commission set up to address the problem, commented that "there seemed to be a lack of a central administrative body or person . . . The council does a good job but it appeared to me that a better job could be done by an individual who worked at it full time."30

Whitefish consulted the city manager in nearby Kalispell. He suggested that a city manager "[is] more efficient, [and] knows how to get federal grants." In addition to that, he recommended that "a small town government should be run like a business."39 Indignation meetings49 and a loosely structured town government could not develop zoning proposals or lobby to the state government for a bed-tax the way a full-time city manager could.

Whitefish had clear ideas about the direction of its economy. Proponents of a city manager for Whitefish insisted that a city manager was the best choice for a tourist town’s development. They invited Jackson, Wyoming’s, manager to Whitefish to explain the benefits of their proposal.

39 Kalispell Daily Interlake, May 1, 1975.
40 Indignation Meetings were Whitefish’s version of a town meeting, where residents could meet and air their views on town projects or problems that faced the community.
Like Whitefish, Jackson attracted winter and summer tourists. Located near the entrance of Grand Teton National Park, Jackson had always accommodated tourists. After the ski area at Teton Village was built in 1965-1966, however, the tourist numbers increased. This forced the people of Jackson to address many of the same problems that now confronted Whitefish. Whitefish looked to Jackson as a model of tourist development, and Jackson had chosen to hire a city manager. Abell recalled that, "'I think when the city manager from Jackson Hole, Wyo. was here he said he made 39 times his own salary in government grants [for the city] in one year.'" Government grants to supplement local taxes appealed to Whitefish residents who recognized how inadequate their infrastructure was to deal with the number of tourists using their town.

The Whitefish Pilot ran an ad September 25, 1975: "Show up Dammet[sic.].! Town meeting, Tuesday, Sept.30, 8:00 p.m. . . . Gripe Session! Last chance to gripe about city government before the commission files its recommendations." Whitefish was still in the habit of holding volatile town meetings. At the meeting citizens hammered out guidelines for growth in their town. They also decided that like Jackson and Kalispell, they needed a city manager. Whitefish residents continued their active involvement in town development. "[T]he following goals that the citizens of the City say they felt were important: EFFICIENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, RESPONSIVENESS AND LOCAL CONTROL FOR LOCAL

\[\text{i} \]
• \cit{Ibid.}
\[\text{i} \]
• \cit{The Whitefish Pilot, September 24, 1975: 3.}
PROBLEMS." The point of hiring a city manager was not to remove local decision making, but rather to enforce it. Part of that future included more development on the Mountain. Big plans were underway.

Purchase agreement papers for the 160 acre site for a gigantic condominium and hotel vacation complex on the side of Big Mountain were signed . . . between Jerry Schumm, president of Big Mountain Development Corp. and Elmer Knopfle, owner of the site. This new development would have condominium residences and hotels. The promotion of home-lots and selling condos was the next phase in mountain development. Anxious to maintain a certain ambiance, however, "the planning architects recommended preserving as much as possible of the site as it is in woods, stream beds and man-made ponds." Efforts also included "clustering of buildings . . . to preserve common open space and provide a 'sense-of-place' in a large landscape." Gondola lifts would connect the development to Big Mountain.

Tourism was not just important to Whitefish; it was important to the state too. Montana had long relied on its extractive industry base and so the second half of the twentieth century presented some very serious problems. The railroad was not the only industry whose importance tapered off in the West. Loggers, miners, farmers, and ranchers had to contend with the decline of their businesses. Although reports like one published by the Forest Service in 1975 concluded that "for all practical

---

45 Ibid., all quotes.
purposes, the State could not generate sufficient growth in tourism to counter balance even moderate declines in timber harvesting,"\textsuperscript{46} the Forest Service misunderstood the path that the new Western economy would have to take. Other pressures influenced the direction of the state's growth. With the prime timber gone, a new environmental ethic arriving, and changing forestry practices, the logging business lost much of its vitality. Similarly, Montana mines shut down when they played out or companies moved to more cost-effective operations in South America. The spread of corporate farming practices edged out those on marginal lands, and a feeble beef market pushed ranchers to rethink economic strategies. The increased number of Americans looking for out-door adventure and a taste of the Old West was a market Montanans hoped to tap due to the diminished nature of its extractive businesses.

Whitefish had some name recognition due to its early establishment in this arena, and so became a favorite of state promotions. The State Advertising Department placed more than twenty-one ads in national magazines as early as 1961. They claimed, "[c]ertainly Big Mountain, situated beside Glacier National Park to the east and overlooking beautiful Flathead Valley, is BIG SKY Country."\textsuperscript{47} Tourism did not totally supplant extractive industries in Montana; however, its growing importance was clear.

\textsuperscript{46} Paul E. Polzin and Dennis L. Schweitzer, \textit{Economic Importance of Tourism in Montana} (Ogden, Utah: Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station, Forest Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1975): 18.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 4.
By the mid-1980s, Montana had four major destination resorts: Big Sky and Bridger Bowl near Bozeman, Red Lodge Mountain north of Yellowstone National Park, and Big Mountain. Destination ski resorts, different than the small, local ski areas scattered across the state, were geared towards people who came to ski for several days. They provided lodging, restaurants, and activities other than skiing. Still, of the four major resorts, Big Mountain stood out from the rest in terms of size and consistent snow quality. In 1987, Ski Magazine rated Big Mountain “... top-10 in the U.S. in both powder and tree skiing ... one of the best ski areas in the world!” Skiers came from the Northwest, rode the train in from the East, and drove across the border from Canada. As Big Mountain turned forty, it could accommodate 6,000 skiers a day.

The 1989-90 season saw a new $4.8 million expansion that included a high-speed detachable quad chair, snowmaking equipment, and improved facilities. “On the drawing board are tennis courts, a swimming pool, hotels, and a huge village expansion - all the trappings of a modern, four-season resorthood.” A 1990 article in Skiing gives a good idea of the resort's status at this time. It claimed, “[a]cre for acre, Big Mountain is the best bargain in the northern Rockies.” Part of the mountain’s appeal was that its ticket and lodging prices remained lower than the national average. Throughout the 1990s Big Mountain maintained its place as the biggest business in

---

48 Dana White, "Wild Times in Whitefish: Of mice, moose, and men: Big Mountain, Mont., is gearing up for the big time," Skiing 43 (January 1990): 1W.
Whitefish. The ski area continued to develop runs, build lifts and condominiums.

The growing number of people who wanted to spend vacations out-of-doors put the West in a unique position to exploit its natural resources in a new way. Whitefish tapped into this market early, and by 2000 that potential became a reality with Big Mountain pulling in more than 300,000 skiers a year. The summer tourist, who drifted over from Glacier Park, ensured if not quite a year-round, at least a steady flow of visitors to Whitefish.

Not just in Whitefish, but around the state, tourism’s importance to the economy increased in the 1990s. The Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR), at the University of Montana, reported that nonresident travel expenditures increased 3.8 percent to $1.59 billion in 1999. This money spent correlated with an increased number of visitors to the state. In 1991 7,519,000 people traveled to or through Montana – some for business – but most for recreation. In 1999 that number had increased to 9,425,000. Nonresident travel business accounted for 29,900 jobs in 1999, just over five percent of job totals in the state, and a four percent increase from 1998. Although ITRR’s report concerns itself mainly with nonresident travel, it estimates that an additional $255 million annually is spent by instate travelers. These figures represent a steady influx or

---

50 This number is somewhat startling, considering that overall, the state’s population is less than one million.
redistribution of money within the state, which in turn creates jobs in Montana.

The ITRR report discusses major shifts in the United States from manufacturing to service jobs. Many of those service jobs are related to the travel industry. ITRR found that in Montana the service sector and manufacturing sector have grown in the past decade. Industries that have declined are agriculture, mining, lumber, and wood products. Data collected shows that traditional extractive industries (mining, logging, and agriculture) only made up eight percent of Montana's labor force in 1997. Nonresident travel accounted for five percent, but when combined with construction, services, and wholesale and retail trade - all businesses affected by increased travel and second home buyers - the total of people employed by these industries in Montana rises to 61 percent. Furthermore, nonresident travel expenditures put $316 million in government coffers (federal, state, and local) in 1999. It is no mystery why Montana continues to promote tourism.

Though the ITRR report does not separate skiing from other amusement and recreation industries in the state, it reported that this particular segment of the economy produced 7,200 jobs in 1998, and that employment for this segment in general has increased 75 percent in the last nine years. Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks outstrip all other attractions in Montana. Big Mountain, with its 300,000 skiers a year comes close to number two: Little Bighorn Battlefield (396,400) and three: Fort Peck Lake (323,441), however. Tourism's value to the
state economy is clear. Whitefish receives a good proportion of that business not just from skiers, but from its proximity to Glacier National Park.

Whitefish built a ski area in an attempt to diversify its economy; a ski area made sense to locals who believed that outdoor recreation would entice America’s vacationers to their area. The proximity of Glacier National Park put Whitefish close to large numbers of tourists; the Great Northern’s tracks provided transportation to Whitefish. The success of ski areas in the 1940s, especially Sun Valley, convinced residents that attracting winter tourists was a worthwhile investment. Big Mountain started small. Two factors contributed to its growth: the popularity of skiing and the decline of the railroad and timber industry. More and more skiers persuaded Whitefish residents and Winter Sports Inc. (the corporation that owns Big Mountain) to continue to invest and promote the area. The railroad and timber’s diminished status motivated Whitefish residents to support what appeared to be a more solid economic choice. In tandem these two factors resulted in a ski area that expanded steadily. Why a ski town? For Whitefish, it made sense. It meant economic stability for the town. In turn, the residents hoped jobs would keep the young people in Whitefish and contribute to the town’s social fabric. In the next chapter I will explore how successful they have been at achieving these goals.
CHAPTER THREE:
CHOICES OR CONCESSIONS?

In 1990 a writer for Skiing magazine described Whitefish:

[It] is in no way backwards. But it is one of those increasingly rare backwaters where a stolen bicycle is headline news - a simpler place that made me want to shuck my urban husk and relocate here to raise a family.

From an outsider’s perspective, this “simpler place” seemed a quaint spot ideal for recreation and raising families. But what was it like for the people who actually lived there? Did the benefits of the ski area outweigh the costs? What were the costs? In this chapter I will examine first how outsiders perceived Whitefish in the 1980s and 1990s. Then I will look at what those opinions meant for Whitefish. Finally I will assess the impacts that becoming a major tourist destination has had on the community.

By the 1990s condos, cars, and restaurants clogged the base of Big Mountain. According to Tad Friend, a Vogue travel writer, though, the town of Whitefish retained an authentic Old West flavor that should charm even the most jaded and worldly traveler.

In Montana’s Flathead Valley, a land tamed by timber companies and the Great Northern Railroad, echoes of the rugged, tall-tale-telling Old West still resound. A lot of the locals who ski at Big Mountain (the valley’s main attraction, eight miles from Whitefish) have names like Tarhead and spend their spare time hiking, snowmobiling, ice fishing, and ‘extreme skiing’ on the sheer, avalanche-prone slopes of nearby Glacier National Park - slopes that enforce

1 Dana White, “Wild Times in Whitefish: Of mice, moose, and men: Big Mountain, Mont., is gearing up for the big time.” Skiing 43 (January 1990): 3W.
The picture one gets here is of a small town, filled with rustic, crusty, mountain-men without a lot of sense who probably could not cut it in the "real world." Friend set out to discover whether residents thought Big Mountain/Whitefish would turn into just another ski town. In an industry with an increasing number of cookie-cutter resorts, was Whitefish doomed to the same state? He gleaned this information about the mountain:

Big Mountain does three hundred thousand skier visits a year, almost the same as Stowe [in Vermont] but somehow invisibly - everyone has heard of Stowe and no one has heard of Big Mountain. It's had eight marketing directors in the last ten years, and it's still searching for an identity - family mountain or skier's heaven?

This notion of creating an identity, or changing an identity, is an interesting concept. Here was a place actively searching for an image to sell, not trying to sell an image that already existed.

Friend decided to talk to some locals to figure out what direction Big Mountain was headed. Stephen Rohde, the marketing director told him, "'We don't want to see anyone in fur around here.'" Buck Love, owner of the Kandahar Lodge gruffly claimed, "'This place is a backwater. It's hard to get to, there's never any sun, and there's nothing much to do at night. And frankly, I hope it stays that way.'" But how much can a town control its image? Hal Rothman's conclusions are: not at all. Does it make

---

3 Interestingly, the Kandahar Lodge is one of the more attractive places to lodge or dine at the base of the mountain - surely the influx of 300,000 is keeping Love busy.
a difference, however, when the marketing director of the resort is as phobic about becoming another Aspen as are local business owners? You bet it does. In the 1990s, as unaware as Friend or the people he interviewed might be, Whitefish had discovered its niche; the particular niche it claimed was that it was not an Aspen. Whitefish's success depended on maintaining its rustic, funky 1970s, ski-area feel. Incorporating people's nostalgia for the way ski areas used to be provided Whitefish with a marketing tool.

One of the reasons Whitefish was able to do this was because of the way development had gone in nearby Kalispell. Kalispell, "is even more of a tacky strip than it was when I passed through in the summer of 1985," proclaims Friend. Development in Kalispell that included an international airport (flights to Canada), strip malls, and chain stores left Whitefish free to avoid those additions. Instead the town could capitalize on its largely intact historical downtown area and specialty shops that sold western kitsch and locally made arts and crafts.

Ultimately Friend does not answer his own question. Has Whitefish maintained its identity in the face of corporate tourism? Other articles that appear in the 1990s do reveal some answers to this particular question. Maybe Whitefish only knew they did not want to be another Aspen; however, journalists from the East had no trouble pigeon-holing Whitefish as a yee-ha.

---

49

Certainly understanding nostalgia and its place in people's memory, or in this case as a marketing tool, is an important part of studying the past. Alone, however, nostalgia is not a good basis of historical analysis.
Western town. Lois Smith Brady wrote "Skiing, Cowboy-Style," for Travel and Leisure magazine in 1992. She found "a slow-paced, old-fashioned and largely undiscovered ski town that is more rough-hewn than glamorous. Half of us getting off the train were skiers; the other half, guys in flannel shirts and jeans, talking about layoffs and lumber." Her impressions were of, "Old Western facades, saloons . . . a pickup in almost every parking place, and covered sidewalks like those in Gunsmoke. This is the kind of town where you need only two kinds of footwear: ski boots and cowboy boots." Despite the fact that loggers do not wear either cowboy boots or ski boots, this journalist has placed Whitefish solidly in stereotypical Western iconography, where "Ski caps are as common as Stetsons . . . [and] . . . where splintery outbuildings are reminders of the town’s Western heritage."

Unlike Steamboat Springs, Colorado, or Jackson Hole, Wyoming, the Western look projected on Whitefish by visitors sits uncomfortably and is largely a figment of their imaginations. Go to Whitefish. Walk down Central Avenue - the main street. Yes, pickups abound, but they are more likely to be Toyotas driven by "mountain-surfers" than Chevys or Fords driven by old-timers. Stetsons are few and far between. Whitefish is not glitzy nor has it or its residents embraced the trappings of a Western tourist town. True, Whitefish has covered sidewalks, but they

---

Ibid., first, second, third, fourth quotes, p. 288; sixth quote, p. 290.

seem more a practical adaptation to the heavy snowfall than a relic of the olden-days.

Visitors and some residents view Whitefish as untarnished by growth or time. Michael Fitzgerald, a transplant from Colorado, told Brady that “Whitefish is the real West. We have hardware stores, loggers, railroaders, real cowboys and Indians. Aspen hasn’t seen a cowboy for years.” For Brady too, “It’s hard to imagine Whitefish becoming the next Aspen, partly because they’re opposites in everything from geography to architecture.” Views of Big Mountain may dominate the town, but Whitefish does not cater to the same clientele as Aspen. According to Brady, at least for now, Whitefish is “safe” for that reason. Again, the image projected on Whitefish by outsiders does not mesh with its past. Whitefish was never a cowboy town. The Great Northern Brewing Company building may sport a bucking bronco and cowboy on its sign (think Wyoming license plate), but this image has nothing to do with the town’s past. Whether this adaptation is harmful to the community, as Rothman asserts, deserves further analysis.

Do images like this, then, hurt Whitefish? Should the town have stayed true to its timber and railroad past? Arguably, since those industries could not support the town’s economy the locals’ fidelity to those symbols would have to be for purely nostalgic reasons. As mentioned earlier, nostalgia is weak ground for forming identity or drawing conclusions about change. Without the ski area, without finding a marketing niche for that
area, where would Whitefish be? To find answers to these questions a comparison of Whitefish to another small town in Montana provides insight.

In 1940 Whitefish and Roundup (located 53 miles north of Billings) had approximately the same population: Whitefish - 2,602, Roundup - 2,664. By 1990, Whitefish boasted 4,368 residents; Roundup had dipped to 1,808. In July 1992, the unemployment rate in Flathead county stood at 5.5%, in Musselshell County where Roundup is located: 8.4%. In Whitefish in 1991 there were 58 homes built and 250 new business license applications, while in Roundup only three homes were built and 5 applications for new business licenses filed. The typical three bedroom home sold for $158,000 in Whitefish and $37,000 in Roundup. Whitefish had 34 restaurants, a single motel room was $65 a night, and its 151 gambling machines grossed $2.4 million. In contrast, in Roundup you could choose from seven restaurants, sleep for $25, and gamble from 51 machines that grossed $397,300. The population difference became noticeable about 1970, with Whitefish growing by about 1,000 residents each decade, and Roundup slowly losing its population.

So what happened between 1940 and 1990? Founded on extractive industry bases, the towns had similar beginnings. The difference began when Whitefish chose to incorporate tourism into its economy. Meanwhile, Roundup sought extractive industry alternatives when coal mining operations in the nearby Bull

---

Mountains cutback in the 1950s. Oil rescued Roundup's economy in the 1960s and 1970s, but that disappeared in the 1980s due to shifts in the market to foreign oil. Meanwhile ranching, the second most profitable enterprise in the area, suffered due to low cattle prices in the 1980s.

Jo Ulmer, owner of the Morning Grind coffee and gift shop in Roundup remembers that, "some people . . . got excited about recent logging in the Bull Mountains, which brought jobs but also left swaths of clear-cut land in the hills. Maybe cutting those trees is good for the short term, but you have to wonder what it means later." In the fall of 1992, the people of Roundup pinned their hopes on a proposed underground coalmine for the area. Joe Hoiland, owner of the local Ford dealership, stated "that mine is absolutely pivotal to the future of Roundup . . . The jobs will provide a real shot in the arm to our town." Robert Morehead, who runs a small coal mine in the mountains, is working with Meridian Co. to get approval of the new mine that would bring an estimated "$26 million a year," into the community in "wages, supplies, and parts" sold. "Morehead said he understands the state's current emphasis on supporting tourism, but added that he believes the state should also support this kind of natural resource project." His opinion is based on the idea that, "Tourism is great and everything, but it doesn't support the economy like this . . . We're talking about jobs that pay $16 or $17 an hour, 40 hours a week. You just don't get that with tourism." However, another resident who owns a Western-wear store admitted that "My heart

*Linda Caricaburu, "A Tale of Two Cities," The Great Falls Tribune,*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
will always be here, but the truth is we just can’t make a go of it in Roundup,” whether the coal mine happens or not.’

These comments expose the heart of the problem that many Western towns face: what to do when their founding industry falters? Extractive industries such as logging and mining have always been risky. The pay might be high, but the resource itself is eventually exhausted. Roundup in the early 1990s was reluctant to shift its economic focus. Its future seemed almost wholly dependent on the state’s acceptance of the proposal. Some residents thought that if Billings continued to grow, Roundup had a chance as a bedroom community. Regardless, with the state pushing tourism more than the more traditional choices, the people of Roundup were in a tight spot.

In contrast to Roundup was Whitefish. What concessions, however, did the town make for prosperity? Was Whitefish worse off than when it had been a railroad town? According to reporter Linda Caricaburu, Whitefish could very well have ended up like Roundup except for the inclusion of tourism.

The railroad continually streamline[d] its operations – and employees – and timber mills in the area forecast cutbacks and closures in coming years. Since 1985 the aluminum plant in nearby Columbia Falls . . . scaled back from 900 employees to 700 . . . Only low paid service jobs . . . [were] . . . increasing.

September 20, 1992: 5A.
9 The Meridian Company’s proposal was approved, however, the company backed out when it decided the operation was too expensive. The permit reverted to the state of Montana. Currently the state, Federal government, and local people are looking for investors to get the mine going again (Steve Regele, compliance supervisor for the Department of Environmental Quality, Billings, MT. Conversation with author, 1 December 2000).
Service jobs did not pay as well as the jobs they replaced. Yet when the figures from Whitefish are compared to Roundup, the alternatives to tourism seem fairly grim.

Tourists alone were not responsible for the growth and development in Whitefish. Some of the newcomers came to start small businesses, others to buy second homes. An increasing number of retirees settled in the valley. Even movie stars who wanted to get away from it all, such as Emilio Estevez and Carol Burnett, bought vacation homes in the area.

The growth came with problems. John Bartlett, a life-long resident and railroad engineer, commented that he was not,

Worried about movie stars . . . [but] . . . worried about speculators who might come in here and buy up large amounts of property, and then do whatever they want. The citizens here aren’t radical . . . We try to remain calm and judge each development on its merits. But growth has its costs. Some of those costs include affordable housing and the dearth of well-paying jobs.

Also out of the locals hands was rapid growth in the 1980s due in part to, “media exposure from national advertising bought by the state tourism office and from write-ups in metropolitan newspapers and magazines.” Low land prices in Whitefish - compared to other resort communities - enticed visitors to become property owners. These newcomers did not always see eye to eye with the locals when it came to development. Dave Speer, a local developer who also owns a downtown western wear store, complains that these newcomers “have money and they have time - and they’ll use both to get what they want . . . A lot of these people just aren’t sensitive to the issue of jobs.” His bitterness stems from
the difficulties he has run into trying to build on his property at the base of the mountain; many people who have moved to Whitefish recently want to preserve it in its present state.

This problem is most apparent when it comes to logging. Logging is a divisive issue that splits people into two camps: those who want to use the trees for commercial purposes and those who want to leave the forests as they stand. Kellie Shaw, from the Chamber of Commerce, noted that, “this town wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for the timber and logging... So some people feel resentment toward people who move here from somewhere else and try to push their views.” She thinks that because both are important to the area, some kind of balance must be achieved. With the recent halt of logging by the U.S. Forest Service in nearby Eureka coupled with President Clinton’s roadless initiative, the balance seems to be shifting towards preservation and alternate use of public lands.

The Montana legislature has also made efforts to make tourism more profitable to the state. In 1987 it passed a four per cent bed tax, with the revenue going to promote state tourism. Many people in Whitefish think this was the moment of real change for the town. “We couldn’t stay undiscovered forever,” said Matthew Cohn, the administrator of the Department of Commerce’s promotion division in 1992. “What these people [tourists] find out when they come here is what you and I already know. This is a good place to live.” He goes on to say that while, “some Montanans still have reservations about promoting tourism... it’s too late to go back.” Though he acknowledges
that the low-paying service jobs created by tourism are problematic, overall, the amount of money brought into the state by tourism is very important. "Tourism is an integral part of the equation, but it's not the only part . . . The more legs we've got on the stool, the better it is when one of the legs falls off. We've seen that in eastern Montana, where some of the legs are pretty weak."\(^{10}\) Certainly some people in Whitefish remain attached to their logging and railroading past. But the transition to tourism as the most important economic force in town has already been made and it is ultimately more reliable.

Real estate development is responsible for many of the visual changes in Whitefish. It also has less obvious impacts as well, especially for those already living in the area. A trend affecting many tourist destinations in Western states during the early nineties was an increase in real estate prices. In 1992 The Great Falls Tribune reported that "[a]n informal survey by The Associated Press found housing prices booming in places like Jackson Hole, Wyo., Whitefish, Mont., and Sun Valley, Idaho, this year."\(^{11}\) Though, "Developers are just starting to build new homes and condominiums in Whitefish . . . demand far exceeds supply and prices are skyrocketing." Whitefish real estate agent Marilyn Mason points out that "One 3-bedroom condo under construction will sell for $235,000. Small homes on scenic Whitefish Lake sell for no less than $169,000, . . . Those are unheard of

\(^{10}\) Ibid., all statistics, quotes, and information comparing Whitefish and Roundup, p. 5A.

\(^{11}\) "Prices of homes in Whitefish area going through the roof," Great Falls Tribune, April 26, 1992: 6B.
numbers in slow-growing Montana." Mason concluded that, "Tourism is the major growth driver."\(^{12}\)

Technology such as computers, Internet access, and reliable transportation to and from Whitefish via Glacier International Airport in Kalispell all influenced growth in Whitefish in the 1990s as well. Richard Firestone, an accounting actuary who moved to Whitefish is typical of, "professionals who fly to work as comfortably as most Americans drive, and whose use of computers in business lets them indulge their preference for life in the great outdoors."\(^{13}\) Their jetting about is not all that sets these newcomers apart.

Old-timers in Flathead Valley call these relocating professionals 'lone-eagles.' The typical home here is 1,200 - to - 1,800-square feet. But the ‘lone-eagles,’ who fly in and out of the state regularly on business, have homes 2,000 to 4,000 feet larger.

They are attracted to the, "area’s natural beauty, wildlife and access to outdoor sports... Relocation to the area has also been strongly motivated by the increase in crime and natural disasters in such states as California." Professionals who move to these areas because of the scenery and quality of life contribute to the shifting environmental ethic in Montana and other western states. The value of the land for them is in its preservation rather than what can be extracted from it.

The development potential of the mobile professional market was not lost on the Flathead County Convention and Visitor Association. In 1988 they staged a promotional campaign. They

---

\(^{12}\) Ibid., all quotes, p. 6B.

58

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
hired a public relations company that brought travel and business writers to the area to see what it had to offer. The campaign was so successful that it precipitated a building boom. A local builder, Tom LeChant, told a New York Times reporter that,

Ten years ago . . . the average home was 2,500 square feet. Now, . . . they average about 4,500 square feet and run to as much as 10,000 square feet. Most of the new homes are custom built, and eight out of ten are for people coming from out of state.\(^{14}\)

The impact of development in the area led to a dramatic rise in property taxes. In 1993, property taxes in Whitefish went up 17 per cent. In an effort to mitigate the impacts of this rise on long-term residents and retirees in Whitefish whose incomes had not made a comparable rise, the city asked the state to give the town resort classification, which it received. Towns with resort classification had special status that allowed them to impose a three per cent resort tax. The town would use the money to alleviate property taxes in city limits and to keep up with the growing needs of the community, such as improved sewage systems and road maintenance.

The popularity of Whitefish in the 1990s, although beneficial for people who worked in construction, was not as good for families who still worked for the railroad or timber companies. The average family involved in these two businesses only earned $20,000 a year. Jobs in the service industry did not keep up either. Workers on Big Mountain made an average of five dollars an hour as did people who worked at the shops in town.

The seasonal nature of the tourist industry left people unemployed in spring and fall.

The 1990s saw unprecedented growth in the Valley. Whitefish's popularity, the growth of the Flathead Valley in general, testifies to the area's reputation as a vacation mecca as well as a spot for second homes and urban refugees. Called "Glacier's gateway," by Snow Country Magazine, Whitefish is summed up like this: "[t]he Bottom Line: Strong tourism base, Traditional Family Setting, Low glitz factor." By 1995, the average three-bedroom home price had risen to $167,000, and the median household income to $21,569.

Although bigger than before, Whitefish still retained its small-town feel.

Whitefish today is what Jackson Hole was 20 years ago: a growing resort community, a Western town with a steady influx of tourists. As the population increases in Whitefish and surrounding Flathead County - the fastest growing area in Montana - a debate has arisen over county's efforts to rewrite its master plan. Many newcomers want to nurture tourism and preserve scenic vistas through strict zoning and land-use regulations. Other locals, however, feel they should be free to do what they want with their land.

Snow Country warns that, "The tourism industry drives the economy, so unless you arrive with a job or launch a business, your stay in Whitefish might be short." Many who consider themselves locals are transplants themselves. "While some view the town as a 'little Vail,' Whitefish carries none of the polish or pretension of that Colorado resort. Rather, it provides a 'traditional family setting,' says Kelly Talsma, a guidance

\[1\] Ibid., all quotes, p. 24.

The Bierstube is the sort of earthy, unique, anything-goes place that is becoming all too rare. 'I don't know if the owner would want me to say this,' says one Big Mountain employee. 'The place borders on raunchy. But that's part of the charm.'

Whether residents characterize Whitefish as a traditional family town or a place with a raucous nightlife, they agree that it is not like Vail or Aspen despite the resort's economic importance to the community.

The economic impacts of Big Mountain have been anything but small in Whitefish and the Flathead Valley. In 1997, "The resort's financial staff calculated that The Big Mountain directly spends $8 million annually on local goods, services and wages." Though many of the dollars of the almost 300,000 skiers a year were spent on the Mountain, "it is estimated that the resort either indirectly or directly circulates a total of $76 million annually in the Flathead Valley's economy."

By the 1990s Whitefish seemed a classic "Devil's Bargain." Rothman would argue that outsiders now made decisions for the community. Good jobs had been replaced by minimum wage ones. The

16 Ibid., all quotes, p. 58.
19 Ibid.
cost-of-living had skyrocketed. Even the past had been fiddled
with slightly in order to appeal to tourists. Cowboys became a
symbol of Whitefish. The end results were ad campaigns that
flaunted Whitefish’s rustic ambiance that contrasted with Vail or
Aspen’s refined atmospheres. The Big Mountain 2000-2001 brochure
used Whitefish’s history to promote itself.

The allure of the mountains is irresistible[sic.]. It’s a
primal force that draws the adventurous to discover nature
and themselves, delighting in the elements. This is what
attracted the original settlers of Whitefish, Montana - a
lakeside town cut from the wilderness and built on the fur
trading, timber, mining and railroad . . . Big Mountain was
born in Whitefish and this natural paradise will always be
home. The place has grown some, but at just over 5000
settlers, it’s not too big for its britches. Cowboys and
moose still amble about - Montana style - amidst the town’s
hustle and bustle.30

The brochure may be a strange admixture of fact and fiction;31
however, the ability of these changes to undermine Whitefish’s
“true” past or compromise Whitefish’s “real” culture slides into
Tosh’s lopsided view of history when nostalgia is used to judge
change over time.

The ingredients of a “Devil’s Bargain” seem to be present
in Whitefish. Rothman’s argument is too simplistic, however. If
Whitefish had not chosen tourism where would it be? Compared to
Roundup’s problems, tourism’s seem the lesser of two evils.
Certainly Whitefish made concessions in order to attract people
to their town, but at least people in Whitefish have jobs. And
what do the people of Whitefish think about the changes in their
area? Are they as unsuccessful and bitter as Rothman would have

---

30 Big Mountain, Whitefish Ski and Summer Resort brochure, Winter
31 For instance, mining was always a huge flop in Whitefish.
us believe? The final chapter considers their opinions. Their stories are a vital part of this evaluation.
That Big Mountain is a great ski area is undisputed. That the Big Mountain and tourism have altered Whitefish for the worse is a more controversial issue. What do the people in Whitefish think? The stories of an "old-timer," the President of the Chamber of Commerce, a skier, and a sales coordinator for Big Mountain help answer this central question: was Whitefish better off before tourism became its main industry? What they think of changes in their community and their hopes for the future supports my argument that evaluating tourism's impacts involves more than a backward, misty-eyed glance.

Frank Gregg’s father moved to Whitefish in 1911. His dad was a fireman and engineer for the railroad. Frank grew up in Whitefish and joined the military right after high school in order to fight in World War II. At the end of the war he came back to Whitefish and worked on the railroad until his retirement. He now lives in the trailer park at the south end of town and is the director of the Stumptown Historical Society. Frank is a walking encyclopedia of Whitefish history – especially information about the railroad. As director of the Stumptown Historical Society, he is dedicated to the goals of the society, which are to, "gain, preserve, maintain, and gather information,

history of the Valley primarily, and then just to keep it, preserve it, in perpetuity for as long as we last." Primarily, the museum gathers and preserves Great Northern memorabilia. Frank tells me that most of the members of the Society are people who grew up in Whitefish. Although many of the people who grew up there left for school or careers, they have come back to Whitefish to retire.

Frank explains that, "Basically I’ve spent my whole life here, most of my life I worked for the railroad, all kinds of different departments. But that’s why I’m here . . . ." Frank, however, is the exception for the most part.

Not too many of us stayed here our whole lives, a number of us did, or come back to retire. Now that we’re getting found there’s a lot of new wealthy people coming in and buying these 2 and 3 million dollar homes, come out here and putter around in the summer. We’ve got an ideal situation that we’ve got a big lake, a 36-hole golf course, a big ski run, and all kinds of hiking trails, and so it’s just a heck of a good spot. They’re finding it out more and more all the time.

Frank, who remembers when Whitefish was a railroad town, is acutely aware of changes brought by the influx of wealth.

Oh God, it’s ridiculous. The house that I had, it was built in about 1919, I think it cost $1400 or $1500 to build, well I got it from my father, he had traded it for a place out west of town for $6700, and then they had a bunch of remodeling done, and they insured it for $12,000 [in 1954]. But it had all aluminum siding, and the interior was all refinished, and my father died, he left the place to me, my brother, and sister. I bought them out for the insured value, $12,000, that was in 1974, I think it was. And I sold the place in 1978 for $36,000. Just in that 4 years it went up, and the same house right now is in the $90,000 bracket. And that’s what happened, it hurt a lot of our people. The biggest part of people in Whitefish are retired, there are some of them that really took a hit when the taxes went up.
He explains that people are drawn to the area for a number of reasons. “It’s a combination of golf, ski, swimming, boating, trail hiking, and it’s a real good summer-time climate.” He repeats, “you gotta admit it’s a beautiful valley.”

Even though Frank watched the economic importance of the railroad decline in the early 1970s, he still thinks it’s the biggest business in town.

The railroad’s still got about $2 million pay-roll here, because the Spokane and Havre men work in here and back, and the Whitefish men work both ways, but they don’t have as many people [as they used to]. I still think it’s the biggest pay roll there is [in Whitefish]. In order to get the sale’s tax [though], they had to prove that tourism was at least the second biggest, and I just don’t think it even come close. We’ve got so many Whitefish people that work over here at Anaconda, in the aluminum plant, and a heck of a bunch of ‘em work at the Semi-tool, in the big store in Kalispell and everything. They claim now that tourism is supporting the town, but I don’t see it. The tourists are not coming into the downtown stores and buying stuff, they’re spending their money on play things, and groceries of course, they’re benefiting from it, and the bars and the motels are benefiting, but the general populace is not. All it does is drive our taxes up.

Most of the businesses downtown are restaurants, bars, and motels, or else stores specializing in expensive kitchen items or Western kitsch. Frank points out that these businesses serve the tourists rather than the community. The profits made by chain grocery stores and gas stations do not stay in Whitefish.

Another problem he sees is that all the development at the base of Big Mountain has drawn business away from downtown. At first there was a lot of community support of the ski area, he remembers.

We got the big winter carnival going, and all kinds of big stuff going to bring people in for the winter. And it was a great thing until they moved it all up on the mountain. Used to have a parade a couple of miles long, the whole...
weekend - all kinds of things for people to do, but then, you hit the bottom line, the only people who made anything out of them were the bars and restaurants and hotels.

Frank makes a distinction between service-oriented businesses and railroad jobs. Clearly he does not believe that the people who own or work in restaurants and hotels contribute to the community in the same way the railroad workers did.

Frank also finds service industry jobs inadequate to meet the needs of residents.

The people that are working up there, the bad part of it is just like everything else, the golf course and all the McDonald's and everything it's all minimum wage people, and I don't know how they manage to stay here with the prices what they are. Sort of like Vail, Colorado, people live on the mountain and working at all those places have to live somewhere else. There's a lot of them who ski, and in the summertime there's quite a few working up there with the big restaurant. A lot of people hike up the mountain and hike down, and it's a good thing, but the money's not coming to the local people.

When asked if he resents the tourists, Frank admits,

To an extent I do, we had it our own way for so darn long, and someone may say, well, I enjoy the streetlights and sidewalks, and I say, hey man, we had streetlights in 1907, we had sidewalks in 1909. We paid for all that, and we would have had them had any tourists came in or not.

Again, a big part of the problem is that promoting tourism has only brought minimum wage jobs to town and increased the cost of living simultaneously.

It hurts me. If I were getting that much increase in my pension each year I wouldn't care, but I don't. That $18 a month raise in rent wiped out my cost of living increase for this year, so I'm making less than I did last year.

Though Frank is hesitant to admit any open hostility towards the tourists, he comments that "it's getting that way," because of the fact that decisions made by the city council and the city manager are more often focused on improving tourist facilities.
like parks and sidewalks than addressing problems of housing or deteriorating residential streets. Too, Frank points out that most of the people on the City Council are not lifetime residents of Whitefish, but people who moved there more recently who may not be as sensitive to local issues.

The way Frank remembers it, when he was growing up the community was very close-knit. Almost everyone worked for the railroad and,

everybody knew everybody, and of course the same people stayed here. Nobody kept coming and going, they came here for the railroad and they stayed here. And they all lived in the same house because it was within walking distance of the school and within walking distance of work . . . We had friends all over town . . . There was a tremendous change. There were no part-time jobs to speak of, no drive-ins, the golf course wasn’t here, we did have the lake all to ourselves. The kids just roamed the mountains. It was the best place in the world for a kid to grow up. We had the lake and the mountains, we had everything [to ourselves].

Frank’s favorite memories of Whitefish have to do with its railroading past. "I like to talk about the town, I grew up here, and spent most of my life here, and I’ve been a history buff since I was a little kid." He recalls the days when his dad would take him walking along the tracks and tell him stories about the Great Northern, and Frank’s passion is in preserving those memories through the Historical Society. For him, tourism is an annoying encumbrance that has raised his rent and altered the working-class town where he grew up. But a “Devil’s Bargain?” Does he believe tourism wrecked the community? Certainly his commitment to preserving Whitefish’s past is grounded in his desire to preserve its railroad history in the face of change. But the fact that Frank and other retirees chose
to stay in Whitefish indicates that they still cherish qualities in their area. Frank may have reservations about tourism. However, his sense of place has not been compromised by tourism, if anything change has intensified his attachment to Whitefish.

At the other end of the spectrum is Jim Trout, whose job and concerns have to do with the future of Whitefish. Jim moved to Whitefish thirty years ago and worked in a bank as a commercial lender - mostly to logging companies. Now, he is the President/Executive Director of the Whitefish Area Chamber of Commerce. His goal, and that of the Chamber, “is to promote the economic welfare of the community,” with its main focus directed towards tourism. He continues by explaining that,

Some chambers in bigger cities, or even get to Kalispell, their emphasis is different than ours is because Kalispell doesn’t have the tourism influence that we have here, just 15 miles away. They’ve got the Walmarts, and the K-Marts, and the ShopKos, and they’ve got the county seat, and they’ve got the big shopping center, big by our standards I guess. That’s what they look at. They’re kind of the commercial center of the valley. Columbia Falls as I said is the industrial center, and we’re the resort, and that’s what we want to be.

The economic success of Whitefish is directly tied to tourism, because Glacier National Park is 25 minutes away, we’ve got the only 36-hole golf course in the state, and there are 11 other 18-hole courses within an hour. We’ve got what people are looking for, and particularly the Boomers [Baby Boomers] who are now looking for kind of, for lack of a better term, adventure travel as opposed to staying in luxury hotel someplace or going on a cruise, they’re young enough and have enough money and they have enough disposable income that they want things to do. If you’re into outdoors at all, we’re there year round, because we have one of the largest ski areas in the country, we’re skiing almost 4,000 acres . . . and in the summer you have Glacier National Park only 25 minutes away, one of the greatest hiking parks I’ve ever been around anywhere. We have a lake that comes right into town with a wonderful city beach, it’s one of our city parks, and Flathead lake’s only a few minutes away, the largest natural lake west of the Mississippi, if you’re into
sailing and that kind of thing that’s available. If you’re into any kind of outdoor - fishing, hunting - all those kinds of things, there just isn’t a better place.

In his opinion the community has definitely changed for the better. He recalls that thirty years ago, downtown Whitefish, the main street which is now actually kind of funky and kind of attractive in its own way, our Central Avenue, was a disaster. I mean when I first came here there wasn’t a bar in town, not that that’s necessarily important, but that you would have taken a lady into, I mean literally. They were all working men’s bars and that kind of thing. There was one, probably one nightclub in the town, the golf course was nine holes, it’s now 36, plus we have one other little course. And since then ten golf courses have been built around the area. It was on the verge of it, and the Mountain of course back in those days was tremendously under-financed and was really struggling to even keep the doors open. And now, just this last year Ski Magazine rated us 16th best in the United States, and that says something. And just a ton of money has gone into the infrastructure of this community to attract the tourists.

He believes the improvements justify the changes. He also admires the contributions that new residents have made to the area.

It’s kind of hard to imagine, but . . . we just built the cultural arts center, the new cultural arts center down across from the brewery and the new library, about a $5 million project with no tax dollars. It’s all private contributions to build those.

Many of these people have come from, Southern California, Arizona, Texas, Florida. A lot of the inquiries we’re getting now, I’d say two out of five are [from] Florida. All of sudden Montana’s been discovered, at least this part of Montana’s been discovered by Florida. People are finding that . . . [i]t’s not a cold forbidding place. And another perception is that you can’t get here from there, that kind of a thing. But we have 16 jet flights a day into our airport that’s ten minutes away, served by 3 national airlines, so it’s not exactly what people perceive it to be.

Jim is excited about the money the newcomers bring to the community. As Chamber President his job is to promote economic
growth in the area and if wealthy people can be lured to Whitefish, he sees the benefits of that rather than the drawbacks. The newcomers might push up property taxes, they most likely are not railroad people; they are, however, invested in protecting the area from irresponsible development. Newcomers are as anxious to preserve the small-town qualities that brought them to Whitefish as are the people who have lived there much longer.

Jim believes that most long-term residents do not resent the changes brought by tourism.

I think we’re awfully tolerant. Montanans are tolerant by nature, I think, even though I’m not a native Montanan, I’ve lived here almost long enough to be one, but they’re pretty tolerant in which you do your thing and let me do my thing and we’ll get along just fine. And I think that there were probably some years when some of the old-timers didn’t want the tourist here... and some of them resented it. And then all of sudden the consciousness slowly shifted to the fact that, hey, these people are bringing money. They’re coming here, they’re spending their money, and they’re going away. And that’s all they’re doing. Talk about a clean industry, how could it get any cleaner than that?

Jim believes that another factor that has eased tensions is that the number of people native to Whitefish is dwindling.

[Almost everybody is from someplace else. Everybody, the three or four of us who work in this office, are all from someplace else, almost everybody up and down main street is from somewhere else. So no, I don’t think there’s any intolerance anymore. I think that the quality of life has improved dramatically with tourism, at least in this community, with basically no ill affects. We’ll never be an Aspen or a Vail or Telluride.

According to Rothman, becoming another Aspen or Vail is inevitable for a ski town that embraces corporate tourism. Jim explains that will not happen to Whitefish,

Because we don’t want to be in the first place, and in the second place it’s too big here. To have those kinds of
development its gotta be capsulated, its gotta be like a Bigfork, where when you walk down the street in Bigfork every business is a little cutesy, tourist thing. Walk down the street in Whitefish, well, we have a hardware store on main street, we’re just a small town, in Montana, that attracts tourists because of the natural surroundings, so, it’s just not going to happen here. And I think too for any of those things to happen, for us to become one of those kinds of places, you have to have a Denver nearby, or a Salt Lake City in the case of Alta, and those places. You’ve gotta have a major metropolitan area, a major airline hub close by. And like I said though we have good airline service for a Valley with only 70,000 people, we don’t have that kind of air service, so to get here, probably fully 90% of our people drive, so that it’s not likely.

His assessment is probably correct. Without a large city nearby, Whitefish can not pull in the numbers that resorts in Colorado and Utah can. Though much of Big Mountain’s business came from Calgary a few years ago, the abysmal exchange rate has cut those numbers back dramatically. And even Calgary, at barely one million is not close enough or big enough to provide the numbers of skiers that flock to areas in Colorado and Utah. Jim’s comment that they won’t become a Vail or Aspen because “they don’t want to be” indicates that the people of Whitefish do not think they have given up control of preserving their community the way they want it.

He also notes that the fact that Whitefish is a real town - with a downtown area - protects its transformation into a soulless resort. He compares Big Mountain to Big Sky, near Bozeman.

They ski just about as many skiers as Big Sky does, maybe a few more. They’re both right around 300,000. The thing that I like about where we are is that Big Sky doesn’t have a town, when you go to Big Sky, there’s Big Sky, it’s a resort, and that’s what there is there, and it’s pretty glitzy. We’re kind of a funky little, blue jeans kind of a ski area, and we have a town, a real town that’s there.
He also added that the 2% sales tax collected in Whitefish helps alleviate the pressures put on the community by the tourists. Of the approximately $40,000 taken in, 25% goes to property tax relief for people in the city. Some goes to maintenance of city parks, some to the merchants for collecting the tax, and the balance towards infrastructure improvements.

Despite his enthusiasm, Jim realizes that tourism is not perfect.

Tourism, like I said is a clean industry, but it’s not without its attendant problems. And one of those attendant problems is that it’s a service economy, and service economies don’t pay very well. So you have that problem, that a lot of the kids, and most everybody’s a kid to me anymore, but a lot of the kids are either working for minimum wage or just a little above, cause there’s a terrific amount of service jobs in a tourist economy, that’s a problem - is [no] high paying jobs.

He downplays this problem by mentioning that many, who work in the service industry, although they are paid minimum wage, also earn tips.

[But there’s a factor left out of all that, that’s never, it’s sort of reported, and that’s tips. Because I know people in town who are working basically for $5.50-$6.00 an hour, but they’re making in reality $30.00 because of tips. I mean there’s places in this town that are very well tipped, so that kind of softens that blow a little bit.

Another trouble is that most service industry jobs do not carry insurance or other benefits for their workers. Basically, you get whatever you get, and that’s the name of the game. That is a problem I think. I think from the standpoint of how it will evolve, I think that we’re not, the place is so big, from the Canadian border to the Bitterroot Valley south, as far as Western Montana goes, which is the main tourist area in Montana, there’s just so much land, I know the government owns most of it, but there’s so much land, we’re not going to get to the point of crowds and that kind of thing, I mean a couple of months a year you have to dodge a Winnebago blocking the highway, mostly its not a problem. It’s just not a problem.
Even though Jim acknowledges that service economy wages are sometimes low he thinks the cost of living in Whitefish offsets this issue. He compares Whitefish to other places and believes that it is still an affordable place to live.

We have the reputation, Whitefish does, of having the highest priced housing in the state, but that's really skewed by a couple of multi-million dollar homes that sell, because we're a town of 6 - 7,000 people, so you have a couple of multi-million dollar homes, $4,000,000 homes that have sold in the last year, that blows the whole average out. As a matter of fact, you can still afford to live here very easily, it's not that expensive to live here. It's probably more expensive to live here than it is in Spokane, or some other places, but it's not that expensive. It really isn't. You can still buy a very nice, a 3-bedroom home here for $125-$150,000. And that's good by anybody's standards. And property taxes are low, relatively low, my house is $225-250,000 something like that, my taxes are $1500 a year. So, I mean, it's just nothing.

Jim consistently downplays many of the issues that worry Rothman and other critics of the impacts of tourism. Jim looks more at the big picture: maybe Whitefish is more expensive than it used to be, but compared to cities around the country, and even other resort communities, Whitefish is still relatively affordable.

In order to combat the problems associated with tourist towns Jim explains that the city is looking at other resort communities’ mistakes. He believes that this will help Whitefish to trouble-shoot future difficulties and preserve Whitefish’s character.

We have very strict zoning, countywide and city zoning, very strict zoning. So you'll never see, as you do in Colorado, a mobile home parked up on the side of a hill with sewage running out of it. Can't happen here, just simply can't happen, we have very strict zoning. We're way ahead of the curve on that kind of thing, so, problems they're experiencing we've already got solved. . . I think that we've learned from their mistakes, and it won't happen here. It will not.
Jim is very optimistic about the future of Whitefish. Its proximity to Glacier National Park and its distance from a major metropolitan area promise in his mind to keep the tourists passing through, but not in numbers that the town can not handle. Zoning laws, such as a recent ordinance passed that prohibits neon and internally lit signs, will help preserve Whitefish’s “funky” charm.

Rich people are not the only ones attracted to Whitefish. Newcomer Joel Griffith came to Whitefish to work as a vehicle maintenance mechanic and snow groomer for Big Mountain. Although only in the community for three months, he has well-developed ideas about the corporation he works for and a strong sense of the place where he lives. Before Whitefish he worked seasonally at Snowbowl, the ski area near Missoula, and before that he worked for a season for Vail Associates in Colorado. He says that he came to Montana “for skiing, specifically. I wanted to move to a town that had a change of seasons, and great skiing, and that’s what brought me here. I wasn’t really thinking about my career or what I wanted to do with my life, other than just play.” Although he moved to Whitefish for the same reasons as other ski bums, Joel is not typical because he is now working full-time for Big Mountain. He considers himself a “professional ski bum,” because he makes, “a living out of being a ski bum. You know I’m living in a nice place, I’m able to save money, I’m not making a wage that you can barely get by on, I work at a ski resort because I enjoy skiing for free.” Joel feels lucky to have a year-round job at a ski resort.
Having a full-time year-round job at a ski resort is very hard to come by. You have to be in the right place at the right time. We employ approximately 100 people full-time year-round here, and seasonally in the wintertime it's up to about 450. When I first moved to Whitefish I met a person who said I was very lucky to just come into town here and get a year-round job.

He also did not have any trouble finding an affordable place to live when he came to Whitefish. He pays $550 for a well-maintained two-bedroom apartment one block from Whitefish Lake. He attributes this to the fact that he,

moved up here right at the end of ski season when everyone was moving out, so I did not have a problem finding a place to live. I know that some people are having a hard time, but then it depends on how picky you are. Like any ski town, there's dumps, and there's really nice places that you might have to get on a waiting list maybe to get.

Joel, who grew up in New Hampshire, imagines that he will stay in Whitefish for awhile.

I just moved here 3 months ago, and this is the happiest I've ever been in the West. I love it here. People are extremely friendly. . . . Everyone really loves what they do, and not just on the Mountain, but in town, whether it's working part-time or just finding a little work to do, they love what they do . . . . People are here in this town, not for the work, but they're here because they enjoy playing. And work is second nature. They work so they can play. And that's true for everyone, whether it's the CEO of the company or the trash collector, they're here to play. And that's why they live in Whitefish.

One of the important factors contributing to Joel's enjoyment so far working at Big Mountain has to do with the corporation itself.

I have more contact with the Administration here than I ever did when I worked in Vail, Colorado, for Vail Associates, the Administration is very open too, they don't consider themselves higher up. Everyone is equal and they treat people that way. They see you, they come by the shop where I work, and it's like he's [the manager] just another employee that I'm helping out, or he's helping me out, and it's a very different company, when it comes to most ski areas or ski organizations aren't like that.
Joel’s experience at other ski areas gives him special insight into the business and tourist towns in general. He appreciates working for Winter Sports Inc. versus his time with other companies.

One of the biggest differences between Vail and Whitefish has to do with the goals of the two corporations.

You could say, possibly, that Whitefish is like Vail 30 years ago. And Vail wanted to make it, their goal was to make it into the biggest ski resort. That’s not our goal. Our goal here is to have a ski resort that is still affordable for people that come and stay, but, yet have great skiing and a great time, and a great environment, and we don’t have all the ritz, it’s not $60 for a lift ticket.

As for the town of Whitefish itself, Joel regards it as a Western town original. It’s not made to look Western, the buildings you see in downtown Whitefish are original, they’ve been there for 100 years, the buildings that you see up here they’re trying to make them so they’re quaint and very nice and so they fit into the atmosphere.

Western, yes. Contrived, no.

Though the risk of becoming another Vail is real, Joel is not too concerned because,

no one here wants to be a Vail. We don’t want to be a Vail. And I’m sure if anything came about, where they were going to put something up that would start attracting people like that it would be shot down, there would be a lot of protest. People are very outspoken around here about how they want their town kept.

Also, something that Joel calls the “Montana lifestyle attitude,” which he defines as “a relaxed attitude,” prohibits the kind of atmosphere found in a place like Vail.

Joel so far has not detected any resentment between the town and the Mountain.
I think that the town welcomes the mountain. It's almost like they're together on it. I think that the people who own small businesses in town know that the Mountain helps bring the tourists, which in turn helps their small businesses. And so I don't think they resent the Mountain whatsoever. They all love to ski too. Or they probably wouldn't be here.

He perceives a shared love of skiing and the way that the community is now as a decisive factor in keeping Whitefish from falling victim to a "Devil's Bargain", or being a victim at all. Though new to Whitefish he finds the town friendly, affordable, and unblemished by tacky tourist trappings. He does see a "Devil's Bargain" in a place like Vail, where housing is so expensive workers can not live there and the corporation treats their employees poorly, but not in Whitefish.

Finally I spoke with Susie Schenck, a sales coordinator at Big Mountain. She grew up in Whitefish, as did her parents, and her children. She remembers that she, "started working here [at Big Mountain] in high school, you know waitressing jobs, bussing jobs, that type of thing." She married Ed Schenck's son and has deep ties to the community and Big Mountain. She has been employed most recently at Big Mountain for the last 31⁄2 years. During that time she worked in the accounting department, the information center, and now at her current full-time position in the sales and marketing office. She's been skiing most of her life, as has her husband, who learned to ski when he was two years old. Her children are avid skiers as well.

---

Lift tickets at Big Mountain were $40.00 for the 1999/2000 season (from the Big Mountain brochure).

Susie in fact was crowned 1962 Winter Carnival Queen.
Susie is aware of many changes in her community during the course of her lifetime. When I was growing up there was a very strong middle-class element in Whitefish. There was logging, and there was the Anaconda aluminum company, and there was the railroad, and very strong middle-class families. And obviously some upper some lower, but I think that the thrust of the community was very middle class, very blue-collar, working folk, and in my life-time I’ve seen that change phenomenally, the logging has been reduced, obviously the railroad has reduced its importance. Columbia Falls - the aluminum company has reduced in its importance to the community as far as employing a large number of people. And unfortunately I think what has happened in our community, my husband and I often tease about being the only middle class family left in Whitefish, and we’re lower middle class financially. I think that there’s a chasm between now the upper class of people, or upper income level of people that have moved here. And there’s just a huge chasm between them and the rest of the people. I think that it is no longer a strong middle class community.

Changes that concern Susie include not just shifts in the socio-economic balance of the town, but the results of those shifts on property values.

[With] things like property values, I know it’s really unfortunate to see these older people that moved here in 1900, and bought homes, and can no longer keep them because of the property values going up because of the upper income folk and the fact that Whitefish has attracted that, and certainly property values go up, but then the older people that have lived here all their lives can’t afford to maintain that, they can’t pay the taxes. Unfortunately also in my children’s generation, I don’t think any of them could actually live here and buy a home, I don’t think that’s a viable option for them, because most of the occupations here are service related, travel industry related, and definitely not of an income where you can really buy a home.

Though Susie recognizes these issues, she comments that obviously she is optimistic about Whitefish’s future, or else she would not still be there working for Big Mountain.

She believes that the people’s consciousness of the problems associated with low-paying service jobs means the community is
actively seeking “clean” industries other than tourism. She mentions the new Stream Corporation that is coming to Kalispell. “Obviously by inviting the environmentally friendly, higher paying jobs like Stream offers, those types of companies perhaps, we can raise the bar, as far as pay scale for people around here goes . . . .” Even though she is hopeful, she is not really sure, “how you could change it. We have so many starter castles around here, and that’s kind of the way it is. And I guess I hope, maybe they’ll get tired of us, and they won’t want to live here [anymore].” She reasons that Whitefish will never become another Vail because it cannot offer the goods and services those places can.

But, we, in some ways, just can’t get there from here, because we are pretty rural, I think a lot of people really would love to have, you know when they move here the upper echelon people are expecting services, are expecting a certain type of thing that is available, that we just can’t offer, you know when you go to build a house, maybe they have what you’re looking for, maybe they ship it in, it is inconvenient to live here. And it’s also inconvenient to travel here.

Like Jim Trout she believes Whitefish’s distance from a big city and the difficulty in getting there protect it somewhat, and she hopes will eventually discourage continued growth.

Susie’s ideas for a hopeful future include,

embracing what used to be. In that I think that so many people that are here locally are looking at it and going boy, there is a price to pay if we do encourage the upper income people to come here and develop and so forth and what they expect from a community, that type of thing . . . . And so I think the people who will stay here, are the ones who actually put their money where their mouth is, in that they do embrace what the community is actually about - like little boys fishing off the bridge, and the 10:00 o’clock whistle, that charm, that kind of down-home old-fashioned [feel]. Like I remember growing up here, if I got in trouble at school, first I got in trouble at school, and
then I got in trouble when I got home. . . It's that type of community thing where there's not that anonymity, it's a community thing, and you know other people's children and you're aware of them, and you know other people's situations, and I think that's part of the charm and hopefully that's why they move here.

So even though Whitefish is not the middle-class community of her youth, Susie still sees in Whitefish elements of the small-town she remembers from her childhood. These include familiarity with events like the train whistle or recognizing people as they walk down the street. She hopes that the qualities she appreciates about Whitefish will also act as a filter that determines the type of people who move to town.

Though Susie does not think there is any conflict between the people and businesses in town and the Mountain, she regards them as,

two different entities, either you're town or you're the Mountain. I think that growing up here it was always that way, and historically I think that you can find there is definitely a division, what we were talking about, the railroaders, and the timber guys, and the Anaconda aluminum guys, I don't think that in early history they thought this was work. I think that they felt that they were really working for a living, and that people on the mountain were just playing, you know it was recreation, it was completely different. So I think that in Whitefish there is a definite sense of that you are Big Mountain or Whitefish. I think that in the marketing department and in everything that I send out from our department, in marketing and sales, I always am inclusive of both Mountain and Whitefish properties. I'm always very sensitive to the fact that Whitefish is an asset for us, and we should be an asset for Whitefish as well, and that there should be a cooperation. And in my mind there is that cooperation.

Like Jim Trout and Joel Griffith, Susie believes that town and the Mountain complement each other in many ways. She also helps explain the perceived difference in types of work in the area. Different conceptions of work illuminate Frank Gregg's and Jim
Trout’s comments. Frank did not think money that went to hotels and restaurants was as good for the community as money that came from the railroad. Jim had an attachment to the timber industry that meant he still supported its operation in the area.

Finally, Susie is wary of tourism as the sole economic strategy for Whitefish’s future.

I think it’s important for us to expand from strictly tourism because I think that is where you get the lower economic level, because the jobs are service oriented and tend to be closer to minimum wage. And I think it’s really important for us to explore other alternatives, like I was saying before, like Stream that comes in, and raises the bar, that starts people way above, well way above you know, a few dollars above minimum wage that type of think. And I think it’s really important economically for us to protect our resources . . . I think it’s really important for Whitefish and the Flathead Valley to explore different things. Tourism is certainly a wonderful thing . . .

Susie may regard tourism as a wonderful thing, but it does not stop her from identifying its problems too. She, like the other three, seems realistic about Whitefish’s future. She also believes that the people in the community have the ability to shape and direct that future. Most importantly, Susie wants a future that includes tourism, but is not exclusively tourist oriented. The lessons of the past show that relying on one industry is not a good strategy.

The stories of the people I talked to in Whitefish indicate that the people who live there have been very active in the creation of their town. Their age, occupation, and other more subtle factors influence how they judge its growth. Frank Gregg comes closest to admitting that tourism has been an ugly trade-off for Whitefish. He and his father both worked for the railroad and his devotion to the Great Northern and what it
represents is upset by the ski industry. As a retiree on a fixed income he is hurt most by rising property taxes. The paradox inherent in Frank’s viewpoint is that with the Great Northern only employing 25 workers in Whitefish now, without tourism, the bustling little town that Frank recalls from his youth would be a virtual ghost town. Without tourism, where would Whitefish be?

Jim Trout and Susie Schenck are the second wave of Whitefish residents; that is the ski area has always been a presence in their time there. They are adamant about promoting not just tourism for the area, but other businesses too. Jim hopes for the continuance of logging in the area as well as high-tech jobs. Susie also regards high-tech, “clean” industries as an important part of Whitefish’s future. They both believe that a diversified economy is the best for Whitefish.

Then there is Joel, a ski bum, whose impressions suggest that as long as the people who move to Whitefish are doing so “to play,” or rather for Whitefish’s natural features, it will keep Whitefish from over developing. What all their opinions demonstrate is that at least in the year 2000, no one thinks Whitefish has succumbed to cookie-cutter resortdom, the furs and fashions of Vail, nor extra-local control.

From administrative positions on the Mountain to bartending jobs in town, tourism has brought work to Whitefish. No one will argue that service industry jobs are glamorous or will earn the worker millions of dollars; however, people in Whitefish are working. The area’s population continues to increase.
According to Jim Trout the quality of life in Whitefish has improved dramatically in the last thirty years as well. A woman can safely venture into any bar in town now. More city parks, clean lake water and drinking water, as well as better sewer systems are only some of the benefits bought with tourist tax dollars. If fresh air, green mountains, no rush hour, low unemployment rate, and a friendly atmosphere are symptoms of a high quality of life - Whitefish has them all.

When assessing tourism, gauging its environmental impact is difficult, but when compared to the alternatives it seems relatively benign. Jim Trout called it a “clean industry,” and compared to logging it is for Whitefish. Tourists who come to Whitefish want to hike, fish, and boat. Even if citizens are not environmentalists, they see the economic importance of maintaining wilderness habitat and clean water. Protection of local forests and watersheds for the tourists is still protection. Even hunting, although a smaller segment of the activities in the area, serves to protect local game populations and habitat. Development and congestion on summer roads can be an eyesore, but even with development, much of the land surrounding Whitefish remains in its natural state. If Jim’s predictions are correct, it will stay that way. Overall then, tourism and the ski industry protect the environment more than logging.

The business of tourism is at this point more reliable than the railroad or the aluminum plant nearby. Although tourism has changed the community, the people who live there recognize its
importance to their economic success. Frank, Jim, Joel, and Susie might complain about the higher cost-of-living prompted by Whitefish's popularity; however, none of them mentioned a desire to move. Their attachment to Whitefish demonstrates that Whitefish is still a good place to live. Their hopes for Whitefish's future suggest that they believe they can protect their town from the more insidious parts of a tourist economy.
CONCLUSION:
DEBUNKING THE "DEVIL'S BARGAIN"

The people of Whitefish have been boosting their community since its inception. Growth was not necessarily inevitable - it was actively encouraged. The people's constant participation in promoting their area affirms that they sought to be where they are, rather than having tourism imposed on them by extra-local influence. Although Frank Gregg does not think the businesses in town are benefiting the same as the mountain, the busy hotels, restaurants, gas stations, and grocery stores along the main drag demonstrate otherwise. The number of new businesses in Whitefish indicates that the community is thriving, not failing. True, these are all service-oriented businesses - but what else does any small town have? A list of businesses advertised in The Pilot in 1938 included ten grocery stores/pharmacies, six clothing stores, three restaurants, five gas/service stations, a jeweler, and a hotel. Arguably the retirees are the only ones who have suffered with the higher cost of living.

Another assumption associated with tourism is that it undermines local culture. This supposedly happens when towns develop according to what tourists want rather than what the residents want. I would argue that tourism, at least in Whitefish, has prompted the town to invent some local culture where it was lacking. The stories told about the town's relatively short one hundred year past to promote tourism have not usurped Whitefish's "true" past. The town clings to its
railroad and logging past through institutions like the historical society. Even Big Mountain’s brochures, though they eulogize people like Mully, include references to the town’s original industries. The people of Whitefish remain attached to their railroad and timber past; they have also made the most of the history of their ski hill and their location in the West to appeal to Easterner’s desires to find a cowboy/ski town.

Whitefish might not be the middle-class railroad town that once was, however, the culture of Whitefish has not been seriously undermined because of tourism. The prostitutes and Japanese workers who came with the railroad disappeared long before Big Mountain and tourism became big businesses in town. Whitefish’s social fabric has changed, that is indisputable; that tourism is to blame is a risky assumption.

Demographically Whitefish does not resemble the town it was when the railroad was the biggest business in town. Whitefish is bigger now, there are more retirees, and ski bums have replaced the boomers and drifters of the early days. Most of the old-timers have died and been replaced by a new population of people associated with the tourist industry. In many ways, though, the beauty of the area, the close-knit quality of a small town - the qualities that the old-timers treasure - are the qualities that have brought the new-comers to Whitefish. Their interest is in preserving Whitefish that way too. This particular drive is partially what has protected Whitefish from Rothman’s “Devil’s Bargain.” Winter Sports, Inc.’s, understanding that the people
who come to visit Whitefish do not want a glitzy Vail or Aspen has also served to preserve Whitefish’s “home-town” ambiance. Unlike a place like Roundup where businesses are closing their doors, Whitefish’s remain wide open.

So do locals benefit from tourism? The answer depends also on who is defined as a local. Certainly Frank and Susie, both born in Whitefish, are locals; however, their perspectives are quite different, colored by their own experiences. Are Jim and Joel locals? If a love of the area and an interest in keeping the community a certain way is a factor, then yes, they are. However, by Rothman’s judgments they would be neo-natives without a thorough grasp of the community. Rothman chooses to make his judgments from what would in this project come closest to an old-timer’s perspective. That particular angle, however, is not sufficient to measure the impacts of tourism on a community.

One of Judd and Fainstein’s questions is whether citizens have access to tourist facilities. According to Joel, who commented that most of the people in Whitefish were there to play, this is a town that skis. Unlike many other ski areas, Big Mountain still offers an affordable season pass, that if bought early, is only $200.00.\(^1\) Big Mountain sold 2,200 passes (roughly 30 per cent of the town’s population) to local people in 1999-2000. People who work for Big Mountain ski for free. As for access to the lake, a public beach is only minutes from downtown.

Like any community, Whitefish has problems. It has more minimum wage jobs that have very little opportunity for
advancement than is ideal. Million dollar homes and celebrities keep popping up on the mountainsides. Locals are sometimes frustrated by the tourists and the tourists are probably irked by the locals (waiters in Whitefish are not necessarily the most professional). But overall, the millions of dollars that pour into local businesses, the solid economy that will continue to grow if predictions of tourist numbers are accurate, and the quality of life in Whitefish belie the idea that tourism cannot be done well. This is very good news for small towns whose traditional extractive industries are failing. Of course not all small towns can attract tourists. The town must possess environmental qualities, geographical features, or have historical significance that brings people to town. Tourism, however, remains an option for many places in the west.

What makes Whitefish exceptional is not that it has managed to be a tourist town without the cost of losing its small town feel, but what it suggests about tourism in the West. Perhaps tourism is not the evil that so many perceive it to be. Especially important is to understand the alternatives to tourism. Although tourism resembles extractive industries superficially—in that it relies on natural resources such as

---

1 I remember in 1994 the “cheap” pass in Steamboat Springs was $850.00, the price rising steadily every year.

snow and open space, it does not actually extract resources from the land. Also different is that tourism has the potential to give towns used to boom-bust economies at least two seasons of solid work year after year. Again, when evaluating tourism it is imperative to remember where towns like Whitefish would be without it. Certainly tourism is not trouble free, but the evidence demonstrates that not only has tourism given economic stability to Whitefish, it has improved the infrastructure and quality of life for many residents. Nostalgia is not a particularly solid form of historical analysis - people's jobs, their sense of place and ability to stay in that place, and the sustainability of the local environment, are.

The purpose of this project was to explain how the gradual incorporation of tourism into Whitefish's economy affected the community. In writing this thesis I had a particular agenda. That agenda was to prove that not only did the community embrace tourism as an economic strategy from very early on, but that the community still supports it. The information I collected and the people I encountered did not demonstrate that Whitefish had sold its soul to the "Devil." Continual corporate influences in the town - whether logging, railroad, or Winter Sports, Inc. - demonstrate that there has always been some extra-local influence in Whitefish. Hyde's observance that mountain communities' erratic economies and populations meant a lack of social cohesion support my belief that Whitefish's culture was not destroyed by tourism; culture in Whitefish was subject to fluctuations due to
the nature of its industries. Rothman's mistake is his premise that everything used to be better. Part of Whitefish's exceptionalism must be tied to the relationship between town and Big Mountain. Ed Schenck said it first, when he commented that,

> there are few people in town who don't feel personally proud of Big Mountain. You can see it from almost anywhere in town . . . . Somehow, [it] has become a concrete expression of the town's spirit of adventure and cooperation.'

The continuous cooperation between town and the mountain helps explain why Whitefish has not experienced problems to the same extent as other ski towns.

The people of Whitefish actively courted tourism. Their gradual incorporation of tourism as the railroad and timber business declined refutes the idea that all westerners are naive victims of slick, city people looking to make a quick buck in the West. Rothman's "Devil's Bargain" may work in analyses of some communities, but for Whitefish at least, that model cannot explain this town's past and present.

This story is not over; how Whitefish will develop is unknown. Will Whitefish be able to steer clear of a "Devil's Bargain" in the future? If the past is an indication of the future Whitefish will be able to protect its community and derive income from tourism. For Whitefish at least, hell will not be the price paid for economic stability. Whitefish's success suggests

---

ad spending from the major Colorado and Utah resorts.

1 Edmund Christopherson, "They Bet Their Shirts on Skiing," The Saturday Evening Post 222 (March 4, 1950): 112.
that other towns dealing with changes in the Western economy have
the ability to avoid selling their souls to the Devil too.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

SECONDARY SOURCES


Polzin, Paul E. and Schweitzer, Dennis L. *Economic Importance of Tourism in Montana.* Ogden, Utah: Intermountain Forest and Range Experiment Station, Forest Service U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1975.


“They bet their shirts on skiing . . . and won,” *Western Seasons,* (fall 1962): 11 and 20.


White, Dana. “Wild Times in Whitefish: Of mice, moose, and men: Big Mountain, Mont., is gearing up for the big time.” *Skiing* 43 (January 1990): 1W-3W.


PRIMARY SOURCES

Big Mountain File. Newspaper articles and ephemera. Whitefish Public Library, Whitefish, MT.

Big Mountain and Whitefish Files. Newspaper articles and ephemera. Flathead County Library, Kalispell, MT.


Missoulian (Montana) Sentinel, 10 July 1960.

