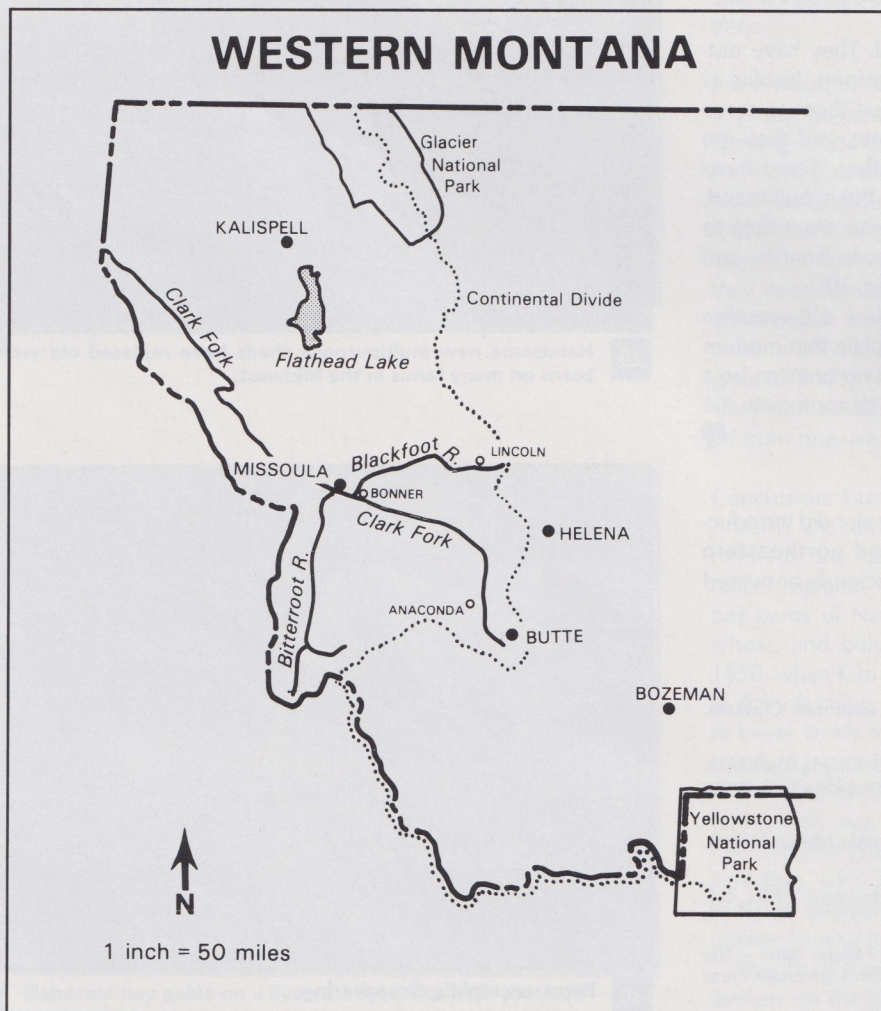


# The Real River That Runs Through It:

## Montana's Imperilled Blackfoot

John B. Wright



“In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” That is the classic opening sentence of Norman Maclean’s novella, *A River Runs Through It*—a story of family closeness and loss and of the wisdom taught by the rhythms of trout fishing on Montana’s Blackfoot River in the early part of this century. Robert Redford’s recent film, *A River Runs Through It*, is an elegant and graceful treatment of Maclean’s work. Yet, the movie portrays images of the Blackfoot River that would have been false even for the time period portrayed.

The mouth of the Blackfoot River is within the Environmental Protection Agency’s Upper Clark Fork River Superfund site in western Montana. The entire Blackfoot watershed has been the setting of unrelenting resource extraction for more than 100 years. The real river that runs through it is choked with sediments washing down from forest clearcuts on steep mountainsides. Mine wastes, excessive irrigation withdrawals, overgrazing, and land subdivision developments are also significantly impacting the landscape. Even the trout fishery, which formed the central metaphor in Maclean’s story, is so poor that the Blackfoot could not play itself in Redford’s movie. What you saw was actually filmed on several other rivers hundreds of miles away. Like so many previous Hollywood movies about the West, *A River Runs Through It* is a geographic myth.

### Environmental history of the Blackfoot River

The Blackfoot River flows westward across Montana from the Continental Divide to its confluence with the Clark Fork River five miles upstream from Missoula, as shown on the map of western Montana. The Blackfoot drainage once was used by Salish, Kootenai, Nez Perce, and other tribes as the “Going to the Buffalo Trail” to the Great Plains east of the mountains. Captain Meriwether Lewis traversed the canyon in 1806 and reported dense forests and abundant trout in the clear, fast-moving river.

Trapping, homesteading, and small gold and silver mining operations began to incrementally alter the watershed in the coming decades. However, it wasn’t until a robust Irish entrepreneur named Marcus





Anaconda Montana –  
an old smelter.  
Note stark,  
bare landscape.

J. Wright

Daly arrived in Butte in 1880 that widespread exploitation of the Blackfoot began. Daly worked for a San Francisco mining syndicate headed by George Hearst, father of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. The first property Daly bought was the "Anaconda," a rather unpromising silver claim on "The Hill" in Butte. The silver soon played out, but in 1882, copper sulphide ore was brought to the surface which assayed 55% pure. A copper boom began as Daly used Hearst's money to grab up most of Butte and create the incredibly powerful Anaconda Company. In 1884, the massive Washoe Smelter was completed on Warm Springs Creek, 26 miles west of Butte. A company town, named Anaconda, was built at the base of the smelter. Heavy metals and mine acids soon polluted the nearby Clark Fork River so badly that it ran red and orange as far downstream as the Blackfoot River near Missoula. Poisonous fumes from the smelter's gigantic smokestack killed vegetation over hundreds of square miles.

"The Company," as Anaconda was simply called, began to control many aspects of Montana life. John Gunther wrote that in the heyday of The Company, "Montana was the nearest to a 'colony' of any American state." The Company extracted huge amounts of timber from the Blackfoot watershed as fuel for the smelter and beams for its expanding warren of mine

shafts. By 1910, The Company owned one million acres of timberland in Montana and was its largest timber producer. The headquarters of their logging operations was Bonner, where a dam had been built at the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers. Heavy metals from smelter waste accumulated behind the dam and migrated up into the main stem of the Blackfoot.

The steep, unstable mountainsides along the Blackfoot River were stripped of timber as fast as men could whip cross-cut saws through the bases of 400-year-old Douglas firs and ponderosa pines. During the 1930s (when much of Maclean's story was set), sediment washed downslope, roiling the river and smothering the eggs of spawning trout in tributary creeks. Log drives also clogged the river until railroad and truck hauling proved necessary to keep up with the chainsaw crews fanning out through the woods. A sawmill and a plywood plant were built at Bonner to process the trees, once the Washoe Smelter switched over to coal and other fuels. With the dismantling of the smelter complex in the late 1970s, much of the Anaconda lands in the Blackfoot drainage were sold to the Champion International Company. However, the process of deforestation continues unbroken into the 1990s. Champion has now even cut its "seed trees," which had been left behind to naturally reforest clearcuts. Champion's land holdings are

now up for sale.

Widespread land subdivision and housing development along the river began in the 1960s. At the same time, recreational pressure by floaters and anglers also dramatically increased. In the early 1970s, local ranchers considered several options for contending with growth, such as zoning regulations, recreation permits, and strict subdivision codes. These choices were rejected—nobody wanted the government involved in their day-to-day lives. Yet, most landowners supported the protection of what remained of the watershed's elk habitats, bald eagle and osprey nesting sites, agricultural land, and rare species.

#### Easements and environmental protection

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Missoula County finally worked out a farsighted plan with local landowners. A program of voluntarily granted "conservation easements" was offered, where landowners could donate their subdivision and development rights to The Nature Conservancy in exchange for federal income and estate tax deductions. Initially, few people seemed interested. In the early 1980s, Land Lindbergh, son of aviator Charles Lindbergh, was among the first to step forward to conserve the riverside portions of his property. Over the years many other landowners have agreed to ease-



ments with TNC, the Montana Land Reliance, and the State of Montana. Today, a 22-mile-long patchwork of protected land totalling some 7,000 acres exists along the Blackfoot. A separate Recreation Management Agreement allows responsible public access to private land at designated river sites.

This program has been hailed as a model for controlling subdivision and housing development in sensitive environments. However, most of the watershed remains unsecured. Montana's Subdivision and Platting Act is an extremely weak measure for contending with the state's current land rush. Until 1993, exemptions from land use planning review existed for new parcels of 20 acres or more, for "occasional sales" of one tract per year, and for "family transfers" to relatives. These exemptions have been widely used and abused. Of 18,336 acres subdivided in Missoula County between 1987 and 1991, less than 1,000 acres were formally reviewed and approved by the local planning board. Changes in the state law now permit planning board review of all tracts 160 acres or less. However, in the Blackfoot, planners say, land splitting is still occurring without any meaningful evaluation of its impact on the environment.

**Mikehorse Creek, Blackfoot drainage: mining acids.**

**The latest threat: gold mining**

The latest threat to the Blackfoot River is a massive gold mining operation proposed by the Phelps Dodge Corporation near Lincoln in the upper reaches of the watershed. Phelps Dodge will



J. Wright

*the Blackfoot could not play itself in Redford's movie*

**Mikehorse Creek, Blackfoot drainage: mine reclamation efforts.**

be mining extremely low-grade sulphide ore (0.025 ounces of gold per ton) from the recently discovered McDonald Meadows/Keep Cool deposit. Mining engineers estimate that some 208 million tons of ore will be extracted from open pits to yield 5.2 million ounces of gold. This process involves the heaping of ore on sealed pads where cyanide is applied to leach out the gold. All such leaching pits are to be built directly adjacent to the Blackfoot River or beside tributary creeks.

Many conservationists fear that leakage problems and flooding will move cyanide and toxic heavy metals into the river. There is substantial reason for concern. In 1975, a small dam failed on Mikehorse Creek, a tributary of the Blackfoot where ASARCO had mined sulphides years before.

Some 300,000 tons of tailings were moved by the creek, and a plume of heavy metals entered the river killing thousands of rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout. The Blackfoot River upstream of Lincoln has

never fully recovered. "Trash species" such as suckers and whitefish have the place largely to themselves. The State of Montana recently allocated \$400,000 to clean up the ASARCO site, but no work has actually been done. Fisheries biologists are now worried that the new Phelps Dodge project will seriously impact aquatic ecosystems down-



J. Wright





## The Blackfoot River.

J. Wright

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stream of Lincoln just when strict fishing regulations are beginning to restore trout populations.

In 1991, the Blackfoot River Challenge Coordinating Council (BCCC) was formed by the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, the Clark Fork/Pend Oreille Coalition, The Nature Conservancy, local landowners, industry representatives, and federal and state land managing agencies. The mission of the BCCC is to create a Blackfoot watershed restoration plan which is coordinated with the larger Clark Fork River Superfund project. A Geographic Information System (GIS) resource analysis approach is being developed and applied by personnel from EPA and the State of Montana.

### Conclusion: in search of the pristine West

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean wrote, "I am haunted by waters." Over the decades, he was also deeply distressed by what was happening to his beloved Blackfoot. Perhaps that's why Maclean held out until the end of his life before allowing anyone to make such a complex personal remembrance into a film. He seemed to know that, even with an environmentally-concerned and respected director like Robert Redford, the whole story wouldn't come out. He was right.

I have asked hundreds of people what they liked about *A River Runs Through It*, and over 70% responded "the scenery." Many said they would like to live up in Montana along the Blackfoot River. The story mattered, but the beauty of the landscape was the most compelling memory of

the majority of people. Despite information in the credits telling which city was used as a base for the filming (Bozeman not Missoula), typical viewers had no idea that what they saw was a mirage.

Montana is experiencing its biggest real estate boom of the twentieth century. Movies cannot start such things. However, they can perpetuate environmentally-damaging geographic myths. Historian K. Ross Toole once wrote with typical grittiness:

"Montana has been cyclically beaten, battered, and bruised". Toole related these abuses to the promotion of misconceptions and illusions in an unbroken chain leading from homestead-era land speculators and railroad companies to today's realtors and Hollywood film-makers. This aversion to geographic reality remains a defining trait of the entire Western region.

Some of the people now settling in Montana have an accurate understanding of the difficulties, joys, and responsibilities of life in the Big Sky country. They know that the landscape has been intensely exploited and requires restoration. However, most newcomers are fleeing urban environments awash in crime, drugs, pollution, and economic upheaval. These homesteaders are desperate for a fresh start and have been strongly influenced by an array of recent media images portraying the Northern Rockies as the last refuge. They arrive in Montana wanting to inhabit an idea, not a true place. And that idea is the "pristine West." As the Blackfoot—the real river that runs through it—has shown, such places do not really exist anymore. Perhaps they never did.