

A TANGLED PATH TO EXTREMISM:
DESPERATION, RESENTMENT, AND REBELLION
IN RURAL MONTANA

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

January 2023

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DEDICATION

To my father. I wish he could have seen me finish.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish I had space to thank everyone who asked me about my work, celebrated the little wins of academia, and offered me wine and friendship in my darker days. To start, I would like to thank my chair, Michael Reidy, for his unwavering support, along with my committee members Amanda Hendrix-Komoto, Mark Fiege, Brett Walker, and Jamie McEvoy. You have taught me to be a better scholar and writer. Faculty in the department and across campus have also offered their feedback and support. I'm grateful to my fellow graduate students and friends who have helped me along the way. Two groups sustained me through a pandemic and this dissertation and I will forever be in their debt: RCRG – Julia Haggerty, Katie Bills-Walsh, Katie Epstein, Grete Gansauer, Elise Otto, Kelli Roemer, Jackson Rose, Kris Smith; and the Doig Writing Group – Jacey Anderson, Micah Chang, Kirke Elsass, Jill Mackin, Katie McLain, Casey Pallister. Many MSU funders have made my research possible: the History & Philosophy Department, Ivan Doig Center, Graduate School, College of Letters and Science, and NSF EPSCoR - CREWS. Funders from beyond campus include BYU's Charles Redd Center, Mining History Association, Western History Association, Montana Historical Society, and American Society for Environmental History. Thanks to the staff at MSU's Library, UM Mansfield Library Special Collections, MHS Research Center, Missoula US District Court, Denton Public Library and the Libby Public Library, Heritage Museum, and County Courthouse. Of course, my family – my mother, father, step-mother, brothers, Toby, Murphy, Essie, and Nelson for your long-standing support. And finally, the many Montanans who shared their stories and experiences with me across the state.

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ABSTRACT

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the American West saw an increase in anti-government and white supremacy extremism. Montana had a number of events where residents resisted the federal government culminating in the Montana Freemen, a group who engaged in an 81-day armed standoff with the FBI in the spring and summer of 1996. Why were western residents so angry at the federal government who they believed was, at best, ignoring rural western communities, and at worst, threatening their liberty and their lives? To answer this question, I examined three rural Montana communities -- Denton, Jordan and Libby -- each of whom clashed with the government at the end of the century. While these conflicts developed for different reasons, residents' responses to the encounters and the regulations imposed on them illustrate a continuum ranging from resigned irritation, to urgent pleas for help, to outright rebellion.

In this dissertation, I argue that the study of the 1990s in Montana reveals the development of anti-government extremism. To understand how western residents' frustrations and concerns coalesced into this directed anger, I examine three rural communities in Montana -- Libby, Jordan, and Denton -- whose residents were frustrated with federal regulation and believed not only that they had been forgotten by the government, unions, academics, and urbanites but that those groups were working against them. The residents of these towns lived and worked in resource communities and supplied the materials that built post-World War II America. They believed that their communities and economies had been sacrificed and forgotten. The residents in these rural towns expressed their anger in different ways, but it did not dissipate after the decade ended. Their responses reveal the mounting tension, frustration, and anger that existed in the last decade of the twentieth century and highlight a throughline of connection and historical significance to anti-government extremist groups that continue to threaten democracy today.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WEIRD, WEIRD WEST

In the fall of 1996, historian Richard White gave a presentation at the Western History Association annual conference in Lincoln, Nebraska. This address was later printed in the spring issue of the *Western Historical Quarterly*. In his talk, White, an advocate for reexamining the history of the American West, explored what he considered “the current weirdness in the West” and concluded that fringe groups such as the Aryan Nation, militia groups, and the Jordan Freeman, among others, were new expressions of long-standing western anger against the federal government.¹ For White, the eruptions of western anger, demonstrated by Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma City and LeRoy Schweitzer in Jordan, Montana, fit into a popular national western narrative characterized by white, violent men fighting against the federal government. It had descended, at least culturally, from their frontier forebears. White argued that Republicans and extremist groups shared a view of the federal government as antithetical to the individualistic western identity.

At the time of his talk at the WHA conference, several anti-government campaigns and incidents, including Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the Jordan Freeman standoff,

¹ Richard White, “The Current Weirdness in the West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* no. 1 (1997): 4-16. White, Patricia Nelson Limerick, William Cronon, and Donald Worster were four of the most prominent New West historians whose academic work in the late 1970s through the early 1990s challenged Frederick Jackson Turner’s long-lasting celebratory interpretation of the settlement of the American West. In the 1990s, New Western historians were often accused of revising the traditional western history by incorporating the studies of race, class, gender, and the environment into their study of the American West.

dominated newspaper headlines in the West. However, while White believed that Republican talking points advocating for eliminating federal oversight, privatizing public lands, and dismantling environmental regulations had fueled the hostility underlying these incidents, he did not believe they would lead to concrete changes in the complex relationship between the federal government and the West. He confidently asserted that these “weird” incidents demonstrated the anger driving western hard-right Republican attempts to oust the federal presence in the West. Yet White ultimately concluded that these attempts to privatize the West would eventually fail and the actions committed by fringe groups would have little historical consequence.

White’s dismissal of these fringe groups has proven to be both correct and incorrect twenty-five years later. He singled out the Jordan Freeman standoff as one such ahistorical outburst, an “eccentric eruption,” that revealed tensions in the West but did not foreshadow any long-lasting political or social change. At the time, the Freeman appeared to many to be unhinged crazies and their convoluted arguments against the federal government to be fictitious ravings. This perception led many, White included, to dismiss their claims.

Seeing their rebellion as an exceptional event, White deemphasized the connective tissue of resentment found in many rural communities and the capacity of rural residents to switch from resignation towards federal oversight to armed defiance. He was prescient in that the Freeman received little attention in the decades after their surrender and conviction. But the fact that the Freeman have been forgotten by most (or have not been used as a right-wing rallying call) does not mean that others could not and

did not relate to their frustrations. The standoff was not an isolated “eruption” between angry residents and the federal government; other rural communities, particularly in the West, saw an increase in radical anti-government attitudes and behaviors in the 1990s. Many in the community and the West echoed their concerns, and while most over the years have responded to the federal government with a frustrated sense of resignation, recent events have proven that the slide into rebellion is not a recent, nor an ahistorical, one.

The weirdness that White noted appeared in communities across the West. Montana was not alone in seeing a rise in anti-government anger and activities in the late decades of the twentieth century, but the state definitely had its fair share of “eccentric eruptions.” Many of these made national news and a quick overview of some of the headlines shows that the sparsely populated state was becoming a desirable haven for those who desired to reject the federal government and its laws.² For example, in July 1984, self-proclaimed mountain men Don and Dan Nichols kidnapped Kari Swanson, a US biathlete as part of a plan to force her to marry Dan, Don’s son, and live free of modern society using their survivalist skills.³ A few years later, there were upheavals over the massive forest fires in 1988, which burned over thirty percent of Yellowstone National Park and saw firefighters battling more than 70,000 blazes across the West. These fires opened the federal government’s long-standing policy of fire suppression to

² In the 1990 census, Montana had less than 800,000 residents. Billings, Montana’s largest city had a population just over 80,000.

³ Matt Gouras, “Mountain Man Abductor Seeks Parole,” *Helena Independent Record*, April 15, 2012.

criticism by western residents, many of whom also blamed “extreme environmentalists” for the fires.⁴

The weirdness continued in the 1990s. Thousands of members of the Church Universal and Triumphant followed their leader’s advice to move to a church compound outside of Livingston in early 1990. Elizabeth Clare Prophet prophesied the possibility of an array of disasters, including a nuclear war, and encouraged her followers to join her in underground fallout shelters at the Church’s headquarters.⁵ In 1996, the same year that the anti-government Freemen began their siege with the FBI, Congress repealed the federal speed limit of 55 miles per hour and Montana reverted to its previous law of “reasonable and prudent” on state highways with no posted speed limit. While the “Montanabahn” only existed between 1996 and 1999, the state’s rejection of federal authority drew lead-footed drivers from across the nation.⁶ Soon after the standoff with the Freemen started, the FBI had to split its force as agents captured the Unabomber in

⁴ Gordon Eliot White, “Senators Scorching Mad About ‘Let It Burn’ Policy,” *Deseret News*, September 9, 1988, <https://www.deseret.com/1988/9/9/18779338/senators-scorching-mad-about-let-it-burn-policy>. Historian Hal Rothman argued that the Yellowstone fires transformed federal fire policy from a science-based response to a political issue. See chapter 7 “Yellowstone and the Politics of Disaster,” in *Blazing Heritage: A History Wildland Fires and National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ “CUT Plans Large Vigil this Spring,” *Billings Gazette*, February 22, 1990. During this same time, a CUT leader revealed his own western, independent, and survivalist mentality by purchasing \$150,000 in illegal weapons for 200 members of the church for protection in the prophesized nuclear war. James L. Eng, “Montana Church Member Spared Jail Time for Illegal Weapons Purchase,” *AP News*, December 2, 1989, <https://apnews.com/article/81fcca81a2400cde0d904cc881dcff3f>.

⁶ Tom Kenworthy, “As Freeway Deaths Rise, Montana Ponders a Speed Limit,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/02/03/as-freeway-deaths-rise-montana-ponders-a-speed-limit/d3a8cca7-2c48-436c-8f8a-31542af7b241/>.

Lincoln, Montana, on April 3rd. In the last month of the decade, Montana came to national prominence again with the discovery that Libby had been blanketed by asbestos for decades from its vermiculite mines and residents were sick and dying.

Having grown up in nearby Bozeman, I remember these events well. I remember homemade cardboard license plates on cars around town — a favorite tactic of citizens who had rejected federal and state authority. Besides being a fun topic of conversation (many Bozeman residents had “end of the world” parties in early 1990 after Prophet foretold the end of times) what is the value of studying this time period in Montana? Why were western residents at this time so angry at the federal government, environmentalists, academics, and other groups who they believed were, at best, ignoring rural western concerns, and at worst, threatening their liberty and their lives? To answer this question, I examine three rural Montana communities — Jordan, Denton, and Libby — each of which clashed with the government at the end of the century. While these conflicts developed for very different reasons, residents’ responses to the encounters and the regulations imposed on them illustrate a continuum ranging from resigned irritation, to urgent pleas for help, to outright rebellion. The three different responses examined in this dissertation, and the continuum they form, demonstrate the pressure cooker of mounting tensions, frustrations, and anger that existed in the last decades of the twentieth century and give historical context for the escalating anti-government actions seen in the twenty-first century.



Figure 1: Case study towns of Denton, Libby, and Jordan seen on map. Map done by Jackson Rose

Historians have noted Western resistance to the federal government since the early days of frontier settlement in the nineteenth century when white, Euro-American settlers moved west across the American continent to harvest the natural resources found there. They have often identified a rebellious, individualistic streak and hypothesized about the cause of this regional characteristic.⁷ Early scholars, such as Frederick Jackson

⁷ Social and new west historians have challenged the myth of the western individual, usually a white male, who created civilization out of the wilderness with little to no

Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, argued that frontier conditions created free-thinking residents who viewed the government with suspicion and rejected federal authority. Later scholars examined the colonial relationship between western resource producers and eastern financiers to understand how this dynamic created long-lasting resentments.⁸

Westerners have repeatedly asserted their authority over federal lands and land-use decisions. The Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, was a movement comprised of western residents who sought major changes in federal land

assistance from others. While their arguments are convincing, the stereotype of the rugged individual persists in western mythology and for many Westerners. For more inclusive examinations of Euro-American settlement in the West beyond white, Protestant men, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (2000); Carl Abbot, *How Cities Won the West* (2008); David M. Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale: The Irish in the West, 1845-1910* (2010); Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (2014); and Anthony W. Wood, *Black Montana: Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier, 1877-1930* (2021). Studies specifically on women's roles in the West include John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, (1979); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: 'Civilizing the West?' 1840-1880* (1979); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860* (2011); and Jennifer J. Hill *Birthing the West: Mothers and Midwives in the Rockies and Plains* (2022).

⁸ The shifting political allegiances in the American West, from Socialism and Populism to far-right conservatism have been explored by historians. See: Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (2006); Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (2008); Michelle Nickerson, *The Mothers of Conservatism* (2012); Darren Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (2012); John R. Van Atta, *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785-1850* (2014); Michael Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (2015); and Adam Slez, *The Making of the Populist Movement: State, Market, and Party on the Western Frontier* (2020).

management and use in thirteen western states. Two historians have studied the Rebellion and its legacies: William Graf and R. Gregg Cawley. Graf's *Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellions* argued that conflicts over land policy proved a long history of western residents opposing federal control of resources. In his book, *Federal Lands, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics*, Cawley gave a comprehensive examination of the rebellion, investigated the movement, its popularity among western residents and politicians, and the consequences of the controversy.

In light of the rise of extremist activities in the 1990s, particularly the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, historians returned to the history of extremism in rural America and longstanding western anger. Catherine Stock examined rural radicalism and the culture of vigilante justice in *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain*, and Kenneth Stern explained how modern anti-government militia groups, such as those related to Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, developed their ideology in *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate*. The far-right extremist movement drew attention as scholars tried to understand how anti-government ideology and hate appealed to growing numbers of Americans. Others have expanded the study of extremist movements to a national scope, especially during the increased incidents of hate crimes and armed marches occurring across the nation in recent years. In *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Katherine Belew argues that the far-right movement arose in response to rising social liberalism as well as eroding faith and widespread distrust in the government thanks to

the debacles of Watergate and Vietnam.⁹ Belew sees connections between a number of far-right groups who unify conspiracy theorists, anti-abortionists, racists, militia members, and survivalists in battle against a tyrannical federal government.

Most importantly, Belew argues against identifying extremists, such as Timothy McVeigh, as angry lone wolves who, due to mental health issues or personal grudges, act alone against the federal government. Instead, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was a culmination of more than twenty years of white power organization and McVeigh must be contextualized within the supremacist movement to understand the interconnections of right-wing extremism from the Vietnam War to present day. Seeing the white power movement as a fringe movement of backwards rural peoples belies its strength and impact on conservatism and mainstream politics and its threat to democracy.¹⁰

Two recent works have refocused attention on western rebellion and extremism and their influence on the mainstream conservative movement. In *American Zion*, Betsy Quammen explores the link between anti-government ideology and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' beliefs through the lens of one family's fight with the federal government. Cliven Bundy and his sons used Latter-day Saint teachings and western

⁹ Katherine Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 203.

¹⁰ Nongovernmental organizations and other groups have raised concerns about extremist and hate groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, the Montana Human Rights Network, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, all of which are cited in this chapter. State and federal employees, particularly those involved in law enforcement and the justice system have become targets of extremist groups as they have warned about rising extremism.

resistance to federal authority to legitimize their claims to federal lands. Quammen argues that their religion and conservatism, paired with their western fight against federal tyranny, drew supporters to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in 2016 and reshaped the resulting standoff into a culture war between the conservative Christian far-right movement and the federal government, who the Bundys accused of being a puppet of the United Nations.

James Skillen examined how western rebellions over public lands moved from regional skirmishes to a national stage and attracted many non-westerners who had a shared hatred of the federal government. Like Quammen, Skillen sees the fights between western legislatures and citizens and the Bureau of Land Management and US Forest Service appealing to far-right groups who prioritized gun rights and culture wars. The standoffs and rebellions in the 1990s and early 2000s were part of an ongoing movement by conservative Christians to radicalize the far right, nationalize the anti-government rebellion, and blur the lines between mainstream Republican politics and extremist ideology.

The three communities in this dissertation – Jordan, Denton, and Libby – shared similar fates at the end of the twentieth century. Denton, located in central Montana, saw its population decline as farming and ranching properties consolidated and residents left the town to find jobs elsewhere. In the northwest corner of the state, Libby residents struggled when the logging and mining industries that supported the town's economy shut down and many found themselves unemployed. Jordan, remotely located in eastern Montana, was hit hard with farm and ranch foreclosures in the 1980s. Many western

communities shared their circumstances. Political scientist Kathy Cramer wondered why rural voters who struggled economically often voted for a candidate that promised to reduce government spending and programs. Cramer argues that they do so because they believed that as their communities failed, other groups were thriving, most notably, urban elites, intellectuals, government employees, and other groups associated with the Democratic Party. Rural voters developed a shared rural consciousness rooted in both their economic class and geographic place, which shaped a belief that they were not getting their fair share. In a somewhat ironic twist, this consciousness then encouraged rural residents to push for a more limited government as the government no longer represented them, even though that often meant less support for those struggling economically. As their economies declined and other areas prospered, rural residents felt “overworked, ignored, and disrespected” and subsequently voted for Republican candidates who promised to reduce the role of the federal government.¹¹

According to Cramer, the anti-government anger felt by rural residents developed a politics of resentment whereby they voted for candidates who promise to reduce the role of the federal government. In the communities I examine, I see that a spectrum of resentment better captures the range of community responses: from a resigned, albeit often frustrated, acceptance of regulation, to desperate pleas for federal assistance, to violent, far-right armed rebellion. In the last decades of the twentieth century, all three towns saw a shift to the right in their voting patterns and joined the rising red tide of

¹¹ Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.

Republican strongholds in the American West. They were not a uniform block of growing anti-government acolytes, however, and the spectrum of their responses was shaped by the community's need for federal regulation, or more precisely, the funding that comes with federal oversight. These rural western communities with dwindling economies did not have the resources to address their challenges – only the federal government could rally the resources necessary. When communities faced public health emergencies, residents chose to work with the federal government. Public health concerns overrode growing anti-government sentiment and anti-government anger was muted as health remained the focus.

In his examination of extractive industry communities, environmental sociologist William Freudenburg elaborated on the challenges to communities such as Libby, Jordan, and Denton that face geographic isolation and the absence of diversified employment opportunities. Freudenburg used a metaphor of addiction in describing how rural towns rely on resource extraction — mining, logging, and agriculture — for economic advantages because they often have few other competitive economic or employment options.¹² The days of “good jobs” have disappeared in these communities, but residents, long used to the boom-and-bust cycle, believe any downturns are temporary and a booming economy will return. And when the decline continues, workers become anxious, frustrated, and blame anyone responsible for regulating industry.¹³

¹² William R. Freudenburg, “Addictive Economies: Extractive Industries and Vulnerable Localities in a Changing World Economy,” *Rural Sociology* 57, no. 3 (1992): 306.

¹³ Freudenburg, “Addictive Economies,” 326.

Finally, I incorporate Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence as all three of my communities suffer from the legacies of industry: agriculture, logging, and mining. Nixon uses slow violence to discuss the incremental violence, dispersed across time and space, that affects communities, but does not gain the attention of the media or the focus of political action.¹⁴ Denton and Libby clearly have environmental and public health legacies from industry. While many Denton residents do not believe that a century of agriculture has filled their drinking water with nitrates, scientific research says otherwise. Either way, the community must fund expensive water system improvements to remediate the contaminant. And Libby residents were in the unique position of suffering from the slow violence of unknown (to them) asbestos contamination. The sudden announcement of their situation in a regional newspaper thrust them in the national spotlight that meant an unusually quick response from the Environmental Protection Agency. Although the Superfund program came to Libby quickly, residents found out they had been exposed decades before. Entire families have been diagnosed with lung disease, lung cancer, and mesothelioma and due to the latency period of these diseases, more residents will be diagnosed in the future. I also argue that Jordan is a victim of slow violence. While not dealing with dire environmental or public health issues, the heyday of the community was decades ago. Unless residents engage in an armed standoff with the federal government, the town receives little notice. Like many other rural communities, Libby and Denton included, Jordan residents feel forgotten and ignored.

¹⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

The communities I examine have escaped public notice for much of the twentieth century — barring some notable dramatic and catastrophic events that I will discuss. Because little has been written about them outside of these notable events, I have cast a wide net in my research, using interdisciplinary sources including sociology, risk assessment, risk studies, ecology, public health, and government documents, particularly from the EPA. Because Denton has not had a newspaper since the early 1950s, I conducted interviews with residents to gauge their responses to two large water projects there. I had hoped to conduct similar interviews in Libby, but the COVID-19 pandemic upset those plans. The Heritage Museum in Libby and the Montana Historical Society have oral history collections from the 1980s and the 2000s, respectively, which I used. And finally, I relied heavily on local newspapers, when available. They provided a valuable resource to understand the local viewpoints and happenings. Today social media is often blamed for fueling extremism, but in the early days of the internet, newspapers were still used by community members to vent their anger, to share their concerns, and to mobilize others to their causes.

Chapter 1 argues that in the last decade of the twentieth century, extremist movements, which long existed on the fringes of society, became far more attractive to Americans, many of whom lived in the rural American West where historic frustrations with the state and federal governments exploded, often in deadly ways. Long resentful of federal oversight, Western legislators and residents waged multiple battles against public lands and government regulations. In examining four of these campaigns in the twentieth century, I explain how rural Montanans and other westerners adopted and adapted these

extremist movements. While anti-government sentiment had long existed, the deadly federal sieges of Ruby Ridge and Waco radicalized residents already frustrated with the federal government's ubiquity and authority in the West. Western vigilantism and stereotypes of independent cowboys and ranchers merged with the conspiracy theories and anger of the far-right to create new western anti-government heroes who armed themselves against federal tyranny. I end this chapter with an analysis of the Militia of Montana and other hate groups, which set the stage for the Freeman standoff in Jordan.

The Montana Freeman did not represent everyone in Jordan. They were a small group of extremists headquartered on a 960-acre farm compound in rural eastern Montana who declared their sovereign status and formed their own government, granting themselves the authority to arrest, try, and sentence local officials. In addition, they devised and carried out a variety of financial schemes to defraud individuals, companies, and the government of billions of dollars. Eventually their actions grew too egregious to be tolerated by authorities and the FBI engaged in an eighty-one-day standoff at Justus Township, the Freeman's governing compound. While most in Jordan did not threaten local officials or write fraudulent money orders, the Freeman ideology did not develop in a vacuum.

In my second chapter, I examine the growing anti-government movement in Montana and how armed residents across the state adopted extremist mindsets and challenged all levels of government: federal, state, and local. I contend that the letters, stories, and editorials in the local newspaper in Jordan — the *Jordan Tribune* — reinforced common complaints found among westerners, many of whom felt their way of

life, and in fact their very existence, was under attack from the forces identified by Cramer: environmentalists, academics, and the federal government. The newspaper amplified the fears felt by residents and intensified them with conspiracy theories and growing paranoia of the United Nations and a tyrannical federal government. The newspaper's growing extremist positions could be found in communities throughout the West in the last decades of the century.

In Chapter 3, I turn to one small community in central Montana and its struggles to meet nitrate requirements for its public water system. To place this chapter in context, Denton is an agricultural community located about 150 miles west of Jordan and shares many of the same economic, social, and cultural challenges that many rural Montana towns have faced in recent decades, including declining populations, loss of jobs, and concerns about the future of the community. Denton residents have also struggled with historic and ongoing contamination issues with the town's water supply, which have necessitated two large-scale water infrastructure projects (one in the late 1980s and one in the 2010s) in order to comply with state and federal drinking water regulations. These projects have been costly to residents and they have found the regulations frustrating, especially because, residents agreed, the improvements to the water system led to a decline in water quality. In addition, residents doubted the danger posed by nitrates and believed the water safe for consumption. Generally, the government was viewed as an obstructive force in Denton, but unlike Jordan, no one took up arms against the government. I argue that although residents believed the water regulations were unfair, unnecessary, and burdensome, the possible public health consequences of nitrate

contamination muted more antagonistic responses from the town. Instead of engaging in conspiracy theories and paranoia, residents met the regulatory requirements, albeit reluctantly. While not happy with the government, they developed a resigned attitude rather than a rebellious one.

For the next two chapters, we move to Lincoln County in the northwestern corner of the state. Located in the Cabinet Mountains and the Kootenai National Forest, Libby looks very different from the agricultural plains where Jordan and Denton are situated. However, Libby also saw a flurry of anti-government anger and activity in the 1990s. Like other rural western communities, Libby benefited from an economy based in resource extraction for much of the twentieth century. These boom-and-bust economies worked well for residents during the good times: for the middle decades of the century Libby workers were among the highest paid in the state and the town's population exploded. The jobs were difficult and dangerous — workers risked their health and lives mining, logging, and dam building, but also took great pride in their work. As dangerous as it was, or, I argue, because it was so dangerous, logging became indelibly intertwined with the town's identity. For decades, Libby residents enthusiastically embraced the dangers of the timber industry, as long as the town's economy remained strong.

In Chapter 4, I argue that Libby residents have a long history with negotiating the risks inherent in the logging and timber economy — the economic success of the community for much of the twentieth century reinforced residents' perceptions that they were in control of accepted risks to their bodies and livelihoods. They were well aware of the western town's boom and bust model, but for decades the community's prosperity

overshadowed the hazards of their resource economy. As the economy quickly declined, the anger that would define the end of the twentieth century developed and residents debated their legacy of logging and the best route forward for the community.

In Chapter 5, the growing anger explored at the end of the last chapter converged with extremist ideology developing around the state. Politically, Libby residents rejected the Democratic Party, which had long held sway over the county, and espoused popular views that the federal government no longer represented working families in resource communities. The Endangered Species Act proved to many that the government agreed with environmentalists who valued animal habitats over Americans' jobs. Feeling abandoned, many in Libby adopted conspiracy theories and far-right extremist beliefs that radicalized residents. I argue that the rural rage did not reach the levels found in Jordan and other communities around the state, however, because of the discovery of asbestos at the local mine. The mine had provided good jobs and year-round employment for Libby residents but had also blanketed the town in asbestos dust that sickened and killed workers and their family members.

Like the logging jobs found in the area, mining and milling at the local vermiculite operation was difficult work. Workers put their bodies at risk in physically demanding jobs. They believed that the risks they assumed were their own and enjoyed the benefits of working stable, well-paid jobs. In the early days after the contamination was exposed, residents, leery of the government, doubted the risks posed by asbestos and believed that more government involvement in Libby would cause further economic

damage. Some residents opposed to the federal government, planned a large civil disobedience rally to highlight government tyranny.

As the vast scope of the contamination was revealed, residents realized they had been mistaken in their belief that the risks from mine work would be localized to the miners themselves – the hazards had moved beyond the mine operations to include everyone in town. This realization led to most in the community scaling back their apprehensions about federal involvement and instead they pushed Libby’s designation as a Superfund site, which would require the town to work with the huge presence of the EPA for the foreseeable future. The anger that had been growing at the federal government, turned to desperation as residents realized that Superfund was their best, and only, option to clean up the town and protect the residents.

In this dissertation, I argue that the study of the 1990s in Montana reveals the development of anti-government extremism. To understand how western residents’ frustrations and concerns coalesced into this directed anger, I examine three rural communities in Montana – Libby, Jordan, and Denton — whose residents were frustrated with federal regulation and believed not only that they had been forgotten by the government, unions, academics, and urbanites but that those groups were working against them. The residents of these towns live and work in resource communities and supplied the materials that built post-World War II America. They believe that their communities and economies have been sacrificed and forgotten. The communities expressed their anger in different ways, but it did not dissipate after the decade ended. Western anger and anti-government extremism were clearly on display in the January 6 insurrection at the

US Capitol. The history of western extremism explains how this attack on democracy happened and why it will happen again in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RISING TIDE OF HATE: FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN THE AMERICAN
WEST

In 2011, the Montana Legislature considered a bill which, according to its sponsor, encouraged “coordination” between the federal government and county officials in local land use decisions. Senator Greg Hinkle, representing Thompson Falls, argued that SB 117 would equalize the relationship between the federal government and local authorities by requiring federal agencies to abide by decisions made by local elected officials. Hinkle pitched the proposal as a way to revitalize local economies and bring back jobs to counties struggling with the loss of industry, particularly logging and mining. Opponents of the bill saw Hinkle’s goals as much more sinister, saying that although “coordination” may have seemed an appealing premise, the bill in fact masked a long-running anti-government agenda to subvert government regulations and channel threats and intimidation towards federal land managers. “Coordination” was merely the newest attempt by County movement advocates to stymie federal authority in the American West.

The County (or County Supremacy) movement developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to push for more local autonomy, ideally at the county level, in federal land use decisions. In response to the movement, hundreds of counties across the West developed land-use plans they believed gave local residents authority over decisions about land within county borders, even public lands managed by federal agencies. Proponents argued that the ultimate authority for land-use decisions resided with the

county government.¹ While land-use plans did not find favor in most courts, the underlying desire for counties to circumvent regulations placed by state and federal governments resurfaced with SB 117.

The bill combined two separate, but interrelated, tenets of the County movement – first, that county commissions had the right to control all lands within the county’s boundaries and ignore federal policies enacted on those lands; and second, the county sheriff was the sole legal authority in the county and could keep federal agencies from enforcing federal laws locally.² County movement activists had been advocating both of these arguments for decades, arguing that residents should have “ultimate authority” to determine what is done with the land in the county.³ The bill’s wording accused the federal government of usurping local authority in violation of the Tenth Amendment and gave communities the ability to resist such arbitrary decisions made by outsiders.⁴ Most importantly, it gave county officials access to natural resources on public lands and allowed them to “subvert various environmental regulations, eradicate wolves, and co-opt water rights.”⁵ County leaders had the means to circumvent any environmental regulations placed by the state and federal governments, a valuable tool in most western states where the federal government controlled a majority of land.

¹ William Chaloupka, “The County Supremacy and Militia Movements: Federalism as an Issue on the Radical Right,” *Publis: The Journal of Federalism* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 167.

² “‘Coordination:’ New Name for the Anti-Government Doctrine of County Supremacy,” Montana Human Rights Network, November 2, 2012, 1, <https://leg.mt.gov/bills/2013/Minutes/House/Exhibits/juh31a09.pdf>.

³ “‘Coordination,’” 9.

⁴ “‘Coordination,’” 6.

⁵ “‘Coordination,’” 1.

The bill found support across the state including from John Trochmann, resident of Sanders County and founder of the Militia of Montana (MOM), a paramilitary organization and mail order business that, in the late twentieth century, became the largest distributor of conspiracy propaganda in the nation. During the 1990s, Trochmann often presented the MOM as a mainstream organization, navigating between the more extreme anti-government groups and the federal government.⁶ Trochmann even offered to act as mediator between the Freemen and the FBI in the Jordan Standoff in 1996. Trochmann had always been associated with white supremacists like the Aryan Nation in nearby northern Idaho, even though he denied a connection. MOM has distributed publications by well-known white supremacists and antisemitic activists.⁷ The Montana Human Rights Network (MHRN), an organization formed in the 1990s to combat the increasing popularity of white supremacist groups in Montana, asserted that Trochmann connected to political mainstream through fights over gun and tax rights and by downplaying his group's more racist and antisemitic beliefs. He, like many anti-government activists, saw private property battles in the West, such as coordination, as new ways to attack the federal government and its policies.⁸

⁶ ““Coordination,”” 3. MHRN noted that Trochmann was pushed out of MOM by his brother and founded the Coalition for Men’s Rights comprised of men who have had restraining order taken out against them due to spousal abuse charges.

⁷ ““Coordination,”” 2.

⁸ ““Coordination,”” 2. Trochmann also became focused on a conspiracy theory about federal bear management plans. Trochmann stated that the collars on collared bears were connected to satellites, and when a bear was killed, the satellite photographed the infraction and contacted game wardens to make an arrest of the perpetrator. In addition, federal agencies used the plans to shut down access to lands, thereby preventing logging and mining.

The bill united anti-government and anti-environmental activists across the state. One proponent of the bill, Dan Happel, was also involved in creating the Montana Republican Party platform. The Madison County Commissioner, who regularly attended Oath Keeper events, pushed for Republicans to repeal the Sixteenth Amendment, which allowed Congress to levy taxes, remove the United States from the United Nations, and support “Birther” concerns about then President Obama’s citizenship.⁹ Ravalli County officials worked with national groups to create a coordination plan that allowed unrestricted killing of wolves. And gubernatorial candidate Rick Hill advocated for county coordination rights when he ran for the state’s highest office in 2012.¹⁰

MHRN announced that they saw coordination as an attempt by County movement activists to push forward their far-right, anti-government, white supremacist agenda in Montana and joined others in opposing the bill. Many legal experts argued that even if the bill became law, it would not influence federal land management in the state. The premise of coordination, that the federal government must work with local officials before making land-use decisions, had no legal standing. Similar bills had passed state legislatures in the West, but they did not give counties the power to force federal agencies to meet or concede their policies. A more concerning result was that they created the impression that county officials could demand coordination with the federal government and ignore federal land use regulations they did not like.¹¹ In contrast to arguments by

⁹ ““Coordination,”” 10. The Oath Keepers are a far-right anti-government militia founded in 2009.

¹⁰ ““Coordination,”” 10.

¹¹ ““Coordination,”” 7.

Hinkle and others, the bills would not lead to more jobs for county residents, but would instead result in long and expensive litigation based on unwinnable legal arguments.¹² And more dangerously, would lead to increased anger at land managers. MHRN warned that coordination had popular support at the grassroots level and Republican state platforms were adopting the term in their language. SB 177 passed the Senate but was tabled in the House. A watered-down version of the bill was passed in the session and Governor Brian Schweitzer, a Democrat, probably did not defray anger against the government when he used his trademark branding iron to veto down the bill, along with more than twenty other bills that passed the Republican-led House and Senate.

The fight over SB 177 did not originate in the 2011 Montana Legislature. It developed out of a long lineage of actions by anti-government groups to remove the federal government from the western landscape. This chapter argues that in the last decade of the twentieth century, extremist movements, which had long existed on the fringe of society, became far more attractive to Americans, many of whom lived in the rural American West where historic frustrations with the state and federal governments exploded, often in deadly ways. While this time period is often overlooked by scholars, the development of far-right groups in the 1990s in the years preceding the Freemen standoff and the interplay between both regional and national extremist movements is important because the connection between western vigilantism, anti-government unrest, and extremist movements played an important role: Contemporary anti-government heroes are often western, and if they are not actually ranchers or cowboys, they have

¹² ““Coordination,”” 1.

adopted western stereotypes to buffer their notoriety. This western archetype of vigilante, anti-government individualism merged seamlessly with the conspiracy theories and anger of the far-right, thereby becoming palatable to a large section of Americans, both in and out of the West.

In order to see the connective tissue between a western anti-government identity and its adoption by the far-right, I first examine how early historians identified and characterized western rebellion. I then move through the twentieth century, discussing the fraught dynamic between western states dependent on federal support but resentful of federal oversight illustrated by programs like the New Deal Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. These early states' rights campaigns were followed by larger movements – the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use Movement, and the County Movement – which developed a clear focus on private property and gun rights.

While these movements have been explored before, I offer examples of how rural Montanans adopted and adapted these movements, which made them both unique to their place and time, but also universally attractive. Once these western movements are discussed, the chapter examines the rise of extremism nationally in the last decades of the century, the government's response in two deadly confrontations, Ruby Ridge and Waco, and how these events furthered the reach of extremist movements. Finally, an examination of the Militia of Montana and other Montana hate groups in the 1990s sets the stage for the next chapter's focus on the Freemen of Jordan, who professed the same anti-government ideology as other groups but, for a variety of reasons, are not remembered and revered as heroes of the far right.

A Lineage of Western Rebellion

Historians have often identified a rebellious, individualistic streak in westerners and hypothesized about the cause of this regional characteristic.¹³ Early historians argued that frontier conditions created residents who viewed the government with suspicion and rejected federal authority. Later scholars explored how the colonial relationship between western resource producers and eastern financiers created long-lasting resentments.¹⁴

More recently, some scholars of extremist movements have moved away from a regional

¹³ Social and new west historians have challenged the myth of the western individual, usually a white male, who created civilization out of the wilderness with little to no assistance from others. While their arguments are convincing, the stereotype of the rugged individual persists in western mythology and for many Westerners. For more inclusive examinations of Euro-American settlement in the West beyond white, Protestant men, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (2000), Carl Abbot, *How Cities Won the West* (2008), David M. Emmons, *Beyond the American Pale: The Irish in the West, 1845-1910* (2010), Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (2014) and Anthony W. Wood, *Black Montana: Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier, 1877-1930* (2021). Studies specifically on women's roles in the West include John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, (1979); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: 'Civilizing the West? 1840-1880* (1979), Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800-1860* (2011); Jennifer J. Hill *Birthing the West: Mothers and Midwives in the Rockies and Plains* (2022).

¹⁴ For more on shifting political forces in the West, see: Catherine McNicol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996), Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2001), Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (2006), Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (2008), Michelle Nickerson, *The Mothers of Conservatism* (2012), Darren Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (2012), John R. Van Atta, *Securing the West: Politics, Public Lands, and the Fate of the Old Republic, 1785-1850* (2014), Michael Lansing, *Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics* (2015), and Adam Slez, *The Making of the Populist Movement: State, Market, and Party on the Western Frontier* (2020).

examination of hate groups to a national one, which makes sense considering increased incidents of hate crimes and armed marches occurring across the nation in recent years.

As White mentioned in his 1996 presentation, “The Current Weirdness in the West,” the 1990s were a particularly disruptive time and resulted in an increased focus on the history of western extremism. In the early years of the decade, both William Graf and R. McGreggor Cawley studied the Sagebrush Rebellion, the movement in the 1970s and 80s, in which western legislators challenged federal control over public lands. Graf’s *Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellions* argues that conflicts over land policy proved a long history of western residents opposing federal control of resources.¹⁵ In his book, *Federal Lands, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1993), Cawley gives a comprehensive examination of the rebellion and investigates the movement, its popularity among western residents and politicians, and the consequences of the controversy.¹⁶ While the rebellion was short-lived, the Rebels won concessions from the government in public land management that future anti-government groups would build upon.

The Oklahoma City bombing also inspired historians to examine the roots of American extremism: Catherine Stock looked at the West’s long history of rural radicalism and the culture of vigilante justice in *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the*

¹⁵ William Graf, *Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990).

¹⁶ R. McGreggor Cawley, *Federal Lands, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1993).

American Grain.¹⁷ The history of militias became a topic of interest to Kenneth Stern who explained how modern anti-government militia groups developed their ideology in *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate*.¹⁸ Other scholars expanded from a regional scope to consider rising far-right extremism through a national lens. This widening scope has revealed that growing extremist movements threatened and continue to threaten democracy.¹⁹ While the increase in far-right extremist activity in the 1990s led to an academic exploration of the history of extremism in the American West, the decade itself deserves consideration as the rapid escalation seen at that time has not cooled. On the contrary, it is directly connected to the recent Capitol insurrection in 2021. The Sagebrush Rebellion sparked over specific issues of federal land management and, in reality, only engaged a relatively small number of western ranchers, miners, loggers, other resource users, and state legislatures. In the 1990s, the Rebellion was resurrected and expanded to include private property and Second

¹⁷ Catherine Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (Cornell UP, 2017).

¹⁸ Kenneth Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹⁹ Several nongovernmental organizations and other groups have raised concerns about extremist and hate groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, the Montana Human Rights Network, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, all of which are cited in this chapter. State and federal employees, particularly those involved in law enforcement and the justice system have become targets of extremist groups in direct proportion to their increasingly vocal concerns about rising extremism. In addition, Betsy Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West*, James Skillen, *This Land is My Land: Rebellion in the West*, and John L. Smith, *Saints, Sinners, and Sovereign Citizens: The Endless War Over the West's Public Lands* look at extremist activity directed at government employees in the West in the early twenty-first century.

Amendment rights that attracted extremists but also, increasingly, many in the mainstream Republican party.

Long-standing Tensions on the Frontier

White clearly focused on the western region when he examined the weird happenings in the 1990s and blamed the national media's fascination with perceived western isolation and images of westerners that had sustained popularity since the closing of the frontier: individuality and resistance to federal authority. This mythic identity has been reinforced by many western historians. Two early historians in particular promoted westerners as free-thinking, government-wary individuals: Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb.²⁰ Turner's exploration of how the frontier created an American identity played into popular stereotypes of western citizens being unique and independent. Turner argued that the process of frontier building recreated a society focused on the decisions of individuals and family units, not one based on governmental rule: "The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly any direct control."²¹ Frontier building created democracy, but a democracy that threatened the older, more established regions of the country. Therefore, Turner argued, "The East has always feared the result of an unregulated advance of the frontier, and has tried to

²⁰ While Turner and Webb focused on the individualistic streak they saw in westerners, many of the settlers who came west after the Civil War were former southern rebels. These new arrivals, along with others from northern states, brought two popular ideological strains to the West – white supremacy and nativism – that solidified in the mid-nineteenth century in response to Reconstruction and immigration. These belief systems have become foundational pillars of far-right extremism in the present day.

²¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894), 27.

check and guide it.”²² According to Turner, a westerner was a strong individual who fought federal authority. As much as the East, and by default, the federal government, would try to control the West, westerners would push back against that control.

Webb reinforced the disconnect between eastern regulation and western independence arguing that the arid Great Plains created western identity and character. The aridity found west of the ninety-eighth meridian presented a unique environmental challenge for easterners. As settlers moved into the Great Plains, they adapted eastern institutions and technologies to survive in new western conditions. It was clear to Webb that the West could not just be seen as an “extension of things Eastern.”²³ As a distinct region, the ways of the east did not easily translate to western communities. When pioneers entered the new arid Great Plains region, they adapted and no longer shared the same experiences, or even the same language as their eastern brethren.²⁴ The power and decisions came from the East: “The Westerner has belonged to a minority and has been compelled to accept the laws and institutions made for other conditions...”²⁵ Since early Anglo-American settlement in the West, the will of the East was imposed, even when conditions did not necessarily support those institutions. As Webb makes clear, “It is not too much to say in advance that no law has ever been made by the Federal government that is satisfactorily adapted to the arid region.”²⁶ While Webb can rightfully be critiqued for his singular focus on white, male settlers in the Great Plains region, his argument that

²² Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier*, 29.

²³ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 507.

²⁴ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 386.

²⁵ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 386.

²⁶ Webb, *The Great Plains*, 399.

the West was a distinct region subordinate to callous rule from the East has persisted in the minds of many western citizens.

In addition to these perceived geographical and regional differences, the perception of eastern power looting the mines, forests, and farms of the West persisted throughout the twentieth century. Writing contemporarily, Bernard DeVoto agreed that the arid climate presented challenges to settlers, but identified another popular sentiment held by many westerners: western resources benefited eastern financiers and bankers which, “to be brief, made the East wealthy.”²⁷ For DeVoto, resource exploitation and extraction, or the industrialization of the West, was a requirement to create the American empire: the resources of the West needed to go into eastern coffers.²⁸ Through this exploitation of the West’s resources, eastern financiers accrued great wealth at the expense of miners, loggers, cattlemen, and others who harvested the vast natural resources necessary to build the country. Westerners historically have not always celebrated this role as nation builders and instead have viewed eastern interests as a form of plunder.²⁹ Perhaps, DeVoto mused, if some of the great wealth sent east had returned to compensate western agrarians, the relationship between the two sides of the Mississippi River would have been more equitable.

Comparing the American West to imperial colonies in order to explain the development of a unique western identity certainly has its critics in university history

²⁷ Bernard DeVoto, “The West: A Plundered Province,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, August 1934, 358.

²⁸ DeVoto, “The West,” 359.

²⁹ DeVoto, “The West,” 360.

departments, yet the boom-bust nature of resource extractive economies, necessary investments from the east, and eastern control of markets all created a colonial relationship between western producers and eastern financiers and industrialists.³⁰ In his overview of the twentieth century, Michael Malone argues that the resources of the West, found in the form of commodities such as lumber, ore, wheat, and oil and gas, created great wealth for the nation. Until the Great Depression and World War II investments in western industrialization and urbanization, these raw materials went east to markets and then returned as finished products.³¹

The problem with a view of the West as a colony is that it denies agency to the peoples who lived and worked in the region and who used their resources to build settlements and infrastructure, recruit workers, and accumulate wealth. While Richard White, in his influential book on New Western history, determined that “for a good part of the late nineteenth century the federal government administered much of the American West as a colony of the United States,” he and his fellow New West historian, Patricia Limerick, both wryly observed that unlike other imperial holdings throughout the globe the western territories’ colonial status was temporary, no matter how much the territorial representatives bemoaned their status.³² More often than not, white settlers benefited from western resources at the expense of Native Americans, Asians, African Americans,

³⁰ Michael P. Malone and Richard W. Etulain, *The American West: A Twentieth-Century History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 11.

³¹ Malone and Etulain, *The American West*, 11.

³² Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 155, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 79.

and Hispanics, but, even so, many residents of the West saw their standard of living rise in the twentieth century. Yet this perception of a colonial empire building hierarchy at the expense of the West and profit of the East held sway in popular perceptions and contributed to the rise of anti-government tensions throughout the century.

Early Western Rebellions

While the Great Depression stalled economic growth around the nation, New Deal federal programs brought short-term relief measures to the West as well as longer-lasting capital and infrastructure investments. As a region, the West did very well under New Deal programs and the federal government implemented conservation plans and limits on industry to at least slow the depletion of natural resources, if not conserve them for future generations.³³ Per capita, westerners received far more in federal expenditures through New Deal programs than Americans overall.³⁴ One New Deal program specifically focused in the West was the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, designed to stop overgrazing and soil deterioration on public grazing lands; provide for use, improvement, and development of public lands; and stabilize the livestock industry. The Act withdrew all vacant, unreserved, and unappropriated public lands from open use and placed them under restricted use and management, including a grazing permit system.³⁵ By the eve of

³³ The fact that Franklin Delano Roosevelt carried every western state in 1932 and 1936 proved the popularity of Roosevelt and his New Deal programs among western residents. Western support remained strong throughout his presidency. In 1940, he lost in the Great Plains states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, as well as Colorado, but prevailed in the rest of the West. And in 1944, he won the same states except for Wyoming.

³⁴ Malone and Etulain, *The American West*, 106.

³⁵ Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 66.

World War II, rangeland in national forests, federal ranges, and other federal areas in western states beyond the Great Plains comprised about one-fifth of the United States.³⁶

Like other New Deal programs in the West, the Act worked to balance conservation goals and support of the western agricultural economy. Early criticisms of the Taylor Grazing Act focused on the lack of any means of enforcement and its tendency to favor larger livestock operators, but the Act was generally supported by western stockmen.³⁷ The Act signified the end of the homesteading era by closing public lands to settlement and placing them under the purview of the federal government and ending private control over the nation's public land resources.³⁸ Until its passage, most cattlemen had illegally pastured their cows on public land, but the act set aside 80 million acres of land for cattle and sheep grazing.³⁹ Through its use of low-cost grazing permits, the act managed federal land resources but also increased federal regulations on public land users, which started to feel burdensome to those in the livestock industries.

As many historians have noted, westerners have a long history of wanting government support but not wanting government oversight, a dynamic that played out in response to the Act.⁴⁰ Malone succinctly explained this dynamic, "westerners, more than

³⁶ Lowitt, *The New Deal*, 68.

³⁷ Lowitt, *The New Deal*, 69.

³⁸ Lowitt, *The New Deal*, 223.

³⁹ Gerald D. Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 166.

⁴⁰ Magdalen Eichert, "John C Calhoun's Land Policy of Cession," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 55, no. 4 (October 1954): 198-209. Fights over western federal lands started before many white settlers moved into the West. South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun proposed ceding federal lands to the western states in which they lay as

most Americans, enjoyed their cake of federal subsidy even as they relished the pleasure of complaining about it.”⁴¹ New Deal programs brought in federal funds and oversight, neither of which would diminish as the West felt the impacts of World War II.

By the end of World War II, a small group of westerners fought to limit federal power in their states by focusing their ire on the Taylor Grazing Act and advocated for the distribution of all grazing lands to individual states for public sale and the reclassification of national forests as grazing lands so they also could be transferred to the states and sold.⁴² In addition, Wyoming Senator E.V. Robertson introduced a bill to transfer all unappropriated and unreserved lands, including the mineral rights, to thirteen Western states so the states could dispose of them as they saw fit.⁴³ A 1948 article in *The Atlantic* noted the frustration of stockmen towards the federal government and its administration of public lands. In early 1947, a group of western sheep and cattle producers announced their demands for changes to the Taylor Grazing Act in a Denver newspaper. The list of demands included allowing those who held grazing permits on Taylor Grazing allotments to be able to purchase the land based on a purchase price determined solely by grazing values.

a way to diminish the power of the federal government. For more recent western fights with the government, see Quammen, *American Zion*.

⁴¹ Malone and Etulain, *The American West*, 107.

⁴² Bernard DeVoto, “The West Against Itself,” *Harper’s Magazine* 194, no. 1160 (January 1947): 10.

⁴³ DeVoto, “The West Against Itself,” 11.

This early attempt at privatizing federal land by selling it to a select group of users would be repeated decades later by President Ronald Reagan's administration.⁴⁴ The ultimate stated goal of this group was to "secure possession of all the present public lands in the West on which grazing might be found," including land in national forests and national parks.⁴⁵ Ultimately unsuccessful, these activists did gain support in Congress in their opposition to increased grazing fees and their support for cuts in appropriations to the Grazing Service.⁴⁶ Nevada Senator Pat McCarran led the charge to take down the Grazing Service by drastically reducing the agency's budget and staff. Due to the Senate's refusal to increase grazing fees and the House's decision to cut appropriations, the Grazing Service was reorganized so that BLM no longer existed as a separate organization.⁴⁷

The backlash to the Taylor Grazing Act illustrates the complex and ongoing dynamics at play: While westerners were more than open to federal funds and legislation that benefited them, they maintained long-held animosity toward any control from the federal government, particularly to limits or restrictions on land use. DeVoto, who reexamined his claims of the West's colonial status after World War II, reiterated the West's long history of mining and logging: "The East has always held a mortgage on the

⁴⁴ Robert H. Nelson, "Why the Sagebrush Revolt Burned Out," *Regulation* (May/June 1984): 32.

⁴⁵ Arthur H. Carhart, "Who Gets Our Public Lands," *The Atlantic*, July 1948, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1948/07/who-gets-our-public-lands/643699/>.

⁴⁶ Philip O. Foss, "The Determination of Grazing Fees on Federally-Owned Range Lands," *Journal of Farm Economics* 41, no. 3, August 1959, 543 (535-547).

⁴⁷ Foss, "The Determination of Grazing," 543.

permanent West, channeling its wealth eastward, maintaining it in a debtor status, and confining its economic function to that of a mercantilist province.”⁴⁸ However, by the time of his writing in 1947, DeVoto saw changes in the West and argued that some in the West were resisting their colonial fate. According to DeVoto, the West was industrializing, a process that would bring it out of colonial control from the East. Yet, while the government may have protected natural resources from eastern corporate control, in the process, those same resources were also protected from western industry.⁴⁹

While New Deal programs benefited western people, those monies were dwarfed by the money spent on the war effort in the West and post-war federal support: From 1945 until 1960, federal largesse in the West amounted to more than \$150 billion.⁵⁰ In that same period, the West saw great economic growth: the region continued to be one of the nation’s major producers of raw materials, particularly in agriculture, minerals, and cattle, and defense contracts contributed to a boom for the manufacturing power of the West.⁵¹ The resultant economic growth in the West may have dampened some of the anger at the federal government, but the long standing resentment that western states held towards the federal government did not disappear. The Great Depression and war years ended a form of colonial status for the western states, but in the coming decades the federal government would take on a ubiquitous and often unwelcome role in many western communities, especially as preservationist forces gained ground in the West.

⁴⁸ DeVoto, “The West Against Itself,” 2.

⁴⁹ DeVoto, “The West Against Itself,” 8.

⁵⁰ Nash, *Urban Oasis*, 248.

⁵¹ Nash, *Urban Oasis*, 240.

Conservation, or wise use of resources, dictated western land management practices in the early decades of the twentieth century. Federal land policy prioritized resource development, a focus that was generally shared between federal managers and commodity users. Preservation interests petitioned for regulating land and resource development and use, but their arguments received little attention.⁵² This started to change mid-century. Post WWII, preservation advocates gained leverage in policy and regulatory discussions as more Americans with disposable income and leisure time participated in outdoor recreation activities.⁵³ The public demand for outdoor recreation gave preservation interests the support they needed to advance their goals.

A new conservation movement developed in the 1960s that sought to protect the environment from development and pollution. A number of key environmental acts passed that supported preservationist objectives and highlighted the changing national priorities concerning public land and resource use: Wilderness Act (1964); Highway Beautification Act (1965); National Historic Preservation Act (1966); Water Quality Control Act (1967); Air Quality Act (1967); National Trails Act (1968); Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968); National Trails System Act (1969); and the Bald Eagle Protection Act (1969).⁵⁴ Sneaking in at the end of the decade, the National Environmental Policy Act

⁵² Cawley, *Federal Land*, 18.

⁵³ Cawley, *Federal Land*, 18.

⁵⁴ Environmental acts did not stop with NEPA. Natural resource users continued to feel threatened by many acts that they believed challenged their rights to public lands and resources: the Endangered Species Act (1973), Federal Land Policy and management Act (1976), Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (1977), Endangered American Wilderness Act (1978), Public Rangelands Improvement Act (1978), and Alaska National Interests Land Conservation Act (1980). Most of these acts, among others, focused on public land use in the American West.

(NEPA) was signed into law by President Richard Nixon on January 1, 1970. Often called the “Magna Carta of environmental law,” NEPA articulated a national policy to protect the environment (Nixon also created a plan to consolidate many federal environmental responsibilities under one agency that was approved by Congress and led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency on December 2, 1970). These laws signaled to many commodity users and producers in the west that the federal government was taking the concerns of environmentalists seriously — perhaps at the expense of previously relatively unrestrained uses of public lands.

The passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act shook up the resource commodities world in the West. The first sentence of the act revealed the new focus of Washington: “In order to assure than an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural conditions, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”⁵⁵ While the focus on “preservation and protection” seemed to be a victory for preservationists, limited commodity use, including mining in wilderness areas, meant that industry received some concessions as well. The Wilderness Act, along with the other environmental laws, set the stage for the next decade when producers became increasingly angry with federal policies and regulation.

⁵⁵ Wilderness Act, 16 U.S.C. 1131-1136 (1964).
https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1981/upload/WAct_508.pdf.

Before the Wilderness Act, about ninety percent of all federal lands were open to mineral exploration and development.⁵⁶ The Wilderness Act restricted use and access to public lands. Ranchers soon felt the regulatory burden as well when a Forest Service study of rangeland in 1972 led the Interior Department to undertake reviews of grazing on all public lands. These reviews led to significant reductions in animal use and an increase in grazing fees.⁵⁷ Just like the livestock owners in 1947, ranchers were furious. Then in 1976 Congress nationalized a policy of retaining and improving the management of public lands with the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). The FLPMA balanced the need for protecting the land with the nation's need for resources from public lands. However, western states viewed its implementation by President Jimmy Carter's administration as heavy-handed and oppressive, particularly range regulation and grazing fees.⁵⁸ In addition, the act required a study of wilderness areas that temporarily locked up land and imposed restrictions on motorized vehicle use and logging on public lands.⁵⁹ The FLPMA, along with the 1974 case, *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Morton*, which ordered the Interior Department to conduct a thirteen year review of livestock grazing on public lands, precipitated the Sagebrush Rebellion. For many in the west, particularly those in the timber, mining, and agriculture industries, the Carter administration's focus on scientific management, its stance on range

⁵⁶ Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger*, 53.

⁵⁷ Michael J. Makley, *Open Spaces, Open Rebellions: The War Over America's Lands* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 48.

⁵⁸ James R. Skillen, *The Nation's Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 122.

⁵⁹ James R. Skillen, "Public Lands Rebellion," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 109.

management, and its endorsement of wilderness preservation demonstrated a perceived lack of interest or even acknowledgement of the needs and uses of ranchers and others in favor of prioritizing environmentalist other groups.⁶⁰

By the 1970s, the de facto compromise reached between the states and the federal government whereby the government paid for western infrastructure and public works and maintained public lands while western legislatures worked to limit federal authority had started to sour, especially with the passage of the Wilderness Act and the FLPMA. A movement much larger than the 1940s fight against the Taylor Grazing Act erupted in the West. The Sagebrush Rebellion was based on similar goals of wresting control of federal lands from the government. By this point, these early rebellions, while often limited to state legislatures and congressional wranglings, demonstrated ongoing resistance to federal regulations and oversight and found fertile ground among increasing numbers of residents throughout the region.

The Sagebrush Rebellion

The Sagebrush Rebellion was, first and foremost, a disagreement between the federal government and states over land use and land policy. The Rebellion came about due to a variety of forces in the West, but at the heart of the movement was the belief that the environmental movement had stymied western growth and extraction in the 1970s through federal regulation. The federal government owns almost one-third of all the nation's land, most of it in the West. Public lands contain a majority of the nation's resources in the form of livestock that graze on land, timber harvested from the forests,

⁶⁰ Skillen, *The Nation's Largest Landlord*, 123.

energy and uranium sources mined from the earth, coal reserves, as well as most of the nation's precious minerals and all of its national parks, monuments, and wildernesses.⁶¹ One contemporary source commented that the Rebellion was “an effort by grazing, mining, logging, and energy interests, state legislatures, county commissioners, and other western groups to assert more control over federally owned lands.”⁶² This coalition of westerners became increasingly frustrated with the federal government and its regulations in the 1970s, building on western discontents that had been exacerbated by a number of environmental statutes passed in the preceding decade.

R. McGreggor Cawley argues that the rebellion came about from three popular perceptions in the West – first, that environmentalists had successfully gained control over federal land policy decisions; second, the environmental community had created an atmosphere favoring preservation over development in federal land management; and third, the only way to successfully counter the increasingly restrictive and regulatory character of federal land management was through open rebellion.⁶³ In early 1979, a group of western ranchers called the Public Lands Council pushed the Nevada Legislature to pursue state control over federal lands.⁶⁴ The federal government's ownership of over eighty percent of Nevada had long been a point of contention for many in the state because of federal environmental and natural resource regulations. A bill was

⁶¹ Frank J. Popper, “The Timely End of the Sagebrush Rebellion,” *The Public Interest*, no. 76 (Summer 1984): 62.

⁶² Patricia Brazeel Lewis, “Sagebrush Rebellion Picks Up Steam,” *BioScience* 31, no. 3 (March 1981): 199.

⁶³ Cawley, *Federal Land, Western Anger*, 9.

⁶⁴ The name of the Public Lands Council echoed the 1946 Joint Livestock Committee on Public Lands and shared the same goal to return federal land to the states.

introduced to the state legislature that declared state sovereignty over BLM land in Nevada – sixty-eight percent of all state land.⁶⁵ The bill also provided \$250,000 to test the law in court.⁶⁶ Westerners had had enough.

The bill was popular in Nevada: eighty-five percent of the state legislature supported the bill “asserting state ownership of all unreserved public lands within its boundaries.”⁶⁷ But the appeal of taking public land from federal control did not end at the state’s borders. By 1980, the wilderness system, and lands protected by the Wilderness Act, had grown from 9.1 million acres allotted at its inception in 1964 to eighty million acres.⁶⁸ Rebellion really started in Moab, Utah, on July 4, 1980, with a rally at the edge of BLM land near town. Politicians attending talked about how federal land policies were destroying the country to a crowd of several hundred people. A county commissioner bulldozed an area of the BLM study area. After the commission was threatened with legal action from the US government, they restored the area and the damage was short-lived. But others soon joined the band wagon — Utah Senator Orrin Hatch introduced a Western Lands Distribution and Regional Equalization Act later that summer that would have surrendered almost all federal lands to the states. Like many westerners, Hatch claimed that local land managers made better decisions than federal land managers.⁶⁹ His bill would have transferred almost all federal land to the states - 544 million acres.

⁶⁵ Makley, *Open Spaces, Open Rebellions*, 51.

⁶⁶ Makley, *Open Spaces, Open Rebellions*, 51.

⁶⁷ Skillen, “Public Lands Rebellion,” 109.

⁶⁸ Cawley, *Federal Land*, 43.

⁶⁹ Lewis, “Sagebrush Rebellion Picks Up Steam,” 199.

The legislatures of several western states debated joining the Sagebrush Rebels in Nevada. Wyoming, Washington, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona all voted to enact their own version of Nevada's statute.⁷⁰ The Montana legislature debated a Sagebrush bill in 1981. Although sponsors agreed that federal management and oversight should be reformed, the additional costs to the state from sole management of public lands worried many residents and legislators.⁷¹ Before the Rebellion's start in Moab, newspaper editorials had noted a general tepid response in the state to the Rebels and their cause.⁷² After Ronald Reagan, who declared himself a Sagebrush Rebel on the presidential campaign trail, took office, momentum gained for Montana to pass a Sagebrush bill.

Senate Bill 123, titled The Sagebrush Rebellion Bill, was heard in the state Senate Natural Resources Committee and claimed state ownership of "most of the federal government's 27 million Montana acres" excepting Indian reservations, national parks and monuments, and wilderness areas set aside before 1977.⁷³ One supporter, voicing shared frustrations with the federal government, stated "the Sagebrush Rebellion is merely another of many examples in the long history of man's struggle against absentee landlords and the stifling effects of central planning and bureaucratic control."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ In their Sagebrush bill, Wyoming claimed USFS holdings in addition to BLM land. Washington's statute was voided by referendum and Arizona's was vetoed by the governor, but his veto was overturned. Hawaii passed a resolution in support of the rebellion. Other states - Idaho, Montana, California, Colorado, and Oregon - failed to muster a majority in their legislature or had their bill vetoed by their governor.

⁷¹ Garry J. Moes, "'Rebellion,' Anti-Unicameral Planks Included in Montana GOP Platform," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 10, 1980.

⁷² "Stay Away from the Sagebrush," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 15, 1980.

⁷³ Larry Elkin, "The Sagebrush Revolution: Time to 'Burn Mortgage,' Proponents Proclaim Before Packed Hearing," *Helena Independent Record*, January 27, 1981.

⁷⁴ Elkin, "The Sagebrush Revolution."

The bill ultimately failed, but Ted Schwinden, then Governor of Montana, nodded to its popularity in the state and the West.⁷⁵ Schwinden, a Democrat, grew up in eastern Montana and returned to help on the family farm after time in the U.S. Army and receiving a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. While he did not think the Rebels had legal standing for their claims to federal land, he did acknowledge that the movement sent a message to Congress that the West was unhappy with federal control over western lands.⁷⁶ Perhaps due to his own experiences farming in Montana, Schwinden offered to compromise with state Rebels and suggested a partnership between the federal and state governments to manage federal lands.⁷⁷ Since the bill failed, Schwinden never brokered such a deal.

Even as they lost, proponents argued that the bill was a message to Congress to change federal land laws and give western states more influence over decisions on their lands.⁷⁸ Montana conservationists and sportsmen unified to fight the bill, which assisted in its defeat. Another factor that may have contributed to Montana joining the few other western states that did not pass a Sagebrush Bill was the percentage of the state in federal public lands. The eleven contiguous western states and Alaska each had more than ten million acres managed by federal agencies. With nearly thirty percent of the state under federal management, Montana had a much larger percentage than the Great Plains states

⁷⁵ SB 123 passed in the Senate but failed in the House on a bipartisan vote.

⁷⁶ Jerry Holloran, "The Sagebrush Revolution: Schwinden Suggests a 'Shared Partnership' as Possible Alternative," *Helena Independent Record*, January 27, 1981.

⁷⁷ Holloran, "The Sagebrush Revolution."

⁷⁸ Larry Elkin, "House Kills Weakened Sagebrush Rebellion Bill," *Helena Independent Record*, March 28, 1981.

or those east of the Mississippi, the majority of which had less than five percent of their lands federally managed.

In the West, however, Montana and Washington each had twenty-nine percent of the state under federal control, making them both the states with the smallest percentage of federal land. In comparison to states that had over fifty percent of their land under federal management (Oregon at 52%; Alaska and Idaho at 61%; Utah at 63%; and Nevada at 80%), perhaps Montanans did not feel as oppressed by federal control as other western residents.⁷⁹ While the Sagebrush Rebellion fizzled out, the complaints about federal management would reemerge in later decades. One local proponent foretold future fights between western residents and federal workers stating, ““if we don’t face up to this problem, in 10 year you’re going to see physical violence in the West.””⁸⁰

In the 1980 election, Reagan won every western state, except Hawaii, an unsurprising result considering how much the West hated Carter and the FLPMA. Although he tempered his views when his anti-environmental comments were viewed as alienating potential voters, once elected, Reagan appointed a prominent Rebel, James Watt, as Secretary of the Interior.⁸¹ Watt’s appointment signaled to environmentalists that any influence they had over land use decisions would greatly diminish in Reagan’s

⁷⁹ “Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data,” Congressional Research Service, updated February 21, 2020, 7-8, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Garry J. Moes, “Sagebrush Rebels Have Hearing in House Committee,” *Missoulian*, March 24, 1982.

⁸¹ Makley, *Open Spaces, Open Rebellions*, 60.

administration, and he worked to increase states' rights and loosen federal regulations but did not implement a land transfer.⁸²

Neither Rebels nor environmentalists really wanted the privatization of public lands. Ownership of public lands was not the issue—the issue was federal control and regulation over the lands within the states and greater self-determination for state residents and users.⁸³ Soon after his appointment, Watt testified before a House appropriations subcommittee that he had not, and would not, propose turning federal lands over to western states.⁸⁴ By stepping back from the Rebel's ultimate goal of turning federal lands over to private interests, Watt represented most residents and legislators in western states. Privatizing public land would have entailed the loss of millions of dollars in federal funds each year, as well as the loss of federally subsidized infrastructure and development of the West. The Federal government subsidizes western industries' use of public lands and if the land were transferred to the states, they would have accrued new costs and responsibilities to care for public lands. One study done during the time of the Sagebrush Rebellion found that the costs to the Interior grazing administration in 1981 were between \$100 and \$200 million, while the chief users, ranchers, were paying grazing fees amounting to just \$25 million.⁸⁵

⁸² Popper, "The Timely End," 61.

⁸³ Skillen, *The Nation's Largest Landlord*, 121.

⁸⁴ "Encouraging Words from Interior Boss," *Montana Standard*, March 10, 1981.

⁸⁵ Robert H. Nelson, "Why the Sagebrush Revolt Burned Out," *Regulation*, May/June 1984, 28 (27-35). Half of this income was earmarked for assistance to ranchers through the Range Improvement Fund.

Within a year or so of Reagan's presidency, the Sagebrush Rebellion was over. The Reagan administration did not privatize federal land nor dismantle environmental regulations but it did slow the momentum of the environmental movement in the nation's policy arena and ease restrictions on extractive use on public lands. In these ways, the outcome of the Sagebrush Rebellion fit within earlier efforts to wrest public land from the federal government. Although the Rebels did not gain control over the land, the federal government allowed states a greater voice in land management and land use decisions. Even with the headaches of federal regulation, many westerners realized that federal land ownership benefited resource users. For example, ranchers received below market grazing rates on public land and mining interests had relatively easy access to public lands for mining exploration under the federal government. Crawley asserts that this outcome did not count as a win for the Sagebrush Rebels, but instead opened the door to the pro-development arguments in the environmental realm.⁸⁶

The balance between federal control and states' rights reached a tentative balance in the 1980s regarding the tension between conservation based on preservation interests and conservation based on development of resources. In addition, while the Rebels could rouse some supporters, they never presented a compelling argument demonstrating how state land ownership would benefit all American citizens, not just the narrow interests of some in the West. But by the end of the 1980s, the anger and frustration of rural residents towards environmentalists and the federal government, which had been expressed by ranchers, loggers, and miners in the Sagebrush Rebellion, manifested in a variety of anti-

⁸⁶ Cawley, *Federal Land*, 162.

government movements that held a much broader appeal for western residents and many nationally.⁸⁷

Wise Use Movement and County Movement

In addition to frustrations over public lands management decisions, tensions were rising over restrictions on gun and private property rights.⁸⁸ Drawing on lessons learned from the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use movement focused on the American West and claimed to represent rural commodity producers in their quest to maintain access to and control over federal lands.⁸⁹ Active between 1988 and 1996, Wise Use organizations targeted enemies that would have been familiar to rural residents – environmentalists, environmental regulations, and federal agencies that determined public land use and access – any group that challenged rural residents’ economic livelihoods.⁹⁰

The Wise Use movement manifested challenges to federal control over western land primarily through land-use plans, a common tactic used by western residents to limit outsiders’ control over the west. This tactic was a cornerstone of the County (or County

⁸⁷ Western right-wing extremism has its base in post-Civil War Reconstruction when many Southerners, frustrated with the federal government and its enfranchisement of former slaves, moved West. While they challenged the federal government because it required them to allow people of color to vote, western extremists adopted environmental regulation and public lands into their fight against the government.

⁸⁸ Skillen, “Public Lands Rebellion,” 110.

⁸⁹ James McCarthy, “First World Political Ecology: Lessons from the Wise Use Movement,” *Environment and Planning A* 34, no. 7 (July 2002): 1282. DOI: 10.1068/a3526. Critics of Wise Use claimed that the movement was a corporate front designed to reduce federal regulation over natural resources. Wise Use activists maintained the grass roots foundation of the movement based on rural peoples responding to an intrusive federal government.

⁹⁰ McCarthy, “First World Political Ecology,” 1283.

Supremacy) movement, closely related to Wise Use, but with a slightly different focus.⁹¹

The County movement, termed the second Sagebrush Rebellion, was a populist insurrection against perceived federal encroachment on western culture, “meaning their right to graze, mine and log on federal lands.”⁹² Instead of hoping to wrest public lands from the federal government, the County movement pushed for more state and local autonomy in land use decisions.

The movement (and its organization, the National Federal Lands Conference or NFLC) started in Catron County, New Mexico, in 1990 when residents mobilized after the federal government placed restrictions on logging to protect the northern spotted owl and 250 jobs were lost.⁹³ The creators of the NFLC used a perceived loophole in the National Endangered Species Policy that required federal authorities to work with state and local governments to ““preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage.””⁹⁴ Using this foundation, the NFLC argued that if counties defined their “custom and culture” as using, or even overusing, the natural resources in the county through grazing, mining, and logging, the federal government must preserve that way of

⁹¹ Chaloupka, “The County Supremacy and Militia Movements,” 167. Members of the county supremacy movement often tried to distance themselves from more radical right groups, but they shared visibility and some ideological beliefs with the militia movement - both believed that the county is (or should be) the “privileged level of government” and the county sheriff was “the most important elected official in American government.” This shared ideology makes it challenging to parse specifically to which anti-government group some residents subscribed and the more extreme factions of the Wise Use and county movements joined militias to protect their freedoms.

⁹² George De Lama, “West Chomping at the Bit Over Federal Control,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1994.

⁹³ De Lama, “West Chomping.”

⁹⁴ Paul Rauber, “Wishful Thinking: Wise Use Cowboys Try to Rewrite the Constitution,” *Sierra* 79, no. 1 (January/February 1994): 40.

life.⁹⁵ This branch of the Wise Use movement focused on land-use planning to achieve this goal. Most land-use plans had previously been created by counties to restrict private landowners for the public good, but NFLC adopted the plans as a way to limit the regulations and actions of the federal government.⁹⁶

The counties fought U.S agencies such as Forest Service, BLM, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in court to gain greater local say on federal land use.⁹⁷ Plans also gave counties the authority to arrest state and federal employees if they were deemed threatening to the life and culture of the county residents.⁹⁸ Proponents argued that the land-use plans gave local residents authority over decisions in the county – decisions that had often been made at state and federal levels against the wishes of those same citizens. Supporters believed that land-use plans placed ultimate authority with the county government. The movement grew and the NFLC claimed that three hundred western counties joined to resist Washington’s control of federal lands and its enforcement of regulations from ESA to grazing.⁹⁹ Similar to the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use movement and the County Movement proved to be short-lived.¹⁰⁰ These movements, however, set the stage for more extreme, and increasingly armed, responses to federal

⁹⁵ Richard S. Krannich and Michael D. Smith, “Local Perceptions of Public Lands Natural Resource Management in the Rural West: Toward Improved Understanding of the ‘Revolt in the West,’” *Society & Natural Resources* 11, no. 7 (1998): 679.

⁹⁶ Rauber, “Wishful Thinking,” 40.

⁹⁷ Janet Guptill, “Lands Meeting Set for Jordan,” *Billings Gazette*, July 9, 1993.

⁹⁸ Rauber, “Wishful Thinking,” 41.

⁹⁹ De Lama, “West Chomping.”

¹⁰⁰ Paul Larmer, “Wise Use Ordinances Suffer Legal Setback,” *High Country News*, February 21, 1994, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/4/113>. In 1994 a district judge ruled that an Idaho county wise-use plan was unconstitutional.

authority by western residents. In the next chapter, Garfield County's foray into the County Movement is documented as the Jordan residents who were most supportive of the Movement soon adopted the more extreme rhetoric of the Freemen and created their own version of sovereignty.

Extremist Movements in the Late Twentieth Century

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s social movements engaged several groups who pushed the federal government to support their claims for recognition and equality. While many of the protest actions were peaceful, violent interactions between the government and civilians were not unknown. Protests flared across the nation, some based in the American West, often built on long standing dissatisfaction with federal control. Native Americans, for example, had several standoffs with the federal government. Almost one hundred Native Americans began an occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 that lasted for nineteen months, demanding that all federal land not in use, such as the former federal prison, be returned to Native Americans.¹⁰¹ American Indian Movement (AIM) members occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972 for a week and participated in the deadly two month Wounded Knee standoff in 1973.¹⁰² Native Americans were not alone in advocating for themselves at this time: women, LGBTQ, marginalized communities of color, university students, and environmentalists also organized resistance against

¹⁰¹ There were actually three occupations of Alcatraz Island — March 9, 1964, for four hours; November 9, 1969, for a day; and the year and a half long occupation that started on November 20, 1969.

¹⁰² Two AIM members were killed during the siege and over a dozen were injured.

normative power structures. These movements usually revolved around social issues or in opposition to the Vietnam War.

The dramatic and hard-fought gains of many of these groups led to a conservative backlash fueling intense anger in those on the extreme right. In *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Katherine Belew argues that the far-right movement arose out of these turbulent times in response to rising social liberalism, as well as eroding faith and widespread distrust in the government thanks to the debacles of Watergate and Vietnam.¹⁰³ The movement spawned a number of far-right groups whose ideologies blurred together and united a broad group of white men in society creating “an alliance of tax protestors, radical anti-abortionists, militiamen, racists, Identity Christians, survivalists, conspiracy theorists, and those who simply believed the U.S. government had grown too large.”¹⁰⁴

Local paramilitary groups were not new. Existing groups had formed during the Cold War in response to the threat of Communism and fears of foreign invasion or subversive elements from inside the country.¹⁰⁵ But the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a dramatic increase in militia numbers, particularly in the Northwest. This region also became a declared homeland for white supremacists. While many militiamen claimed that their anti-government rhetoric distinguished them from the overtly racist white power movement, in fact they shared many concerns with other right-wing fringe groups:

¹⁰³ Katherine Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 203.

¹⁰⁴ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 203.

¹⁰⁵ Mark Pitcavage, “Camouflage and Conspiracy: The Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to Y2K,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no. 6 (February 2001): 959.

opposition to paper money, abortion, and immigration; support for homeschooling and property rights; and an emphasis on survivalist preparation for the apocalypse.¹⁰⁶ They also shared ideologies and personnel with the established white power movement as the militias gained visibility and membership.¹⁰⁷

However, militia groups differed from others in the white power movement in two key ways: their focus on gun rights and their belief that armed resistance was necessary to oppose a tyrannical government and the global, socialist New World Order. Many militias and right-wing groups in the 1980s, particularly those founded in the Pacific Northwest, derived their ideology from the Posse Comitatus. A precursor to the modern militia movement, the Posse Comitatus, formed in the 1970s in Oregon, declared the federal government illegitimate and believed the true form of government centered on the county sheriff who had responsibility for keeping the federal and state government at bay.¹⁰⁸ Government's support of social positions such as gun control and abortion – social positions abhorrent to the far right – reinforced the view that the government did not represent them.¹⁰⁹ The Posse believed its members were sovereign citizens and law enforcement agencies, including the Internal Revenue System, interfered with the rights of these citizens. The Posse Comitatus and the subsequent militia movement saw the government as an enemy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 963.

¹⁰⁷ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 191.

¹⁰⁸ Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 959.

¹⁰⁹ Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 959.

¹¹⁰ Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 959.

No one reason can be given as to why supremacist groups and militias proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s. Socioeconomic drivers do not seem to be a factor as particularly after 1983 America had a healthy economy, low unemployment, and low inflation. One report argued that the fall of the Soviet Union might have contributed to the popularity of militias in the 1990s.¹¹¹ Others say that an agricultural crisis in the 1980s caused rural residents to vent their frustrations about bankruptcies and the loss of family farms through participation in anti-government movements, but urban and suburban militia numbers were on the rise as well.¹¹² Social, political, and cultural events such as the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King verdict, the election of Bill Clinton, NAFTA, and the Brady gun law and assault weapons ban all became fear mongering recruitment tactics used by far-right groups. Western anxiety, in particular, was stoked through Republican narratives of the President's "War on the West."¹¹³ Clinton's agenda addressed a number of contentious issues from grazing fee increases and land use decisions, to endangered species preservation and a Forest Service regulation, eventually withdrawn, that limited firearms on federal lands.¹¹⁴ Westerners who worked and

¹¹¹ Kenneth S. Stern, "Militia Mania: A Growing Danger," *USA Today* 124, no. 2608, Jan. 1996.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxybz.lib.montana.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pwh&AN=9602051672&site=ehost-live>.

¹¹² Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 961.

¹¹³ Jill Lawrence, "Clinton Policies Agitate the West, Energize the GOP," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 6, 1994. The "war" referred to a general frustration among western residents, although several armed confrontations between westerners and government officials did occur during the 1990s, some of which will be discussed further.

¹¹⁴ Lawrence, "Clinton Policies."

recreated on the land saw their access and uses restricted or banned when the BLM and USFS changed focus from resource use on public lands to ecological health.

Richard Krannich and Michael Smith, while astutely identifying the frustrations with and lack of trust in the Federal Government, mitigate and downplay the persistence and ferocity of these feelings considering, as White did, the eruptions of violence to be anomalous rather than logical even predictable events. Their study of western residents in the summer of 1995, taken in rural communities in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, asked respondents about their views on public land management and trust in federal and state agencies to determine how widely shared frustrations with the federal government were in rural western communities. Most surveyed believed that federal managers exerted too much control over decisions about resource use.¹¹⁵ In addition, residents thought that federal land managers did not share the same values about resource use as those in the local community.¹¹⁶ Most believed that public lands would be better managed by state or local agencies.¹¹⁷

In spite of the fact that these responses could equally have been recorded in 1946 or 1979, and while Krannich and Smith acknowledge the fact that the survey found these sentiments to be widely shared across tourist and resource extractive communities, they concluded that although dissatisfaction with federal agencies on land use in the American West had escalated to violent confrontations in some instances and social movements were working to challenge federal land management, “the sentiments underlying the

¹¹⁵ Krannich and Smith, “Local Perceptions of Public Lands,” 683.

¹¹⁶ Krannich and Smith, “Local Perceptions of Public Lands,” 683.

¹¹⁷ Krannich and Smith, “Local Perceptions of Public Lands,” 685.

‘revolt in the West,’ are not universally held by the region’s residents.”¹¹⁸ While the authors argued that most westerners’ frustrations did not mean advocating for war with the federal government, without the framework the continuum of resignation/resentment provides, explosions into violence when they did occur were seen as siloed and discreet occurrences. To the contrary, two infamous events in the early 1990s, Ruby Ridge and Waco, illustrated the intensity of existent feeling and pushed western tensions into a rolling boil. Both events created confluences for the pervasive yet disparate anger, mistrust, and dissatisfaction with the federal government. In addition, they galvanized white supremacist and militia groups, such as the Militia of Montana, who claimed the events demonstrated the government’s willingness to attack and kill citizens who would not conform to federal strength. In both events, the extremist groups cast the government as overtly hostile and malicious.

Ruby Ridge and Waco

In late August 1992 federal agents began an eleven-day siege in a remote area of northern Idaho. Randy Weaver and his family, who had converted to Christian Identity, a theology that the Southern Poverty Law Center defines as “a unique antisemitic and racist theology that rose to a position of commanding influence on the racist right in the 1980s,”

¹¹⁸ Krannich and Smith, “Local Perceptions of Public Lands,” 693. While these attitudes reflect popular arguments against federal public lands during the fight over the Taylor Grazing Act and the Sagebrush Rebellion, the respondents had very low trust in their local county commissions to make wise decisions about land management and use. These results convinced the study’s authors that although some groups in the west had been advocating for local control over land-use decision, residents, in fact, just desired more collaboration with federal land management agencies.

moved from Iowa to the Idaho mountains in 1983.¹¹⁹ Once there the Weavers connected with a number of supremacist groups, including the Aryan Nation, and joined in the belief that the United States was under control of Jews, communists, atheists, homosexuals, and others who planned to enslave all white Christian Americans.¹²⁰ The Weavers integrated with others who supported the Northwest Territorial Imperative that began in the early 1980s and advocated to make the region, which was already largely white, exclusively white.¹²¹ White power groups dotted the landscape in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and western Montana. Building on historic racist laws that existed in Oregon throughout the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, along with declining African American populations in Portland and Seattle, the Pacific Northwest attracted a number of racist groups hoping to create a whites-only state.¹²² For the Weavers, their move to rural Idaho was motivated by a desire to create a white separatist homeland where the family could prepare for the end of days.

Weaver soon came to the notice of federal investigators landing on a list of dangerous white separatists, when, in relatively short order, he sold an illegal shotgun, skipped his court date, and threatened to kill any official who came to arrest him on Ruby

¹¹⁹ “Christian Identity,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/christian-identity>.

¹²⁰ Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 143.

¹²¹ Rebecca S. Katz and Joey Bailey, “The Militia, A Legal and Sociological Movement Analysis: Will the Real Militia Please Stand Up? Militia Hate Group or the Constitutional Militia,” *Sociological Focus* 33, no. 2 (May 2000,) 133-151, 136, DOI: 10.1080/00380237.2000.10571162.

¹²² Casey Michel, “Want to Meet America’s Worst Racists? Come to the Northwest,” *Politico*, July 7, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/07/northwest-front-americas-worst-racists-119803/>.

Ridge. Thus began an eighteen-month stalemate between the federal government and the Weavers that drew rightwing extremists from around the country to gather along the rural road leading to the family's home. On August 21, 1992, the tension was broken by gunfire when US Marshals met Sam, the Weaver's 14-year-old son, and a family friend in the woods. The confrontation quickly escalated into a shootout that led to the deaths of a US Marshal and the teenage Weaver. Soon after, Vicki, Weaver's wife and Sam's mother, was also shot and killed. At this point, federal forces converged on the area with more than one hundred FBI agents, Idaho national guardsmen, and other state and local officials, along with armored vehicles and helicopters.¹²³ During the standoff many far-right groups, including Neo-Nazis, came from across the country to show their support of the Weavers and protest the perceived persecution of an innocent American family by the federal government.¹²⁴ The standoff resulted in the surrender of Weaver, his surviving children, and a family friend.

Less than six months after Ruby Ridge, another, more deadly, standoff occurred between civilians and the federal government. The government suspected a millennial sect in Waco, Texas, of stockpiling illegal weapons. David Koresh, a charismatic cult leader, founded the Branch Davidians on an apocalyptic prophesy and developed a polygamous plan to build an army of followers in preparation for the end of days. After the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) attempted to serve Koresh and

¹²³ Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 145.

¹²⁴ Jason Wilson, "Ruby Ridge, 1992: The Day the American Militia Movement Was Born," *Guardian*, August 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/26/ruby-ridge-1992-modern-american-militia-charlottesville>.

other members arrest warrants in late February 1993, a firefought broke out that led to a fifty-one-day siege of the compound by the FBI. On April 19, 1993, the FBI launched a tear gas attack to force the cult members to surrender resulting in multiple fires and the deaths of Koresh and eighty-two members, more than twenty of whom were children.

In both incidents the actions of the federal agencies involved were investigated. After Ruby Ridge the Department of Justice examined the conduct of the participating agencies. Randy Weaver was acquitted of most charges, and he and his daughters received a multi-million-dollar settlement from the US government. Congress held extensive hearings on the tragic event in Waco. While the hearings found the Branch Davidians bore the “ultimate responsibility for the deaths,” they also condemned the aggressive responses of multiple federal agencies, including the Department of the Treasury, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, the Department of Justice, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹²⁵

Ruby Ridge and Waco left long-lasting legacies. The US government, particularly the FBI, reassessed how they responded to future interactions with extremist groups. Unwilling to contribute to another deadly conflagration, the agency tempered its responses in standoffs like the one that would happen in the coming years in Jordan, Montana. At the same time, the recognition that extremist groups had become dangerous foes of the federal government led to the militarization of law enforcement at all levels.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ US Congress, House, *Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians*, 104 Cong., 2nd sess., 1996, H. Rep. 104-749, 3-4, <https://www.congress.gov/104/crpt/hrpt749/CRPT-104hrpt749.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Bill Morlin, “Ruby Ridge Carved Niche in History,” *Spokesman Review*, August 19, 2012, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2012/aug/19/ruby-ridge-carved-niche-history/>.

This increased militarization included a new view of supremacist groups as the primary threat in domestic terrorism.¹²⁷

Others saw Ruby Ridge and Waco as grim warnings: the siege and resultant deaths of women and children convinced many radical anti-government groups that they needed to stockpile weapons to protect themselves from federal overreach, or the “New World Order.”¹²⁸ In his testimony before Congress, FBI Director Louis Freeh said as much when he admitted that, ““Ruby Ridge was a series of terribly flawed law-enforcement operations with tragic consequences.””¹²⁹

The mismanaged sieges became rallying calls for white supremacist and militia groups as they demonstrated the gestapo tactics taken by the federal government to control innocent citizens. Supremacists also used the Congressional investigations into FBI missteps and coverups to recruit new members. These fears of government tyranny, paired with the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act that imposed a five-day waiting period on handgun purchases, caused some to stockpile arms. In addition, rising fear of the New World Order, government surveillance, and black helicopters led many militiamen and supremacists, even in the remote northwest, to believe they had nowhere else to hide.¹³⁰ Ruby Ridge and Waco became effective rallying points for anti-government groups, including citizen militias. In their wake, the militia movement

¹²⁷ Morlin, “Ruby Ridge Carved Niche.”

¹²⁸ Wilson, “Ruby Ridge, 1992.”

¹²⁹ Tim Weiner, “U.S. Will Bring No More Criminal Charges Against F.B.I. Officials in Ruby Ridge Siege,” *New York Times*, August 16, 1997.

¹³⁰ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 194.

peaked at more than 50,000 members in forty-seven states and focused on violent action as a means to defend against the federal government.¹³¹

In response to this growing movement of hate, the American Jewish Committee released a report on the militia movement in April 1995 arguing that militias should not be viewed as a local issue, but instead showed the anger and dissatisfaction felt by many in the fast-growing movement. The report, titled “Militias: A Growing Danger,” found that militias were connected directly or indirectly with the white supremacist movement and used many forms of communication to share their message of hate: internet, faxes, shortwave radio, and video.¹³²

While militia groups shared the same targets with other hate groups – racial and religious minorities – they also had an additional paranoid animus directed at the federal government. As militias organized around the country, oftentimes with connections to local law enforcement and the military, the report presciently warned that members did not differentiate between elected government officials or any representative of the government: “The first person murdered by a militia member may well be a county clerk, a postal worker, a deputy sheriff, a tax collector, an FBI agent or US Marshal, a firefighter, a forest service employee, a FEMA worker, an elected representative — in

¹³¹ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 207. A 2018 study found that the number of hate groups peaked in 2011, decreased until 2014, and were on the rise as of the article’s publication. Richard M. Medina, Emily Nicolosi, Simon Brewer, and Andrew M. Linke, “Geographies of Organized Hate in America: A Regional Analysis,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, 4 (2018): 1008.

¹³² Stern, “Militia Mania.”

fact any representative of government or anyone perceived as opposing the militia and, therefore, seen as doing ‘the work of the government.’”¹³³

One infamous individual radicalized in his hatred of the federal government later carried out the worst domestic terrorist attack in American history: Timothy McVeigh.¹³⁴ McVeigh attended the Waco siege outside the compound and shared with many in the white power movement the view that Waco was a massacre carried out by a militarized superstate against innocent women and children.¹³⁵ On April 19, 1995 (the same month that the American Jewish Committee warned that militia members were becoming increasingly dangerous, particularly towards government employees), McVeigh parked a rented moving truck in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City.¹³⁶ At 9:20 a.m. the truck exploded, destroying the front section of the

¹³³ Stern, “Militia Mania.”

¹³⁴ While McVeigh attended Michigan Militia meetings prior to the bombing in Oklahoma City, McVeigh was not a member of a militia. The Michigan Militia and other groups, in fact, have denied a connection with the bombing and McVeigh’s actions weakened the anti-government militia group that had been growing after Ruby Ridge and Waco.

¹³⁵ Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 206. Belew argues that although McVeigh is often referred to as an angry lone wolf, he was, in fact, associated with and influenced by the white power movement. The lone wolf metaphor paints the actions of angry men as caused by mental health issues or personal grudges. Instead, the bombing of the Murrah federal building was a culmination of more than twenty years of white power organization and McVeigh should be contextualized within the supremacist movement to understand the interconnections of right-wing extremism from the Vietnam War to present day. Seeing the white power movement as a fringe movement of backwards rural peoples belies its strength and impact on conservatism and mainstream politics.

¹³⁶ April 19 has become a symbolic date important to many anti-government groups. It was the first battle of the American Revolution in 1775; the Warsaw ghetto uprising began on that day in 1943; and federal agents stormed Waco on that day in 1993. While the Ruby Ridge siege did not occur in April, supporters of Weaver and his family brought them supplies in April 1992. At least one reason that McVeigh and Nichols chose April 19, 1995, to place their bomb was because Richard Snell, a white supremacist convicted

building, damaging more than three hundred area buildings, and killing 168 people.

McVeigh and his friend, Terry Nichols, built the bomb in anger over the events at Ruby Ridge and Waco and decided to attack the federal government before it could subjugate them.¹³⁷

Militia Groups and the Militia of Montana (MOM)

Because of incidents like Ruby Ridge and Waco, the early 1990s saw a surge in militias and recruitment of new members.¹³⁸ And as previously mentioned, the militia movement grew, at least partially, out of the Posse Comitatus. The Posse believed that any government above the county level was illegitimate.¹³⁹ Many in the Posse also subscribed to Christian Identity, a theology that employed racism and antisemitism and asserted that God's laws, not man's, were supreme. Posse members also held elaborate conspiratorial views of the government, one of which claimed the legitimate government had been subverted and replaced by a tyrannical, illegitimate government.¹⁴⁰

of murder, was executed the same day. Katz and Bailey, "The Militia," 138. Mid-April has continued to be a time of violence — Columbine High School shootings on April 20, 1999; Virginia Tech shooting on April 16, 2007; and the Boston Marathon shooting on April 15, 2013.

¹³⁷ Stock, *Rural Radicals*, 148.

¹³⁸ "The Militia Movement," Anti-Defamation League, October 19, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-militia-movement-2020>. The militia movement is one of the youngest major anti-government right-wing movements in the United States, developing in response to Ruby Ridge and Waco, and its membership peaked in 1996.

¹³⁹ Morris Dees with James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 90. Many state militias sponsored legislation to make the county the center of power and required federal authorities to notify county sheriffs before any arrests could be made.

¹⁴⁰ "The Militia Movement," Anti-Defamation League.

One principle central to militia ideology was a focus on gun rights centered on the belief that guns were necessary to oppose a tyrannical government.¹⁴¹ Militia members combined their anti-government convictions with an interpretation of the Second Amendment that allowed them to possess any form of firearm or military weapon in their defense against an unjust government.¹⁴² This was a change from the extreme right's focus on and extralegal enforcing of "law and order" in the 1960s. Resisting the authority of the federal government differentiated militias from groups like the Ku Klux Klan that had historically posited itself as a self-proclaimed vigilante government force and used extralegal methods to protect white Americans and enforce control in communities.

The second characteristic of militias was support for and a perpetuation of conspiracy theories, including a common one held by militia members that the government was instituting a police state to control citizens. Militias' belief in an impending armed conflict with the federal government was the most ominous aspect of their conspiracy views.¹⁴³ A more extreme theory asserted that the U.S. government was in league with a globalist, socialist New World Order, often in the guise of the United Nations.¹⁴⁴ Regardless of the theories, the enemies of militias were clear: "Jews, Blacks, Russia, international bankers or socialists, and sometimes the United Nations [all of

¹⁴¹ Katz and Bailey, "The Militia," 136. Interestingly, the belief in the government's desire to usurp an individual's right to bear arms is shared by the far left as well as the far right. Both extremes of the political spectrum resist federal overreach by forming armed militias.

¹⁴² Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 960.

¹⁴³ "Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows," Anti-Defamation League, 1995, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Pitcavage, "Camouflage and Conspiracy," 965.

whom] are trying to take over the world and enslave the people through their control of the government.”¹⁴⁵ While not all militia groups subscribed to white supremacist ideologies, many had a history of white supremacist and racial right-wing ideological beliefs. Many believed that only white people, and specifically white Christians, were God’s chosen people and, thus, had the divine right to rule over other racial and ethnic groups (or at least, to be separated from them through the development of white homelands).¹⁴⁶

One notorious militia in the 1990s that subscribed to these theories was the Militia of Montana (MOM), formed by John Trochmann in February 1994.¹⁴⁷ Trochmann was friends with the Weavers who he met at an Aryan Nations family event and founded MOM in response to the Ruby Ridge siege. Launching a base for what would soon become the nation’s best-known and most prolific militia in Noxon, a small town in western Montana with 350 residents, may have seemed surprising, although the defensive position of the town appealed to Trochmann who noted that there was only one access point from the state highway into town and that route was over a bridge too narrow for military tanks.¹⁴⁸ From a mountain cabin MOM became the “ideological nerve center of the growing militant gun freedom movement” particularly adept at spreading hate,

¹⁴⁵ Katz and Bailey, “The Militia,” 138.

¹⁴⁶ Katz and Bailey, “The Militia,” 139 and Medina et al., “Geographies of Organized Hate,” 1010.

¹⁴⁷ Medina et al., “Geographies of Organized Hate,” 1010. The American Jewish Committee report singled out MOM as the formative example of extremist, violent militia groups proliferating across the country. Another study referred to MOM as the foundational model for many of the militias that operated in the United States.

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Voll, “The Right to Bear Sorrow,” *Esquire*, March 1995, 81 (75-82)

conspiracy theories, and anti-government propaganda across the country.¹⁴⁹ MOM's newsletter, *Taking Aim*, was widely read in militia circles and its most popular publication detailed how to form a militia. MOM mailed out thousands of these manuals to individuals and groups around the nation.¹⁵⁰ Connected to the outside world by a fax network and shortwave radio shows, MOM claimed half a million followers across the nation, all of whom Trochmann claimed he could activate, if needed, to take up armed resistance to the government.¹⁵¹

MOM members presented themselves as authorities on the Constitution, with a particular emphasis on the Second Amendment and an insistence on their rights as "true patriots" to own weapons and the necessity of so doing in order to defend against subjugation under the federal government. MOM materials focused exclusively on the Bill of Rights and refused to acknowledge later Amendments, most notably the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments. Ignoring those Amendments denied the civil rights gained by people of color and women.¹⁵² In his publications, Trochmann also argued that Presidential Executive Orders were unconstitutional because the Constitution did not authorize that power in the executive branch. The federal government used these Executive Orders, according to Trochmann and his followers, to bring about America's inclusion in and subjugation to the New World Order.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Voll, "Bear Sorrow," 81.

¹⁵⁰ Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 85.

¹⁵¹ Voll, "Bear Sorrow," 81.

¹⁵² Katz and Bailey, "The Militia," 149.

¹⁵³ Kenneth S. Stern, *Force Upon the Plain*, 73.

Other MOM documents whipped up further paranoia by claiming that the federal government had engaged in a variety of attacks against Americans, including the 1993 World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings. MOM pamphlets asserted that laws about abortion, taxation, and homeschooling, along with the government's support of affirmative action programs, destroyed the white man's way of life.¹⁵⁴ For MOM, the government led the conspiracy "to take guns away from true patriots, tax them into poverty, strip them of their constitutional rights, and place them under the boot of a one-world government."¹⁵⁵ The only way to prevent this subjugation was to make sure that Americans were armed and ready to defend themselves from the federal government.

The Growth of Hate

The right-wing extremist movement was not monolithic: MOM may have been the most visible hate group in the 1990s in Montana, if not in the nation, but it was not the only one. Militias, such as MOM, generally focused on gun rights and fears of government and New World tyranny. Other hate groups targeted a variety of enemies, many of them local. The Montana Human Rights Network (MHRN), formed in 1990 in response to growing militia and white nationalist activity in the state, compiled a report in 1994 covering the activities of far-right organizations. White supremacist groups with a long tradition of violence and intimidation had been active in Montana since the mid-1980s. Residing predominantly in northwest Montana, an active core of white supremacists, loosely associated with the Aryan Nation from northern Idaho, harassed

¹⁵⁴ Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 83.

¹⁵⁵ Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 83.

local Jewish residents and people of color. White supremacists in the small town of Superior, located near the Idaho border, invited armed supporters from around the nation to gather in town and show their support for creating an all-white nation ““when the whole rest of the world is teeming with mongrels and misfits,”” as quoted in the *Missoulian*.¹⁵⁶ While Superior’s mayor declared that the town’s eight hundred local residents condemned such beliefs, the head of the Church of the Creator claimed that Montana was a stronghold of supremacist values.

Hate groups were not relegated only to western Montana. Billings’ residents saw a spate of hate activity in the mid-1990s, particularly targeted towards the local Jewish community. White supremacists distributed hate literature and recruitment flyers on the Martin Luther King Day walk in Billings in 1993.¹⁵⁷ Antisemitic acts occurred that fall through posted flyers, vandalized tombstones at the local Jewish cemetery, and a bomb threat at the synagogue.¹⁵⁸ By the end of the year, two churches and six homes that displayed Hanukkah menorahs had been vandalized. At least partly in response to the rising incidents of hate crimes, the Billings police department hired six new officers with a grant from the US Department of Justice designed to address the hate groups that “have established small, but highly visible and threatening, presences in the community.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Kathleen McLaughlin, “Supremacists Vow to Take It to the Streets,” *Missoulian*, July 23, 1996.

¹⁵⁷ Greg McCracken, “Hate Groups Recruit Members, Say They’re Planning More Activities,” *Billings Gazette*, March 22, 1993.

¹⁵⁸ Len Iwanski, “City’s Stand on Hate Acts Wins Praise,” *Billings Gazette*, September 19, 1993.

¹⁵⁹ Lorna Thackeray, “Billings Will Get 6 More Officers,” *Billings Gazette*, December 21, 1993.

White supremacists also targeted homosexuals and Native Americans with vandalism, threats, and hate literature.¹⁶⁰ And supremacists were active in other communities throughout the state.

In July 1994, the Montana Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights compiled a report on hate groups in the state showing that the number and size of white supremacist groups in Montana were increasing. According to the report, white supremacists found fertile ground for recruitment in Montana “because of its spare population, isolation, and limited law enforcement resources.”¹⁶¹ The Committee concluded that Montana had twenty identified white supremacist groups, out of a nationwide total of 3,500.¹⁶²

White supremacists had connections with many of the other far-right groups in Montana, such as the militia. In the MHRN twenty-three-page report, militia and MOM activities take up four pages. The report noted the longtime connections between John Trochmann (and his brother, David, and nephew, Randy) and white supremacist groups, particularly MOM’s connection with James Gordon “Bo” Gritz, a white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke’s vice-presidential candidate in 1988. In 1992, Gritz ran for President for the Populist Party and encouraged supporters to form militias. He then played a pivotal role in negotiating Randy Weaver’s surrender at Ruby Ridge. According to MHRN, MOM, along with other militia groups, tried to “portray

¹⁶⁰ “Haven for Hatred: Civil Rights Report Finds Influx of White Supremacists of Every Ilk,” *Missoulian*, July 21, 1994.

¹⁶¹ “Haven for Hatred.”

¹⁶² “Haven for Hatred.”

themselves as mainstream Montanans with legitimate concerns about public policy [but] that rings hollow when one considers they are advocating the formation of a domestic army to fight the government.”¹⁶³

Although MOM received the most scrutiny of any militia group in Montana, the report gave an overview of other militia activity in the state and commented that the groups were formed with the express purpose of protecting citizens from the government. MHRN acknowledged that some of the groups might appear benign but many of the groups were linked through their leaders, propaganda, and philosophy and were also connected to more radical, racist groups.¹⁶⁴ While some of the more extreme far-right fringe groups existed on the political margins, they worked to connect with mainstream conservative audiences through controversial issues such as taxes, abortion, homosexuality, school prayer, anti-environmentalism, and gun control.¹⁶⁵ And their unsubstantiated conspiracy theories found an audience: between February and May of 1994, MHRN tallied eleven meetings around the state with approximately 2,500 participants.¹⁶⁶ While that only made up a small percentage of the state population, MHRN warned that militias were finding sympathetic ears.

Militias comprised just part of the congregation of far-right activities, protests, and gatherings across the state in the 1990s. But delineating their complaints into discrete anti-government or hate group classifications proved an almost impossible task since they

¹⁶³ “A Season of Discontent: Militias, Constitutionalsists, and the Far Right in Montana,” Montana Human Rights Network, 1994, 10.

¹⁶⁴ “A Season of Discontent,” 2.

¹⁶⁵ “A Season of Discontent,” 6.

¹⁶⁶ “A Season of Discontent,” 8.

shared similar ideologies and an underlying fear and distrust of the federal government that pervaded their actions. While MHRN identified some groups in their report, they cautioned against trying to categorize each person and incident. More importantly than specifically classifying any particular group was understanding the danger they posed to government employees and how attractive their ideas were to the mainstream as they resonated with underlying historically grounded discontents with and fears of the federal government.

Two closely aligned groups popular with anti-government extremists at this time were tax protestors and Constitutionlists, also called Sovereign Citizens. Many who adopted these groups' beliefs fought the government over tax and regulatory issues and denied that the government had authority over them. Tax protestors believed that the tax structure was inherently illegal and therefore often refused to pay income tax.¹⁶⁷ In 1990, an early tax protester, Wallis Pederson, refused to vacate a garage at the airport in Glasgow, Montana. Pederson claimed he owned the county airport because he paid rent for a hanger and the government and government agencies could not own property.¹⁶⁸ In addition, he sent out bills and tax liens for millions of dollars to dozens of people including anyone who questioned him or his business transactions.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps because Pederson was an early anti-government agitator, county officials did not take his claims

¹⁶⁷ "A Season of Discontent," 13.

¹⁶⁸ Melody Perkins, "Federal Agents Seize Records of Tax Protester Pederson," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 12, 1990.

¹⁶⁹ Perkins, "Federal Agents Seize Records."

very seriously—instead of filing criminal charges they used a civil suit to evict him from county property.

Another tax protestor who gained more notoriety was Marvin J. “Red” Beckman, a Billings resident who lost his property in a tax dispute and refused to vacate his home. Beckman used his interpretation of the Bill of Rights to craft his justification for not paying taxes.¹⁷⁰ Beckman had supporters from around the state. One letter writer from Great Falls called Beckman a hero who, along with others, “have put their necks on the chopping block to try and bring this corrupt government back under control of the people – meaning you. To label them as extremists is not only cruel, it is an example of the ignorance we all share of what kind of government our forefathers gave us and the rights we have to control the government...not be controlled by it.”¹⁷¹ In the summer of 1994 deputies removed Beckman from his property after a twenty-year battle with the IRS.¹⁷² Beckman became a fixture at meetings around the state including one in January 1994 titled “No More Wacos” featuring national leaders of the racist right.¹⁷³ Beckman also joined militia members at a Great Falls rally in May of that year and “denounced gun control laws, military-type tactics used by police squads, last year’s government raid in

¹⁷⁰ Steven E. Shay, “The Rise and Fall of the Montana Freemen,” (PhD diss., Washington State University, 2008), 118.

¹⁷¹ Helen Arthur, “Letter to the Editor,” *Great Falls Tribune*, April 8, 1994.

¹⁷² “‘Freemen’ Movement Taking It on the Chin,” *Great Falls Tribune*, July 3, 1994.

¹⁷³ “A Season of Discontent,” 13.

Waco, Texas, and other instances of government intervention.”¹⁷⁴ Over 200 area residents, mostly male, attended the rally.¹⁷⁵

Many sovereign citizens joined tax protestors in refusing to pay their taxes. Like the militias, the sovereign citizens movement derived from the Posse Comitatus in the 1970s. Sovereign citizens believed that virtually all existing governments were illegitimate and declared that state and federal laws did not apply to them.¹⁷⁶ Sovereign citizen ideology claims that the original, legitimate government was slowly replaced by an illegitimate de facto government.¹⁷⁷ Because the government (state and federal) was illegitimate, corrupt, and tyrannical, sovereigns believed they could reject their subservient role by reducing their ties to the state through acts such as turning in driver licenses, marriage licenses, and social security cards.¹⁷⁸

Sovereign citizens adopted a less overtly racist theme (for which the Ku Klux Klan is notorious) for a more patriotic one, but their loyalty was towards the true government they created, not the fraudulent version created after the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed US citizenship for ex-slaves. The focus on this Amendment was not random. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center,

¹⁷⁴ Jacquie Long, “‘Militia’s’ Message: Stand Up and Fight,” *Great Falls Tribune*, May 12, 1994.

¹⁷⁵ Long, “‘Militia’s’ Message.”

¹⁷⁶ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement: Common Documentary Identifiers and Examples,” Anti-Defamation League, 2016, 1, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/reports/sovereign-citizen-movement-common-documentary-identifiers-examples>.

¹⁷⁷ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement,” 1.

¹⁷⁸ “Human Rights Conferees Warned Not Underestimate Hate Groups,” *Great Falls Tribune*, May 14, 1990.

“Sovereigns hold truly bizarre, complex, anti-government beliefs that are rooted in racism and anti-Semitism.”¹⁷⁹ Even when they professed they were not racist, they still subscribed to white supremacist ideology. Although sovereigns hold varying racial ideologies, they generally believed, along with other Christian Identity adherents, that non-white people were not human and that Jews possessed a satanic plot to take over the world.¹⁸⁰ For example, they contended that Jewish bankers ran the Federal Reserve System, which violated Congress’ Constitutional power to coin money and regulate its value.¹⁸¹ Sovereigns were known by a variety of names including Constitutionals, Christian Patriots, and Super Patriots.¹⁸² They believed that the Constitution was a divinely inspired document and the first ten Amendments, along with common law, made up the only valid law of the land. MOM adopted these Constitutionalist tenets although the groups remained separate.

Like militia members, Constitutionals could be found across the state. Twenty Constitutionals in Ravalli County put a public notice in the *Ravalli Republic* declaring their right to emancipate from the “foreign jurisdiction known as the municipal corporation of the District of Columbia, a Democracy.”¹⁸³ According to the group, “Any and all, past and present political ties imposed by operation of law or otherwise in trust

¹⁷⁹ “What You Should Know About ‘Sovereign Citizens,’” Southern Poverty Law Center, April 23, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2018/04/23/what-you-should-know-about-sovereign-citizens>.

¹⁸⁰ “Sovereign Citizens Movement,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 21, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement>.

¹⁸¹ “Human Rights Conferees Warned.”

¹⁸² “A Season of Discontent,” 11.

¹⁸³ Public Notice, “American national Status,” *Ravalli Republic*, September 9, 1993, 8.

with said democracy [were] hereby dissolved. By this emancipation [they] return to an estate of primary sovereignty and freedom that pre-exists all government(s).”¹⁸⁴ The proclamation, found as legal notices on the classified pages, gave their corroborating evidence “as guaranteed by the full Bill of Rights, the Ten Amendments to the Constitution for the United States of America, a Republic.”¹⁸⁵ This action was taken by Constitutionalists around the state who would place such notes in the classified section or legal notices in local papers. Constitutionalists also used a variety of distinctive techniques to denote their addresses because using a zip code created a contract with the federal government and a loss of sovereignty.¹⁸⁶ They often added “state,” “republic” or “commonwealth” to the state name to define themselves as state citizens rather than (14th Amendment) US citizens.¹⁸⁷ In addition, they would employ punctuation techniques in their signatures to separate their first and middle names from their government-given last name. They usually used a comma, semi-colon, or colon between their middle and last names.¹⁸⁸ This tactic was necessary, they claimed, because their name did not reference them but instead referred to the entity created by the government.

Sovereigns focused their activity on the court system and local governments by filing copious documents and announcing their intent to sever ties with the federal government, which they believed had no jurisdiction over them.¹⁸⁹ They also filed liens

¹⁸⁴ Public Notice, 8.

¹⁸⁵ Public Notice, 8.

¹⁸⁶ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, 6.

¹⁸⁷ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, 6.

¹⁸⁸ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, 2.

¹⁸⁹ “A Season of Discontent,” 11.

against public officials across the state, convened their own courts, and issued arrest warrants for local law enforcement officials. With no legal basis, these documents amounted to harassment and intimidation of government officials. The actions of Sovereigns, such as Cal Greenup, brought them into confrontation with law enforcement. Greenup made a name for himself in early 1995 as an anti-government patriot and tax protestor. Greenup faced an array of legal issues from a variety of state agencies: the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Department of Revenue.¹⁹⁰ Among other legal issues, Greenup owned ten elk that the state required that he license as a game farmer; he refused. Ignoring the citations against him, Greenup announced that he would rather die than show up for his court date. The sheriff decided not to arrest him on his property for a misdemeanor charge thereby hopefully avoiding a confrontation.

Greenup continued to push his luck against the federal government when an Idaho National Guard helicopter flew over his property in the Bitterroot Valley. The helicopter was headed home after training and passed over Greenup's home before a militia meeting was held there. Twenty to thirty militia members arrived at Greenup's home where he stated that if the helicopter returned for another pass, "we're going to dump him out of the sky. Yeah, we were going to shoot him down but he never came back."¹⁹¹ The local

¹⁹⁰ Patricia Sullivan, "Tax Protestor Draws the Line: Government Will Have to Come and Get Him, Darby Rebel Says," *Missoulian*, February 4, 1995.

¹⁹¹ Patricia Sullivan, "Guard Chopper Stirs Up Bitterroot 'Militia,'" *Missoulian*, February 7, 1995.

sheriff employed a measured approach and decided again not to go on Greenup's property to avoid conflict.

As state and local officials worked to defuse the volatile situation with Greenup, others stoked anti-government passions fifteen miles away in Hamilton during two days of escalating tensions and threats to take over the Ravalli County Courthouse. For residents there, 1995 started amid rising tensions between increasingly angry and armed protestors and those who worked for the federal and state governments. Near the end of January, the local paper, the *Ravalli Republic*, contained an announcement covering the entire last page. The "Proclamation" expressed support "for our local, state, and nationally elected officials and public employees in their endeavors to do their respective duties," and had hundreds of signatures.¹⁹² The message to those professing hostility towards the government was clear: "We abhor and speak out against threats of violence by any persons or organizations against these public servants."¹⁹³ The "Proclamation" did not include any informative details as to residents' motives for putting the announcement in the local paper, but was published on the same date that the Republican majority in the state Senate advanced a states' rights constitutional amendment authorizing state officials to resist federal interference in state affairs.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² "Proclamation," *Ravalli Republic*, January 20, 1995.

¹⁹³ "Proclamation."

¹⁹⁴ Len Iwanski, "States' Rights Measure Advances," *Montana Standard*, January 21, 1995. Senate Bill 143, which rejected all federal mandates not derived directly from the Constitution, passed the House, but did not gain enough votes in the Senate to amend the Montana Constitution. "States'-rights Amendment Doubtful," *Montana Standard*, April 6, 1995.

Local events in Hamilton soon revealed other reasons why residents may have felt the need to visibly support their elected officials. A local woman tussled with US Internal Revenue Service agents who arrested her for refusing to identify herself or submitting to booking procedures. Supporters convened at the courthouse and threatened public officials. Al Hamilton, the husband of the woman protested that he had not made threats at all but then said, “I told the judge if one hair on Karen’s head is hurt, I’ll get vengeance on everyone involved. This will happen. I’m not bullshitting one bit. When people are warned and they don’t take heed, they deserve what they get.”¹⁹⁵ Hamilton, then requested the addresses of fifteen employees of the sheriff’s office, presumably to harass or file liens against them or for more nefarious purposes. He further stated that, if needed, he could rally militia members from across the country and in twenty-four hours they could “tear the courthouse down.”¹⁹⁶ Greenup chimed in stating that armed militia members were prepared to take over the courthouse.¹⁹⁷ After two days of confrontations with and threats from local Constitutionals, Ravalli County officials passed a 90-day emergency ordinance and banned guns, knives, mace, and other explosives from the courthouse, adjacent sidewalks, and courthouse parking lots.¹⁹⁸

Soon after weapons were prohibited at the Ravalli County Courthouse, the Bitterroot Human Rights Alliance sponsored a community unity rally and informational

¹⁹⁵ Ruth Thorning, “No Guns Allowed: County Passes Emergency Order After Death Threats,” *Ravalli Republic*, March 3, 1995.

¹⁹⁶ Thorning, “No Guns Allowed.”

¹⁹⁷ Patricia Sullivan and Greg Lakes, “‘Militia’ Threats Spook Ravalli Officials,” *Missoulian*, March 3, 1995.

¹⁹⁸ Sullivan and Lakes, “‘Militia’ Threats Spook.”

meetings to show support for public officials. The State Legislature passed House Bill 347 in response to residents impersonating public officials or making threats against public officials and their family members. The bill passed with unanimous support with Representative Dick Green from Ravalli County stating, “Everybody is upset by this freemen thing across the state... You’d have to be an airhead not to believe in the [bill].”¹⁹⁹ The events in the Bitterroot Valley ended without any shots fired and only a relative few residents took part in protests, but this was one of an increasing pattern of incidents between anti-government protestors and state and federal officials across the state that culminated in the Jordan Freeman standoff that following year. Many observers feared that eventual violence would take place: “Although observers agree that only a tiny fringe element of either the militias or the county movement is actively engaged in violence, the level of violence directed against federal employees has been extraordinary.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Pat Rhodes, “Felonious Threats: Bill Passes in Response to threats by State’s ‘Freemen,’” *Ravalli Republic*, March 13, 1995. Interestingly Rep. Dick Green from Ravalli County was among a group of state legislators who, just a month earlier, had signed a resolution that recognized the right of all Montanans to keep and bear arms and urged residents to own firearms and ammunition in preparation for service in a state militia. While legislators noted that the proposal did not advocate for the formation of militias, opponents saw the resolution as a clear call to militia members to amass weapons in their attempts to intimidate federal officials. The resolution was not a bill and did not have the backing of law, but read as supportive of locally organized militias, especially when local militia organizers testified in support of the resolution. See Pat Rhodes, “Militia Resolution Sparks Controversy,” *Ravalli Republic*, February 13, 1995, and Susan Gallagher, “Armed and Ready: Militia Proponents Want Citizens Outfitted for Duty,” *Missoulian*, February 11, 1995.

²⁰⁰ Chaloupka, “The County Supremacy and Militia Movements,” 168.

As “patriots” around the state refused to pay taxes, took out bounties against officials, and threatened to shoot helicopters out of the sky, the Militia of Montana, in a somewhat ironic move, attempted to distance itself from the more radical movements in the state. In an interview with the *Missoulian*, Trochmann, along with his colleague Bob Fletcher, tried to separate themselves from other extremist groups.²⁰¹ According to Trochmann, MOM was primarily an educational nonprofit that sold books, pamphlets, and videotapes.²⁰² MOM merely gave advice to militia members such as store enough non-perishable food for a year, accumulate as much ammunition and guns as possible, and “beware of a world government that wants to control every aspect of every individual’s behavior.”²⁰³ For Trochmann, “The militia isn’t the same as the group of scofflaws who say no elected official but the sheriff has legal authority, and if you don’t sign contracts, you don’t have to abide by the law.”²⁰⁴ Trochmann told the reporter that he voted and while he saw other protestors as “friends” and shared the same ideology with them he differed on concepts such as issuing liens. Trochmann also noted that MOM was not sympathetic to the Aryan Nation, and although he claimed not to be anti-Semitic, he commented that the people behind the one-world conspiracy were ““Anti-Christ banksters, The Warburgs, and the Rothschilds, The Federal Reserve, and its chairman

²⁰¹ Trochmann subscribed to Christian Identity ideology but did not promote the beliefs directly through MOM. “Christian Identity,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/christian-identity>.

²⁰² Patricia Sullivan, “Militia of Montana: They Say They’re Being Confused with More Radical Organizations,” *Missoulian*, April 2, 1995.

²⁰³ Sullivan, “Militia of Montana.”

²⁰⁴ Sullivan, “Militia of Montana.”

Alan Greenspan.”²⁰⁵ Trochmann offered to negotiate in a number of standoffs around the state, but he clearly viewed MOM as a more acceptable alternative to many of the extremist groups cropping up around the state.²⁰⁶

Trochmann’s claims of moderation aside, federal and state officials in Montana and other communities in the West bore the brunt of anger from a variety of sources. A front-page article on the plight of local governments in the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the toxic combination of fears of a new world order paired with concerns that blue collar workers were being left out of the economy. The target of this anger and fear was the government, including local government officials. A Flathead County planning director commented on the challenges of working in communities with anti-government agitators. In handling the population growth of the county in northwest Montana, Steve Herbaly found himself the target of accusations that he worked for a secretive group of world leaders who aimed to take over the United States.²⁰⁷ Herbaly worked in Kalispell, a former logging town experiencing growth pains from new residents that shared with other communities what the *Times* referred to as the “politics of paranoia” based on growing numbers of “mostly white people who feel economically disenfranchised and in desperate

²⁰⁵ Dees and Corcoran, *Gathering Storm*, 90.

²⁰⁶ Trochmann’s willingness to work with the FBI as a mediator earned him the derision of one supporter of the Freeman. In his book, *Turning Point: A Personal Account of the ‘Freemen’ Standoff*, Scott McMahan Bowman referred to Trochmann as a sellout who praised the FBI on national television. Scott McMahan Bowman, *Turning Point: A Personal Account of the ‘Freemen’ Standoff* (Self-Published, Thumbprint Graphics, Salem, OH, 1997), 9.

²⁰⁷ Louis Sahagun, “A Wave of Distrust in the West,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1995.

need of explanations — and villains to blame.”²⁰⁸ No longer just the purview of off-the-grid survivalists, “These beliefs are creating new alliances: Armed citizen militia groups are joining with anti-gun-control patriots, conservative religious groups and average working-class people who feel oppressed by government restrictions and abandoned by a national economy that is leaving manufacturing and extractive industries - such as mining - behind.”²⁰⁹ The anger citizens felt at being oppressed and dismissed by the government infected many communities across the state, which made the Jordan Freeman less of an anomaly and more an extreme expression of pervasive anti-government paranoia.

Conclusion

The 1990s were, indeed, a weird time in the West. The popularity of militias, the growing visibility of white supremacists and other hate groups, anti-government activists threatening government employees, and armed standoffs with the federal government — all of these happened in the last decade of the twentieth century and seemed to center predominantly in the American West. Richard White, writing at the time of the Jordan Freeman, viewed these occurrences as eccentric eruptions that signaled the decline of the rural, extractive West and the triumph of the urban, metropolitan West.²¹⁰ To be fair, White was writing at a time when Wise Use and privatization arguments were losing in the courts and among voters. White equated those losses with the belief that far-right Republican candidates who had been voted in to reduce the federal government’s

²⁰⁸ Sahagun, “Wave of Distrust.”

²⁰⁹ Sahagun, “Wave of Distrust.”

²¹⁰ Richard White, “The Current Weirdness in the West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* no. 1 (1997): 13.

presence in the West and enact privatization plans had failed their constituents and ceded their political future in the West to Democrats. While Democrats did make some inroads in western states, particularly on the coast, other Intermountain West and Great Plains voting records reflect an entrenchment of the far-right conservative movement, reflected in fears that their religion, culture, and rights would be destroyed by a liberal agenda and New World Order.

Two recent works explore the dynamic between the far-right movement and western rebellion in the 1990s. In *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West*, Betsy Quammen examines the link between anti-government ideology and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' beliefs through Cliven Bundy's fight with the federal government. According to Quammen, Bundy had a long-standing dispute over federal protection efforts for the desert tortoise and grazing fees on public lands. In his fight, he relied on his Church of Jesus Christ teachings and his western identity to legitimize his private property claims and resistance against federal tyranny. Bundy and his family believed that his rights had been established with the Euro-American settlement of the West and were further justified by church teachings.²¹¹ His refusal to allow the court-ordered removal of his cattle from public lands in 2014 garnered support from hundreds of protestors, including many from militia groups, although few in the crowd shared his background steeped in ranching, and those who did paid their grazing

²¹¹ Betsy Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West*, Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2020, 225.

fees. Cliven's supporters believed, as he did, that their fight against tyranny was a bold one, especially when their culture, beliefs, and property were under attack.

Cliven's sons then took up the banner of western resistance in early January 2016 with their occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Although neither of them was a rancher or had worked in the livestock industry, they used the same cowboy imagery to promote their righteous fight against the government.²¹² Initially Amman and Ryan had confusing and convoluted reasons for taking over Malheur and struggled in attracting followers. However, the death of one protestor galvanized anti-government groups whose members rallied to support the Bundys as the evil nature of the government was once again exposed. For Quammen, the combination of religion and conservatism with western imagery resulting in western fights over public land use became the staging ground for the culture war between the conservative Christian far-right movement and a One World government run by Jewish bankers and the United Nations.

James Skillen takes issue with White's almost whimsical rendering of the Freemen and other eccentrics and sees western rebellion in a larger context than conflict over federal lands in the American West. In *This Land is My Land: Rebellion in the West*, Skillen examines three recent areas of rebellion. The Sagebrush Rebellion and the War for the West/Wise Use Movement have both been discussed in this chapter. While Skillen does not discuss the Freemen, their rebellion is part of a larger "War for the West" in the 1990s when the Mountain West suffered economically and agriculturalists, miners, and

²¹² Quammen, *American Zion*, 262.

loggers all saw massive job losses, also called “the second Sagebrush Rebellion.” Other parts of the West, however, were not having the same economic issues, particularly places where the economy was not steeped in resource extraction. Skillen notes that the division between long-time residents with a history in natural resource industry and new arrivals working in the service and technology industries caused deep resentment in rural communities.²¹³ As rural westerners felt that their economies and culture were under attack, they turned to their county governments as a way to assert authority over and autonomy from federal agencies – through the Wise Use Movement and the County Land-Use movement.²¹⁴

While White saw the anti-federal government movement in the West as an anomaly, Skillen argues that the 1990 events were part of an ongoing and escalating Christian conservative movement that radicalized the far right, nationalized the anti-government rebellion, and blurred the lines between mainstream Republican politics and extremist ideology. The War for the West linked states rights’ (the focus of the first Sagebrush Rebellion) with larger issues of property rights and gun rights. In this way, the War for the West moved from a regional fight to a national battle using the shared hatred of the federal government, the obsessions with gun rights, and a dark view of America’s future that all conservatives could share.²¹⁵ For both Quammen and Skillen, western fights against the government have come to define the far-right movement. While

²¹³ James R. Skillen, *This Land is My Land: Rebellion in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 88.

²¹⁴ Skillen, *This Land is My Land*, 98.

²¹⁵ Skillen, *This Land is My Land*, 128.

extremist groups exist throughout the nation, the fight is most attractive to far-right groups and often occurs in the West because the federal government is so visible, especially in its control over public lands.

Both historians, however, are limited in their scope. Quammen's focus on Bundy's religious justifications for his anti-government actions reveals the important intersection between Saints' perceptions of landscape and freedom, but in her historical analysis, the growth of extremism in the 1990s plays less of a role. Skillen, on the other hand, sees the importance of the decade in the coupling of western individuality with extremist ideology. In his study, however, he narrows his gaze to the anti-government histories of three western families. The appeal of the anti-government cowboy, however extended far beyond his ranch.

This chapter demonstrates that these extremist movements were both products of long-standing western resistance to the federal government and a shift towards the far-right movement nationally. These movements caught fire in the 1990s as rural residents incorporated western anger and conservative values into their fights against government regulations and changing western demographics. One common complaint for many rural westerners at this time was that their lifestyles and beliefs were no longer respected or valued by many others in the nation – Democrats, environmentalists, academics, urbanites, and of course, the federal government, were all dismissive of the western way of life if not outright enemies of it. My goal is to shed light on this relatively short period of the radicalization of rural westerners who felt angry at the government and society

changing around them and adopted extremist ideology as a way to express that anger and combat changes they felt otherwise helpless to influence or control.

In this light, it is surprising that the Jordan Freeman did not garner more support in their fight against the feds. The Freeman fought a similar battle for guns, private property, and their cultural and economic existence against the federal government, but they received scant support during and after the standoff. While they garnered excessive media attention, even John Trochmann from Militia of Montana noted that he still paid his taxes and had not seceded from the government, thereby portraying himself as almost a moderate in comparison to the Freeman. The Jordan Freeman, although less successful than other extremist groups in rallying supporters, come out of the rising extremism of the late twentieth century. The Freeman built on the local and national far-right movement, culminating in their armed eighty-one-day standoff with the federal government. The next chapter uses this rural community as a case study to examine how residents can quickly become radicalized through the potent/dangerous combination of anger, anti-government frustration, and right-wing conspiracies.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FREEMEN OF JORDAN

“A Paean to the Wisdom of the Inscrutable East”

An unfortunate breeze
Brought Rutgers Ph.D.s
To this beautiful state where we live
And told us, as you know
To the wild buffalo
Our cities and homes we must give.

Please send them back home
Where the drug addicts roam
And the sewage runs into the bay.
Where the Scarlet Knights
Flow blood from gang fights
And the streets are not safe in the day.

Yes, send them back east
Where each man is a beast
And the women don't smell very good.
I'd much rather they be
At Rutgers, New Jersey
Than here fouling my neighborhood.¹

The above was published in Jordan, Montana in the fall of 1992. The poem, presumably penned by a local cowboy poet, commented on The Big Open controversy, which infuriated Garfield County residents and inspired numerous editorials and letters, along with one poem, in the local newspaper.² While its rhyming verses are whimsical,

¹ Don Garrity, “A Paean to the Wisdom of Inscrutable East,” *Jordan Local Paper*, October 22, 1992.

² The controversy, described in detail later in this chapter, revolved around a proposed project in the mid 1980s to return parts of east-central Montana to a prairie ecosystem. The anger of rural Montana residents in the proposed counties helped contribute to the mounting tension that culminated in the Freeman standoff.

the author clearly saw a division between crime-ridden cities in the East and the scenic, rural West. Jordan residents probably shared a chuckle over the verse in their local coffee shop, but the poem also reveals long-standing targets of western frustration: urbanites, environmentalists, and academics (presumably whose research was funded through the federal government). Soon after the poem was published, some Jordan residents would view these outsiders as more than laughable targets who did not understand or appreciate the hard-working western rancher, but instead saw them as enemies who actively sought to destroy western lifestyle, culture, and people. Less than four years after the poem's publication in the *Jordan Tribune*, the Jordan Freeman took up armed resistance against the federal government and other perceived enemies.

Garfield County, one of the least populated counties in Montana, had been better known for its unique paleontological discoveries than its politics.³ In 1996, however, an uprising near Jordan, the county seat, thrust the rural community into the national spotlight. The Montana Freeman aligned with the national militia movement and shared beliefs with other anti-government extremist groups around the state throughout the early 1990s. But they also connected to a local history of frontierism, isolation, and agricultural decline. Unlike Ruby Ridge or Waco, the Freeman standoff ended peacefully after eighty-one days with no lives lost on either side. Perhaps the peaceful resolution is why

³ The nation's first *T. rex* was found in the Hell Creek area near Jordan in 1904 by paleontologist Barnum Brown. Fossil discoveries exploded in the area with a baby Triceratops found in 2006, a Triceratops skull discovered in 2011 and a T. Rex found in 2013. In 2006 two nearly complete dinosaur fossils that appeared to be locked in mortal combat were found. The ownership of these "dueling dinosaurs" was still being argued in court in 2020.

so few people remember the Freemen and their standoff with the federal government. Or maybe the Freemen's complaints against the government were overshadowed by their criminal financial schemes that led to many of them being convicted of bank fraud among other charges.

While the majority of the Freemen's neighbors did not participate in their convoluted and illegal money stratagems, many across the West shared their anger at the federal government and found at least some of their arguments appealing. The Jordan newspaper, for example, printed many editorials and letters detailing a spectrum from frustrations with the government to wild conspiracy theories. A few of the letters printed were from Freemen; most came from others in the community and across the state. In the 1990s, many in the West felt under attack and while the Freemen might have represented an extreme response to federal oversight, anti-government anger ran through the region waiting to explode under the right conditions.

The Freemen held national attention for their three-month siege. But once they surrendered, they were forgotten. While historians have studied western rural rage in the twentieth century, little research has focused on the Freemen and the growing western rage in the late twentieth century that fueled their cause.⁴ This chapter looks to remedy

⁴ The Sagebrush Rebellion, Wise Use, and County Movements were examined in the last chapter. I'll expand on Wise Use and the County Movement in this chapter. Historians have studied the extremist movements that shared ideologies with the Freemen: Evelyn Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier* (2006); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination* (2019); David A. Neiwert, *In God's County: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest* (1999); Katherine Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (2018); Morris Dees and James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (1996); William Chaloupka,

the dearth of academic studies on the Freeman and their short-lived movement: two books by their supporters came out during the standoff or soon after, but little academic analysis has been written.⁵ The difficulty in finding sources may be one reason why the Freeman have not been studied. The Jordan newspaper, a source I relied on to show the increasing tensions in Jordan, is only available through microfilm from the Montana Historical Society. I was allowed brief access to the court transcripts, exhibits, and other documents from the federal trial of the twelve Freeman defendants in Billings, Montana, *United States of America v. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al*, as they were being packaged to ship to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. A few interviews were taken from participants in the standoff, but for the most part, the Freeman remained tight-lipped and defiant as they served their prison sentences.⁶

Between the scarcity of sources and the fact that during the siege the Freeman numbered less than twenty, perhaps the scant study into their fight with the federal government is not surprising. Seeing the Freeman as an “eccentric eruption” or a failed attempt by a group of crazy individuals to hold off the federal government in an armed standoff, however, ignores how, in the late twentieth century, the growing far-right

“The County Supremacy and Militia Movements: Federalism as an Issue on the Radical Right” (1996), and John L. Smith, *Saints, Sinners, and Sovereign Citizens: The Endless War Over the West’s Public Lands* (2021).

⁵ Steven Shay wrote his dissertation, “‘Here Once the Embattled Farmers Stood’: The Rise and Fall of the Montana Freeman,” to examine the role of the 1980s agricultural crisis on the Freeman and radical right-wing movements in the West. J. Patrick Shannan and Scott McMahon Bowman both self-published their experiences offering support to the Freeman during their standoff. Shay, Shannan, and Bowman’s works will be discussed later in this chapter.

⁶ A few of the Freeman died in prison before their release and others have occasionally been interviewed by reporters on the anniversaries of their standoff.

movement connected with existing fear and anger in many rural communities. This detailed case study of the radicalization of one specific rural community in the 1990s reveals how anger and paranoia can grip a town and set the stage for a federal standoff. Additionally, the Freemen uprising represents a crucial example of the politics of resentment taken to an extreme, visible in the ways the Freemen separated from the United States, formed their own township and judicial powers, refused to acknowledge the validity of any part of the federal government, and took up arms to protect their rights. The Freemen, while extreme in their beliefs and actions, shared anger with many residents across the state and throughout the region. Theirs is the same story of extremism that exists today but now is intensified through social media and far-right media networks. Decades later that anger and resentment has not dissipated, but instead influenced the mainstream Republican party to the point of open rebellion at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.⁷

This chapter follows the radicalization of Jordan, a small town in eastern Montana. It begins with the history of a town, currently with just over 400 residents, in a county the size of Connecticut. Garfield County farmers and ranchers have dealt with hardships and isolation for over a century. In the 1990s, however, many residents felt anxious and paranoid about the state of their community and of the nation. This chapter details their increasing anger and fears as seen through editorials and letters in the town's newspaper. From the Big Open, to wolf reintroduction, to a local ranch family arrested

⁷ Richard White referred to the Freemen and other extremist groups as “eccentric eruptions” in “The Current Weirdness in the West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1997): 7.

for EPA violations, letter writers, as well as the paper's editor, felt under attack from outside forces – environmentalists, academics, anti-agriculturalists, and the federal government. Reading the stories and letters in the paper gives insight into how some developed increasingly more extreme responses to the federal government and decided that seceding from the nation was their only option.

The newspaper, the *Jordan Tribune*, created an echo chamber, much like contemporary social media, which reinforced common complaints found among westerners and amplified them through the conspiracy theories and fears of a tyrannical government found in the editorials and letters. In this maelstrom, the Freemen began offering their racist, anti-government courses in which hundreds learned how to escape their debt through fake money orders and checks and justify their secession from the federal government. The chapter then details the influence of the Freemen on other groups and individuals around the state, the standoff, and the resulting trial. It concludes with a look at the legacy of the Freemen and discusses why they have not been remembered or championed by the far-right, even as their anti-government ideology continues to spread and fester.

Jordan Country

In his classic writing on the American West, Frederick Jackson Turner noted that the US Census determined the frontier had effectively ended by 1890 when settlement density in the West was two or more residents per square mile. Turner argued that a distinct American identity developed as settlers advanced westward and, according to him, created civilization out of primitive nature. In 1930, Isaiah Bowman, a geographer,

challenged Turner's assertion that the frontier had closed by the 1890 census when he wrote of Garfield County and named the area "Jordan Country." Bowman argued that frontier-like conditions still existed for residents of Jordan Country who shared a long-lived pioneering experience with other sparsely populated areas in the West.

The area remained sparsely populated because settlers took their time moving to eastern Montana. Until 1900, the railroads went through the region to larger population areas but rarely stopped in rural communities. Between transportation issues and marginal agricultural prospects, eastern Montana had a late homesteading boom compared to other pioneer communities during nineteenth century western expansion. Most settlers to Montana's plains came between 1900 and 1925.⁸ The town of Jordan fit this model as Jordan's first recorded census data shows forty-six intrepid souls in 1900.⁹ As eastern Montana's population grew, so did Jordan's. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the population of eastern Montana dramatically increased from 93,000 (thirty-eight percent of the state's total) to 314,000 (fifty-seven percent).¹⁰ Jordan's resident population increased four-fold by 1915 when the town boasted 200 residents. But even with the growth in the eastern two-thirds of the state, Garfield County remained relatively empty of white settlers.

⁸ Rex C. Myers, "Homestead on the Range: The Emergence of Community in Eastern Montana, 1900-1925," *Great Plains Quarterly* 10 (Fall 1990): 219.

⁹ Riley Moffat, *Population History of Western U.S. Cities and Towns, 1850-1990*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 132.

¹⁰ Myers, "Homestead on the Range," 219.

The county's peak population came soon after the county was founded in 1919 with a count of over 5,300 residents.¹¹ The influx of settlers helped Jordan emerge as the county seat. The county never achieved that population level again.¹² Four decades after Turner bemoaned the loss of the frontier Bowman wrote of the area in 1930 and noted that the population still had not achieved the population density necessary to move the county out of frontier designation: with a population of 4,242, there was less than one person per square mile.¹³ The land was not under heavy agricultural use: only five percent of the county was under cultivation.¹⁴ Bowman wrote that "frontier living is still the rule" in Garfield County where dealing with fluctuating climatic and economic conditions required continual experimentation from the people who lived there.¹⁵ The instability experienced by residents created "a state of unsettlement" that led to a pioneering lifestyle that continued long after Turner's pronouncement of the end of frontier life.¹⁶ Garfield County was indeed very isolated. When Bowman wrote of the area he noted that there was not a "a mile of telegraph or telephone line or railway in the whole of Garfield County."¹⁷ According to Bowman, many of the challenges experienced

¹¹ John A. Alwin, "Jordan Country - A Golden Anniversary Look," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 71, no. 4 (December 1981): 482.

¹² While Garfield County reached population apex in 1920, Jordan started to increase again in population as the nation entered World War II.

¹³ Isaiah Bowman, "Jordan Country," *American Geographic Society* 21, no. 1 (January 1931): 26. In Garfield County's first census in 1920 the population had reached its apogee at 5368, or just over 1 person per square mile.

¹⁴ Steven E. Shay, "The Rise and Fall of the Montana Freeman," (PhD diss., Washington State University, 2008), 31.

¹⁵ Bowman, "Jordan Country," 22.

¹⁶ Bowman, "Jordan Country," 22.

¹⁷ Bowman, "Jordan Country," 27.

by residents could be addressed through better transportation, agricultural management practices, and state support to improve residents' economic standard of living.

Telephones did eventually come to Garfield County although train service never arrived.¹⁸ Geographer John Alwin reexamined Jordan Country in 1981 on the fiftieth anniversary of Bowman's study and described a place that had moved beyond much of its frontier past, even as the population had fallen to 1,649, or one person for every three miles.¹⁹ Alwin noted that after Bowman's study in 1930, the rest of the decade was particularly difficult for residents: "The dry depression decade of the 1930s alone witnessed a staggering thirty-eight percent drop in county population. Older residents pensively recall this wholesale abandonment of the region...In the thirties they saw the texture of the settlement fabric coarsen when almost fifty percent of the county's farms folded...Most who left never returned."²⁰ Bowman had not foreseen the Great Depression and held optimism for the prospects of Jordan Country: he believed that increases in agricultural production paired with better access to outside markets could improve the economic outlook for residents. Alwin argued that Bowman's positivity did not pan out. While the Dirty Thirties challenged many farming and ranching families in Garfield County, as well as much of the West, the population decline did not end mid-century.²¹ In

¹⁸ Alwin, "Jordan Country," 493. Jordan might not have built a train line, but an airport came in 1940. In addition, highway transportation to Jordan greatly improved with the paving of Montana Highway 200, as well as the addition of over one thousand miles of county roads.

¹⁹ Alwin, "Jordan Country," 482.

²⁰ Alwin, "Jordan Country," 485.

²¹ Moffat, *Population History of Western*, 132. As the county seat, Jordan drew in residents as the county population decreased: almost seven hundred residents in 1950 and then a long population decline for the county and Jordan.

fact, the population has steadily decreased until present day. With a 2020 population of just over twelve hundred residents, Garfield County is still one of the least populated counties in Montana.

As the number of county residents decreased over the fifty-year period between studies, Alwyn noted that farms in the county fell from 1300 to 269, while at the same time, the average farm size increased more than fourteen-fold, from 541 acres to more than 7600 acres per farm.²² Transportation of livestock and crops proved challenging: even with the improved road infrastructure, US Highway 12 and the other two state highways in the county are among the least traveled paved highways in Montana.²³

In his conclusion Alwin noted that while the region had evolved, some of the same characteristics Bowman identified half a century before were still in existence: “Gone is the frontier life with its prevailing uncertainty and experimentation. Sons and daughters of original homesteaders still must contend with the inconsistency of climate and marketplace but have achieved a much greater degree of settled agricultural practices.”²⁴ Alwin concluded with an overview of the oil, gas, and coal development possibilities in the area and hypothesized that future development of mineral resources might effect significant change on Jordan Country. In a marginally optimistic tone, he noted that “the mere presence of the region’s wide-open spaces and thinly populated character may alone be sufficient to attract other developments, perhaps linked to

²² Alwin, “Jordan Country,” 482.

²³ Alwin, “Jordan Country,” 496.

²⁴ Alwin, “Jordan Country,” 497.

national defense or space projects.”²⁵ Interestingly, both Bowman and Alwin visited Garfield County just before economic disasters struck: Bowman wrote his study of the area in 1930 with the worst years of the Great Depression still ahead and Alwin’s revisit to Jordan occurred just before the worst years of the 1980s farm crisis. Alwin, much like Bowman, had hopes for Garfield County’s future, but government projects never came to the area and, just fifteen years after Alwin’s article, anti-government sentiments exploded when the Montana Freemen challenged the federal government in an armed standoff on an isolated ranch outside of Jordan.

Paper Amplifies Local Concerns

In October 2021, long-time Jordan resident Janet Guptill passed away. In her eighty-six years, Guptill lived in communities throughout her home state and worked in grocery stores, bakeries, insurance companies, and the Montana State University Animal Science Department before she and her family moved to Jordan where she started her career in the newspaper business. According to her obituary, Guptill, whose picture shows a stereotypical grandmother with permed dark-grey curls, worked in the 1970s as the editor of the *Jordan Tribune*, started an advertising publication, and in 1991 premiered *Garfield County’s Very Own Local Paper* (also referred to as Jordan’s *Local Paper*).²⁶ Like many other small town newspapers, this paper (later becoming the *Jordan Tribune* in June 1995) included mostly local stories about residents and their lives.²⁷

²⁵ Alwin, “Jordan Country,” 498.

²⁶ Obituary of Janet Guptill, Stevenson and Sons Funeral Homes, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://stevensonfuneralhomes.com/obituaries/janet-guptill-age-87-of-jordan/>.

²⁷ A change to the mailing permit reactivated an old permit held by the *Tribune* and necessitated the name change. By the time of the Freemen standoff, the paper was known

Guptill shared many of the concerns and frustrations of her fellow residents and used her editorial capacities to highlight the challenges to rural residents. Stories, editorials, guest editorials, and letters all reflected rural fears in the 1990s and highlighted a number of adversaries of rural Montanans: environmentalists, the federal government, special interest groups, urban and east coast residents, and academics, to name a few.

In a short span of time the editorials and letters started to take on a darker, more conspiratorial, anti-government tone. Guptill, among others, encouraged a clear “Us versus Them” mentality, railing against those she saw oppressing area residents. Many of those highlighted were popular scapegoats of rural resentment, but in the years leading up to the Freeman standoff, the newspaper revealed, and amplified, a level of anxiety and paranoia that many shared. Not everyone in Jordan was a Freeman. In fact, very few were. But those who were harnessed an anger shared by many others. The Freeman of Jordan were not alone in their belief that they and their rural way of life were under attack.

The *Jordan Tribune* circulated in thirteen counties in Eastern Montana. For a town with about five hundred residents, the paper had a surprisingly geographically diverse readership in the 1990s. Letters to the editor came from communities around the state and surrounding region – one prolific letter writer lived in New Mexico. The paper was much like any other small-town paper in that it focused most of its ink on local news – high school sports, town events, letters to the editor – and occasionally included articles

as the *Jordan Tribune* and, in this chapter, the more commonly used title will be used for both iterations of the paper.

of a Montanan or regional scope in its once-weekly publication. In the days before widespread internet usage and social media, former and vacationing residents often wrote in to share their news with others.

In the 1990s environmentalists were an easy target for many rural Montanans. General claims of environmentalists caring more for the flora and fauna of the state over hard-working westerners was a common theme. One editorial decried those who valued the environment over business interests: “If one were to deliberately try and create a means to kill free enterprise (and its wealth and freedom), one could not come up with a better killing machine than the Environmental Party.”²⁸ A three-part story in the paper titled “The Religion of Environmentalism” adopted a more extreme position and warned readers that environmentalists had more insidious plans than just taking jobs. They wanted to take lives as well: “It must be noted that Hitler’s plan of genocide was child’s play compared to what these eco-freaks have in store for us. Hitler only killed millions. Environmentalists want to kill billions.”²⁹ Whether or not environmentalists really wanted to kill hard-working Montanans, the sentiment was clear — environmentalists were the enemy.

The spotted owl controversy in the Pacific Northwest took up quite a bit of space in the paper in the early 1990s. While the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA) passed by Congress listed the northern spotted owl as potentially endangered, the owl was not declared threatened until the summer of 1990. Then in 1991, the US District Court in

²⁸ Janet Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, January 16, 1992.

²⁹ Troy Mader, “The Religion of Environmentalism,” *Local Paper*, October 31, 1991.

Seattle ruled that the federal government had not taken steps to protect the owl and placed a temporary ban on most timber sales in old growth habitat and an eventual forest plan that drastically reduced logging and protected two-thirds of the remaining old-growth forests. This plan removed a billion board feet of timber from loggers.³⁰ While extensive logging did not take place in Jordan, the paper sympathized with the challenges to the timber industry stating, “the spotted owl accomplished its goal it seems if the headlines are true...Regional timber sales off by 49%. According to the Forest Service there was enough timber cut to construct 51,000 homes, but that was 49% less than the year before.”³¹ The paper was not alone in seeing the small owl valued over the economy. Other Montana papers weighed in on the debate between the tiny bird and the jobs lost or compromised as a result of the reduction. The *Great Falls Tribune*, for example, carried an editorial titled “Spotted Owl Crisis is a Threat to Jobs.”³² For this cause at least, Jordan residents shared similar opinions with other Montanans.

While a general distrust of environmentalists existed, Jordan residents focused on two local debates that they believed proved that their economic, and at times physical, existence mattered less than other animals: wolves and the Big Open. The planned reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park in January 1995 led to impassioned editorials and letters in the paper. Biologists had petitioned for decades to return wolves to the Yellowstone-Idaho ecosystem to balance elk herd populations and

³⁰ “Spotted Owl Became Symbol in the 1990s,” *Seattle Times*, April 27, 2007, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/spotted-owl-became-symbol-in-1990s-controversy/>.

³¹ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, December 2, 1994.

³² “Spotted Owl Crisis is a Threat to Jobs,” *Great Falls Tribune*, April 13, 1990.

the idea was generally well-received by the public. The *Billings Gazette* reported that a poll of more than thirty-five thousand Park visitors showed overwhelming support for the recovery plan: ninety-seven percent of those polled supported returning endangered grey wolves to the area.³³ Polls conducted nationally also revealed a majority of Americans supported reintroduction.³⁴ Even a study done on local responses to wolves and wolf reintroduction reported that many residents in Idaho (fifty-six percent) and Montana (forty-four percent) favored the plan.³⁵

General support for wolf reintroduction belied the fierce opposition from agriculturalists and other groups. In Jordan, the support of wolves was not only seen as ill-considered but also proof that rural life was under attack. Railing against wolf reintroduction became a regular refrain in the editorials, often equating supporters with the wolves themselves: “These environmentalist freaks are predators of the Western State as surely as the wolves will be on the livestock industry if they are re-introduced into Yellowstone Park.”³⁶ Another editorial described wolf reintroduction as a component of the downfall of America and stated, “Basking in the glamour and the glory with projects like ‘wolf’, our nation is headed on a downhill slide, economically, culturally, and

³³ Michael Milstein, “Wolf Recovery Plan Wins in a ‘Landslide,’” *Billings Gazette*, November 5, 1992.

³⁴ “Wolves in Yellowstone Next Year?” *Great Falls Tribune*, July 15, 1993.

³⁵ Alistair J. Bath and Collette Phillips, “Statewide Surveys of Montana and Idaho Resident Attitudes Toward Wolf Reintroduction in Yellowstone National Park,” September 1990, 35.

³⁶ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, March 28, 1991.

morally because at this point, it appears we have just turned the corner of making animal life more valuable than human. Just a little bait for thought!”³⁷

As the date of wolf reintroduction neared, the responses in the Jordan paper bordered on hysteria warning “predator lovers” that they would die a slow painful death once wolves “start eating on your internals.”³⁸ The letter writer continued, “don’t feel terrified because you will be having everything going you [sic] way. You will be balancing the eco system with PREDATORS.”³⁹ Another letter recommended installing a display at the entrance of the park showing the savagery of wolves on animals or “a good picture of the remains of a lost hiker or child.”⁴⁰ For Guptill and others opposed to wolves, the more than two hundred miles between Jordan and the borders of Yellowstone National Park meant little when wolves roamed the region. Wolf dissenters also had support in the Montana legislature. One editorial praised a Montana representative for introducing a bill to reintroduce wolves into Central Park in New York City and other sites on the east coast.⁴¹ The fact that most Americans supported reintroduction only reinforced the idea that the interests of Montana agriculturalists could only be defended by those who lived and worked there.

Another local topic, the Big Open, provoked even more vitriol from residents than wolf reintroduction, inspiring long screeds from letter writers and editorials. Many Jordanites often conflated the Big Open with another similar idea called the Buffalo

³⁷ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, March 31, 1995.

³⁸ John Trumbo, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, April 1, 1993.

³⁹ Trumbo, “Letters to the Editor,” April 1, 1993.

⁴⁰ Robert O. Burnes, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, February 10, 1995.

⁴¹ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, January 20, 1995.

Commons although technically they were two different plans. Frank and Deborah Popper, researchers from Rutgers University, developed the Buffalo Commons idea in 1987 to address the environmental and demographic crises in ten Great Plains states. The Poppers argued that these states were depopulating thanks to “the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history” – the settlement of and agriculture in the arid prairie states.⁴² The short article noted that the forecast for the climate and environment in these areas was grim, and depopulation would occur as “the small towns in the surrounding countryside will empty, wither, and die.”⁴³

The Poppers believed that only the federal government could prevent the Plains from turning into a wasteland – by deprivitizing the land and creating “the world’s largest historic preservation project, the ultimate national park.”⁴⁴ While the couple warned that the residents would, not surprisingly, “feel aggrieved and impoverished, penalized for staying too long in a place they loved and pursuing occupations the nation supposedly respected but evidently did not,” and recommended that the government needed to plan for “compassionate treatment for the Plains’ refugees,” one can imagine that rural residents of the future Buffalo Commons did not appreciate the Poppers’ concerns.⁴⁵ Many, in fact, might have taken issue with the Popper’s suggestion that rather than buying the land from farmers and ranchers at full market price, the government should wait until farmers and ranchers abandoned the land and purchase it at a discounted price.

⁴² Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust,” *Planning* 53, no. 12 (December 1987): 12.

⁴³ Popper and Popper, “The Great Plains,” 16.

⁴⁴ Popper and Popper, “The Great Plains,” 17.

⁴⁵ Popper and Popper, “The Great Plains,” 17-18.

The Commons attracted a number of supporters, and the Poppers gave public talks to test drive their proposal. While the Commons concept was not widely implemented, a locally based similar proposal raised interest and concerns.⁴⁶

Montana's Big Open shared goals with the Buffalo Commons on a more modest scale. Headquartered in Missoula, the fifteen thousand square mile project proposal began taking shape in 1986. It proposed returning parts of ten counties in east-central Montana to a prairie ecosystem reminiscent of the area in the mid-nineteenth century. Garfield County and Jordan were located in the dead center of the proposed prairie ecosystem. Supporters of the Big Open proposal saw it as a way to preserve the land and its small and geographically scattered population, while addressing many of the agricultural problems in Montana.⁴⁷ Guptill and other residents viewed the idea with hostility and derision. Their responses were not surprising since one article detailing the benefits of the Big Open heralded the opportunity to set the project around Jordan because "[h]uman presence and infrastructure are not impediments to restoration since no industrial sites, missile silos, major cult communities, major mineral deposits, or large population centers exist in the region."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Popper and Popper, "The Great Plains," 17. The Poppers noted that a number of proposals to restore the Plains to their "pre-white" conditions were being considered, including one to have the Forest Service pay farmers and ranchers to not cultivate their land, expanding national grassland reserves, and the Big Open.

⁴⁷ Patrick Dawson, "'Big Open' Proposal Arouses Strong Emotion and Hostility in Montana," *High Country News* 19, no. 21 (November 9, 1987): 14.

⁴⁸ Bob Scott, "The Big Open," *Restoration and Management Notes* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1992): 51.

Descriptions of their community as the Big Empty did not go over well with many, and arguments that the area barely supported three thousand residents (down from over ten thousand in the agricultural boom of the early 1900s), fell on deaf, even hostile, ears in Jordan.⁴⁹ Guptill encouraged residents to write their elected officials, “[o]therwise you may be writing letters to the Congressmen from your new home where the Government says you shall live or where the Big Open/Buffalo Commons people have driven you.”⁵⁰ As one letter writer sneered, “[s]eems the ‘Earth First’ fanatics would like to see public lands ‘Cattle Free by ’93.’ How’s about we change that to say, ‘Environmentalist Free by ’92.’ I would have made it rhyme, but who can tell what damage the environmental groups could cause in a year’s time?”⁵¹

Area residents roundly criticized a planned trip by Big Open organizers to explain the proposal. A meeting in nearby Lewistown, scheduled for the end of February 1992 and featuring the Poppers as headlining speakers, was canceled at the last minute due to threats of disruption and violence against the speakers.⁵² The meeting’s goals had been to bring together “ranchers, ecologists, wildlife researchers, authors and local residents to discuss the future of the Northern Plains.”⁵³ This collegial gathering never happened.

Guptill, listed in the *Great Falls Tribune* as the spokeswoman for the opposition, claimed

⁴⁹ Scott, “The Big Open,” 51-52. Bob Scott of the Institute of the Rockies in Missoula, Montana, developed the idea for the Big Open. Scott’s approach was unique because he recommended that the farmers and ranchers keep their land but treat it as free range. In addition, he believed that the preserve would bring in 1000 new jobs to the area in the recreation, hunting, and service industries and help repopulate some of the region.

⁵⁰ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, Jan 9, 1992.

⁵¹ Clay Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, April 25, 1991.

⁵² “Threats Cancel Big Open Conference,” *Local Paper*, March 5, 1992.

⁵³ Jill Sundry, “‘Big Open’ in Big Trouble,” *Billings Gazette*, March 1, 1992.

that although no one in Jordan had made threats against the Poppers, “people in the region feel threatened” by the Big Open.⁵⁴ While peaceful intentions may have been true for the Lewistown meeting, a Big Open informational meeting in Brusett, west of Jordan, in 1987 had descended into a “shouting match” and “[O]utside the Brusett meeting hall that night, windows were broken on the only car with out of the county license plates.”⁵⁵

Although the Lewistown conference was canceled, the *Great Falls Tribune* reported that over two hundred residents still met in Jordan to voice their opposition.⁵⁶ Opponents noted that farms and ranches in the county were, on average, three times larger than the average Montana farms and Garfield County farmers and ranchers had a net return on cash higher than other farms in the state with a higher value of assets as well, making the average value per farm \$652,000 in the county.⁵⁷ These statistics, they felt, proved the economic future of the county was not as dire as the Big Open proponents professed.⁵⁸ Soon after the meeting Guptill penned a fanciful editorial about how the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* might describe the region in the near future:

Archeologists have proven that the homo sapiens that occupied that territory in perhaps the twentieth century were capable of weathering the severe storms, the unswerving droughts and low prices for their products. However, history indicates that the political pressures from eastern United States, now known as the ‘Washington Commune’, for more wilderness, wildlife refuges, water fowl [sic] preserves, and amphibian retreats caused these inhabitants to move to the concrete jungles of the nations [sic] cities.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Carrie Mantooh, “Fear of Disruptions Derails Weekend Big Open Session,” *Great Falls Tribune*, February 28, 1992.

⁵⁵ Dawson, “‘Big Open’ Proposal,” 15.

⁵⁶ Mantooh, “Fear of Disruptions.”

⁵⁷ Sundry, “Big Trouble.”

⁵⁸ Sundry, “Big Trouble.”

⁵⁹ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 2, 1992.

The editorial concluded with a bleak pronouncement that those who remained behind were forcibly removed or killed by the government.

Within two years, the editor had tempered her grim attitude when the Poppers released a new research paper “saying that much of what they predicted is already happening, though not as severely as they first thought.”⁶⁰ According to the *Jordan Tribune*, the new study was “not a decline scenario, but [the Poppers] insist that in a generation, ‘large parts of the rural plains will be far emptier, more frontier-like than today.’”⁶¹ While the Big Open never achieved its goal in Garfield County, projects like it and the Buffalo Commons convinced many in the area that outsiders, especially those from the East Coast, did not have their best interests at heart.⁶²

⁶⁰ Guptill was referencing Popper and Popper, “Great Plains.” In their article, the Poppers reiterate that the Buffalo Commons was never a land-use plan but rather a metaphor for rethinking the Great Plains. In addition, the couple pushed back against critics who argued that they advocated for forced depopulation and deprivatization of farms and ranches in the region, stating that proposals like the Commons would not necessarily depopulate the region but rather redistribute the population for better use of the land, increased biodiversity, and economic improvement.

⁶¹ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, September 23, 1994.

⁶² White, “The Current Weirdness in the West,” 13. White compares Republican efforts to privatize the West with misguided plans like the Big Open: “Just as there is an ahistorical strain in conservative Republicanism willing to place full faith in the market, so there is an ahistorical fundamentalist strain in environmentalism that imagines a self-regulating nature, fully independent of humans, that should be shielded from use.” While neither the Big Open nor Buffalo Commons came to Jordan, in 1999 the World Wildlife Fund initiated a conservation effort north of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge north of Jordan. The American Prairie Reserve (APR), founded in 2001, is an independent Montana non-profit with the goal to purchase and hold title to private lands to create “a vast mosaic of existing public lands so that the region is managed thoughtfully and collaboratively with state and federal agencies for wildlife conservation and public access.” “Our Story,” American Prairie, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.americanprairie.org/our-story>. While less ambitious than the Big Open goal of 15,000 square miles of preserved land, APR biologists have determined that 5,000 square miles (about 3.2 million acres) was large enough to create a fully functioning

Guptill's initial animosity towards the Rutgers University-based Poppers was not surprising considering that the couple represented three popular targets of rural residents: academics, Easterners, and urbanites. Guptill and other residents expressed frustration with these groups' perceived influence over area residents and other rural people. The editor often disparaged those who she felt did not possess rural characteristics. In one editorial she wrote:

All too often by the city folks [sic] standards, farmers and ranchers are looked upon as rather second class [sic] citizens. Somebody to be tolerated, somebody to be jealous of because they drive a 4-wheel [sic] drive, somebody that surely has an easier life, somebody that can come and go as they wish, somebody who gets tax breaks, somebody who is better off financially, somebody who takes advantage of public lands, somebody who gets all the advantages.⁶³

One letter writer stated the same belief more succinctly: "Why is it people from the east and the big cities want so bad to preserve the west, especially Montana, in the state it was in when Lewis and Clark came here?"⁶⁴

The terms "Easterner" and "urbanite" were handily applied to a variety of peoples who did not necessarily fit the scope of those characterizations. For example, Guptill

ecosystem with migration corridors and all native wildlife. Since 2004, the private lands purchased by the APR, along with leased federal and state lands, make up about 450,000 acres of APR land bordering the 1.1 million acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and 375,000 acres of BLM public land in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. "Assembling the Land," *American Prairie*, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://www.americanprairie.org/assembling-the-land>. Considering that one article on the APR noted that ranchers "for the most part, despise the American Prairie Reserve" one can imagine how Jordan residents feel about another prairie ecosystem project on the northern border of Garfield County. Jake Bullinger, "Montana's Grand Prairie Experiment," *Montana Free Press*, February 21, 2020, <https://us19.campaign-archive.com/?u=9016264b73b145c7baa1e9df9&id=777b9e64d5>.

⁶³ Guptill, "Editorial," *Local Paper*, March 24, 1995.

⁶⁴ Leonard Farnsworth, "Letters to the Editor," *Local Paper*, February 20, 1992.

often bashed the western side of the state in her editorials as a place that benefited from the largesse from Eastern Montana's resource-extractive industry without the appropriate appreciation for the lives of those workers in eastern Montana:

As you well know, Eastern Montana doesn't really mean much to Western Montana, and all the addresses for the Montana Magazine start at Bozeman or further west. No[,] Eastern Montana doesn't mean much to western [sic] Montana, only when they want our tax dollars to maintain the larger cities [sic] schools...All of Montana has enjoyed the income that came from the oil booms. All of Montana enjoyed the jobs that boom made. All of Montana enjoys the abundant crops of small grains coming from this area.⁶⁵

For Guptill and many of her readers, the terms Eastern and urban worked for a variety of offenders, regardless of whether they came from Western Montana or New Jersey. When an editor from the Butte Montana Standard condescendingly dismissed Jordan residents' concerns about the Big Open by telling them, "Relax a little, flatlanders," Guptill had a pointed response.⁶⁶ She observed that hard working eastern Montanans supported the academic institutions most often found in the more populous western region of the state: "The editor should sit up and take notice because while he's adding his uninformed information and at the same time making fun of his country cousins, the cousins by a fluke in Montana law are sending money through their tax dollars to help finance the school system of Butte."⁶⁷

For a few years, Guptill wrote frequent and alarmist editorials claiming that America was under attack from forces wanting to destroy everything that made the country great. In her opinion, these elements needed to be contained, although she often

⁶⁵ Guptill, "Editorial," *Local Paper*, October 1, 1992.

⁶⁶ "Editorial: Buffalo Dance," *Montana Standard*, March 3, 1992.

⁶⁷ Guptill, "Editorial," *Jordan Local Paper*, March 12, 1992.

stopped just short of calls to violence. After the World Trade Center attack in 1993, she argued that special interest groups, such as animal rights and pro-choice groups, “have been actively pushing their ideology sometimes with force.”⁶⁸ Guptill conceded that these groups’ actions did not meet the definition of terrorism but were “along those lines.”⁶⁹ As she concluded her rant, Guptill mused that the line between advocacy and terrorism was blurry and stated, “Maybe, just maybe, we can learn a lesson from the terrorists in that it doesn’t take great numbers to make a difference. We can conduct our own campaign to regain control...Remember the saying: The price of freedom is eternal vigilance! And to add another slightly adjusted cliché, ‘It just may begin at home.’”⁷⁰

Others adopted a similar refrain and advocated for barely restrained violence. A Memorial Day’s speech given in Forsyth, Montana, by local attorney John Forsythe, was printed in full in the *Jordan paper*. Not surprisingly, for a speech given on Memorial Day, it invoked America’s soldiers who risked their lives fighting for freedom, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. The speech also made clear what soldiers were not fighting for: “He didn’t fight for racial norming, busing, affirmative action, reverse discrimination or racial quotas, the esoteric ideas of our leaders.”⁷¹ For the author, these “esoteric ideas” were as dangerous to America and democracy as the Nazis had been in World War II. The speech concluded by encouraging the listener to remember who were the true enemies of America: “We need to fight the enemy within with the same high principles

⁶⁸ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Jordan Local Paper*, March 4, 1993.

⁶⁹ Guptill, “Editorial,” March 4, 1993.

⁷⁰ Guptill, “Editorial,” March 4, 1993.

⁷¹ John S. Forsythe, “Guest Editorial,” *Local Paper*, June 17, 1993.

that he [the soldier] fought the enemy abroad...He fought exploitation, oppression, government control. He fought for concepts of duty, honor, country, family, justice and freedom. I believe we can still learn from this example.”⁷² In her editorials and guest editorials, Guptill chose to highlight concerns that the America that she and others loved was under attack and needed to be defended from forces weakening the strength of the country.

While Guptill had a wide range of anti-agriculturalists on her list of enemies, one remained a constant target for her and many of her readers: the federal government. The government inspired many to write letters to the editor and guest editorials that often painted the government as prioritizing special interest groups over rural residents in Montana. A guest editorial written by Guptill’s son, Scott, stated “I thought (and still think) that government was for providing basic essential services...defense, and a basic education...If a project or program is not essential for a majority of us, we shouldn’t expect government provide it, nor the taxpayer to fund it.”⁷³ A new feature in the paper titled “You Missed It” had no author credit, but seemed to be written by the editor, and referenced the “BBLs” – Bratty Boomer Liberals who were trying to change Western values “through manipulating an unsuspecting education system, through museums of history, through movies and music videos, and through the Big Hand of government.”⁷⁴ Guptill contrasted these upper-class elites with another group of Americans:

the ones who are fed up with the ‘progress’ of the last twenty years, the ones who refuse to risk their children’s future on some egghead Global Peace

⁷² Forsythe, “Guest Editorial.”

⁷³ Scott Guptill, “Editorial,” *Jordan Local Paper*, April 25, 1991.

⁷⁴ “You Missed It,” *Jordan Local Paper*, December 30, 1994.

Experiment...they're suffering from a serious case of Founding Fathers Fever. These Americans are finally fighting back. You can almost hear the American Revolution drums in the background. It's a beautiful sound...Americans are already, with Righteous Indignation, taking back their schools, their museums, their government and their lives. Never again will we be so lax about protecting our country. Our kids deserve the same America we grew up in and we're going to give it to them.⁷⁵

This idea that the culture wars undermined rural family values was expressed in another editorial that referenced "thought controllers" in the media who were trying to inculcate the minds of America's youth.⁷⁶

The "big hand of government" threatened the security of Jordan's residents even more than the Left's cultural tactics. Residents warned of the federal government's socialist- and communist-leanings. One former resident living in Helena cautioned that the adoption of the metric system in the US was a slippery slope that would lead to the downfall of America:

In 1988 the President signed a bill that justified metric tyranny over the people by saying U.S. goods would be more competitive overseas using the metric system. The simple truth is that the use of the metric system fits into the plans for the new World Order and the One World Government. Road signs will be unintelligible to the average American. For example, the highway sign coming up the Yellowstone Hill will read, "136 Km to Jordan."⁷⁷

Fears of One Government and the UN were repeated in editorials and letters throughout the early 1990s. Katherine Bunch, a frequent letter writer, expressed her fears saying, "There is no provision in our Constitution for we the people of this country to be deeded over to the control of the U.N. Yet all three branches of our government are working

⁷⁵ "You Missed It."

⁷⁶ Janet Guptill, "Editorial," *Jordan Local Paper*, December 16, 1993.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Huston, "Letters to the Editor," *Jordan Local Paper*, February 11, 1993.

toward that...They are our invisible government. Now they think we are becoming sufficiently brainwashed to accept a one world government. Are we? Do we wish freedom or tyranny?"⁷⁸ Another writer from Bozeman expressed similar concerns and urged citizens to recognize that the federal government and United Nation Troops will not protect them when emergencies or disasters threatened.⁷⁹

The refrain of the government quashing freedom-loving patriots reverberated around the state. One writer in Great Falls asked readers what they would do to defend themselves and their children. Would you inform yourself and prepare to fight, asked the writer, or would you remain uniformed and, "take part in a bloody revolution where mill[ion]s of Americans would undoubtedly be killed by United Nations troops called in to quell so-called extremist, fundamentalist, hate groups; or do nothing and give up your freedoms of your children and grandchildren to a one-world government like a docile sheep going to the slaughter?"⁸⁰

Surprisingly, little was initially written in the Jordan paper about the Waco and Ruby Ridge sieges until a local event ignited passions. In March 1993, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) agents performed a raid on an elderly couple who owned a ranch outside of Jordan. The Bergers were accused of poisoning eagles — a violation of the Endangered Species Act. The federal raid on the ranch coalesced with fears and anger inspired by Waco and Ruby Ridge and provoked impassioned and angry letters and editorials in the paper. The furor stemmed from the

⁷⁸ Katherine Bunch, "Letters to the Editor," *Jordan Local Paper*, September 9, 1993.

⁷⁹ Kamala Webb, "Letters to the Editor," *Jordan Local Paper*, November 11, 1994.

⁸⁰ Helen Arthur, "Letter to the Editor," *Great Falls Tribune*, April 8, 1994.

federal government targeting a frail elderly couple, but also from the opinion that the feds had overstepped their authority by descending on the ranch without telling the Garfield County sheriff of their plans.⁸¹

Guptill quickly responded to the raid with an inflammatory editorial titled “Are We Involved in the New World Order?”⁸² Another editorial railed against the federal government’s “gestapo tactics” that trampled civil rights and urged readers to see this incident as tyrannical governmental overreach: “The re-directed show of government power towards its own people is no less becoming the wars our men and women have fought since World War II. It may not require a uniform to fight. It may not even look like patriotism, but it is a fight. The winning of that battle means our survival as a nation, as we continue our quest for freedom.”⁸³ One letter disparaged the “gestapo tactics” of the government over “our rights” and those of the elderly ranchers. This letter by soon-to-be Freeman Edwin Clark warned that anyone’s rights could be violated and encouraged residents to “focus on one common enemy” – the federal government.⁸⁴

Another letter argued the primacy of a county judge or sheriff over federal officials and noted that,

Free people are not supposed to fear the government - the government is supposed to fear the people. The more corrupt and oppressive the government is, the more the government has to fear. That is what the 2nd Amendment is all about. A well armed body of free men do not easily give up their liberty...If you want to be free, then you should make up your mind that you very well may be forced to take up your weapon and take your stand...To those timid souls that will not stand with us, I say to you, go and

⁸¹ Guptill, “Ranch is Searched for Eagle Evidence,” *Billings Gazette*, March 25, 1993.

⁸² Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 1, 1993.

⁸³ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 22, 1993.

⁸⁴ Edwin Clark, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, April 1, 1993.

cower before your masters, you are not my countrymen. If we lose the battle, then your own children will curse you as the chains of tyrants are placed on them.⁸⁵

Although the Berger raid did not lead to any violent protests, many in Jordan saw the federal action on the local ranch akin to the government's actions at Ruby Ridge and Waco: innocent civilians at the mercy of tyrannical federal agents.

Since its inception in 1990, the *Jordan Tribune* both encouraged and amplified fears of the government and other perceived enemies of residents. Since critiques (at least those printed in the paper) were few and far between, Guptill must have believed that most county, if not state, residents were on her side. Not every reader of the Jordan paper, however, agreed with her editorials and the increasingly fiery letters to the editor. In February 1993, one former resident wrote,

I find some of the content of the Local Paper to be disturbingly similar to the publications of the Far Right (i.e. the Aryan Nations, the Klu Klux Klan, the Christian Identity Movement). The xenophobic paranoia expressed against Western Montanans, Easterners, environmentalists, foreign nations, the government, liberals, Helena, Washington, non-Christians, and other outside groups which permeates editorials, articles, and letters to the editor in the Local Paper makes me uncomfortable.⁸⁶

Guptill responded to the letter, somewhat dismissively, saying, "My question to you is: Do you have answers for a better economy, for more jobs, for a society that is not wracked by immorality and a government that is in control of its finances?...As editorials are written only to make people think, I appreciate your views, but my question is still: As a Nation, how did we get to this point and where are we going?"⁸⁷

⁸⁵ LC Roberts, "Letters to the Editor," *Local Paper*, April 15, 1993.

⁸⁶ Vern Fogle, "Letters to the Editor," *Local Paper*, February 18, 1993.

⁸⁷ Editor, "Letter response," *Local Paper*, February 18, 1993.

Those willing to criticize the paper, however, were in the minority. More commonly the paper printed supportive comments. One reader from Idaho stated, “Your editorials have been just great. We appreciate the fact you are really getting in there where a lot of people are afraid to tread or else they aren’t aware.”⁸⁸ Another writer thanked Guptill for her editorials saying, “It’s great to see that the people of your community are willing to let it be known how they feel about what is happening to this country and that they are not afraid to become involved. Starting with your editorials which give the people confidence, to know you have the same views as they do and that you will print the truth even if it isn’t agreeable with some groups.”⁸⁹ Whether or not others disagreed with the paper’s stance and chose not to write in cannot be known. It is clear, however, by the letters and guest editorials, that the paper represented the views of many in the area and across the state.

Guptill not only provided a platform for fear and anger in the *Tribune’s* editorials and letters, but she also supplied anti-government and conspiracy sources to the public. In response to one letter writer complaining about the government forcing EPA regulations on the state, Guptill encouraged residents to read informational pamphlets and audio tapes about Constitutional Rights and the New World Order available on a bookshelf at the newspaper office.⁹⁰ While she often argued that she was just informing the public of

⁸⁸ Marie E. Stricklan, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, July 27, 1992.

⁸⁹ Bill and Marie Stricklan and Ethel M. Clark, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, July 15, 1993.

⁹⁰ Guptill, “Editor’s Note,” *Local Paper*, December 9, 1993.

the issues, Guptill clearly agreed at some level with the rising frustration developing in the area.

Anger in Jordan

After threats of disruption and violence canceled the Big Open meeting in early 1992, an alternative pro-agriculture meeting took place. The *Jordan Tribune* reported extensively on the meeting and since all the remaining participants had come to fight the Big Open, the speakers were, not surprisingly, very critical of the concept and defensive of the economic, environmental, and social capital found in the Jordan area and surrounding counties in Eastern Montana. Nick Murnion, Garfield County Attorney who would soon become a target of Freemen intimidation tactics, argued that agriculture was the best use of Garfield County and challenged the proponents of the Big Open who touted tourism as an economic savior of the region.⁹¹ The meeting attendees felt that agriculture was still a viable lifestyle and should be celebrated and not disparaged.

Other speakers extolled the quality of education and workers in the area, explained how the Environmental Species Act assisted the federal government in controlling land use, denigrated federal rules and regulations that benefited environmental concepts, and urged residents to organize in order to defeat proposals such as the Big Open. The general feeling of the pro-agriculture conference was that their way of life was not appreciated or understood by those from outside the community, or at least

⁹¹ "Big Open Issue Not Dead," *Local Paper*, March 5, 1992. According to Murnion, Garfield County had an economic value of \$200 million and the focus on agriculture meant that the average farm or ranch in Garfield County was valued at approximately \$652,000 and the average per capita value was \$134,000.

those who did not work in agriculture. One attendee believed that the Big Open was an insult to the memory of his family's homesteading ancestors and another claimed the Big Open was "anti-business and insults the integrity and intelligence of the people of central and eastern Montana."⁹² The newspaper noted that the threat of the Big Open spurred another response from locals – the reorganization of the Garfield County Taxpayers Association in response to the ecological proposal. The Taxpayers Association, originally organized in 1931, had last been active in 1977. Locals brought the group back for the purpose of giving local taxpayers a voice "on such vital issues as land use, zoning, water resources, local government study commission, local impact of coal development and many other issues that may arise in these activist orientated times."⁹³ Reports from the Taxpayers Association continued regularly over the upcoming years.

As the Big Open dropped off the scene, the arrest of the elderly Bergers on ESA violations captivated the attention of residents and spurred many responses.⁹⁴ A month after the raid, Garfield County landowners pledged to close their land to hunting "to bring about less control by federal agencies and to protest what is perceived to be unfair law enforcement practices."⁹⁵ A few months later in June 1993, both the *Great Falls Tribune* and the *Billings Gazette* reported that some Garfield County residents were planning to

⁹² "Big Open Issue Not Dead."

⁹³ "Taxpayers Reorganize," *Local Paper*, March 5, 1992.

⁹⁴ "Jordan Ranches Sue CNN for Violating Privacy Rights," *Great Falls Tribune*, May 3, 1994. The Bergers were eventually acquitted of three charges but convicted of using a pesticide incorrectly in September 1993. The decision did not lower tensions between residents and the federal government.

⁹⁵ Guptill, "Landowners Threaten Closure of 160,000 acres" *Billings Gazette*, April 27, 1993.

protest the federal government by circulating a petition to “abolish the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge,” by hosting a land use seminar, creating a county land use plan, and working with private landowners to close 220,000 acres of land to hunters. Protesters framed their actions as a “symbolic protest” of the “gestapo tactics” of government and environmental groups.⁹⁶ According to the *Gazette*, residents were taking these actions in hopes that the USFWS would take their concerns about grazing allotments in the Refuge and predator control seriously.⁹⁷

The land use seminar, which drew more than two hundred residents from Montana and the Dakotas to Jordan, occurred in early July 1993. Citizens for Freedom was a local group sponsored by the National Federal Lands Conference (NFLC), an organization founded under the umbrella of the Wise Use movement, which focused on county land use plans.⁹⁸ Speakers from around the West rhapsodized about the need for counties to develop plans to limit federal control over public lands. Active between 1988 and 1996, and drawing on lessons learned from the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Wise Use movement focused on the American West and claimed to represent rural commodity producers in their quest to maintain access to, and control over, federal lands by developing land-use plans to restrict the authority of the federal government on public lands.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Jill Sundby, “Government Policies Disturb Landowners,” *Billings Gazette*, June 18, 1993.

⁹⁷ Sundby, “Government Policies.”

⁹⁸ Guptill, “Lands Meeting Set for Jordan,” *Billings Gazette*, July 9, 1993.

⁹⁹ James McCarthy, “First World Political Ecology: Lessons from the Wise Use Movement,” *Environment and Planning A* 34, no. 7 (July 2002): 1282. DOI: 10.1068/a3526. Critics of Wise Use claimed that the movement was a corporate front

Jordan residents enthusiastically joined other western residents in their quest to elevate the county role in local land-use decisions. Even before the NFLC conference in Jordan in the summer of 1993, some residents advocated for county control over local land use decisions. That spring, Guptill wrote an editorial calling for a land-use plan to limit federal power modeled on the one used in Catron County New Mexico.¹⁰⁰ Karen Taylor, a local resident who, along with her husband Clay, eventually embraced the Freemen ideology, attended an NFLC conference in Idaho and wrote up her experiences for a story in the paper.¹⁰¹ Taylor argued to implement the Catron County-style plan in Garfield County, noting that otherwise the federal government could trample the constitutional rights of all residents and not just the Bergers. Taylor noted that the land use plans were legal and enforceable against the federal government, echoing a Wise Use argument: “After we start [a land use plan], the government agencies have to make sure their actions follow our plan and are to the benefit of our county and citizens economic stability, sociality, and fits our customs and culture.”¹⁰² Taylor was so impassioned about

designed to reduce federal regulation over natural resources. Wise Use activists maintained the grass roots foundation of the movement based on rural peoples responding to an intrusive federal government.

¹⁰⁰ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 15, 1993; see chapter one for more detail on Catron County’s land-use plan.

¹⁰¹ Shay, ““Here Once the Embattled Farmers Stood,”” 60. Karen Taylor had a long history of chafing under the federal government. At a 1982 meeting to discuss the issues with Farmers Home Administration loans, Taylor asked the presenter if they could shoot government employees. Fourteen years later Taylor and her husband became visible local adherents of Freemen ideology.

¹⁰² Karen Taylor, “Attends Meeting at Driggs, Idaho: A Special Report: ‘Our County Can Control Itself,’” *Local Paper*, April 15, 1993.

her experiences at the NFLC conference that she also wrote a letter to the paper stating that she was organizing a NFLC conference in Jordan that summer.

Others in the community agreed and soon the County commissioners appointed a committee to develop a county land use plan. Montana Attorney General Joe Mazurek tried to temper their zeal and advised them that although the counties might pass a plan, the federal government was not required to follow it.¹⁰³ Mazurek's response to county land-use plans was echoed around the West as state and federal officials noted that any land-use plans were invalid and therefore unenforceable.

Freemen Sovereignty

Although land-use plans appealed to many residents in Jordan, some began to argue that any governmental oversight, whether federal-, state-, or county-level, was unwelcome. These residents moved beyond elevating county power to resisting all outside forms of government. They adopted the "freemen" rhetoric and ideology, a Sovereign, or Constitutionalist, stance that argued that because the federal government was illegitimate and tyrannical, their only option was radical separation. One common refrain of the freemen was that they were a sovereign entity and not bound by federal and state laws. They called themselves Sovereigns because they did not see themselves as "Fourteenth Amendment citizens' whose rights are granted by the federal government in Washington, D.C...They are 'American nationa-s - sovereigns like the kings of Olde

¹⁰³ "Garfield County Unhappy with Federal Presence," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 28, 1993.

Engla-d - whose rights came straight from God.”¹⁰⁴ To support their anti-government arguments, they used the Bible, legal codes, the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the Magna Carta.¹⁰⁵ They were preparing for a battle to “prove the sovereignty and supremacy of white, male, Christian landowners.”¹⁰⁶ Like many other extremist groups at the time, they believed they were “warriors of God in a battle to the death against lawmakers, homosexuals, Jews, and all minorities.”¹⁰⁷

The Taylors illustrated the abrupt and dramatic transition from advocating that the federal government respect the rights of local agriculturalists to adopting the Freemen ideology. They demonstrated this radicalization process as they embraced increasingly extremist viewpoints as well as demonstrated the kinds of practices and tactics deployed by the Freemen. Both Clay and Karen Taylor had advocated for closing private lands in the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge to hunters to protest government grazing regulations in the summer of 1993. Prolific letters writers to the *Jordan Tribune*, they used increasingly radicalized and inflammatory language after the NFLC conference. In one letter soon after the conference, Clay started his letter with the claim

¹⁰⁴ Leonard Zeskind, “Montana Freemen Trial May Mark End of an Era,” *Intelligence Report*, June 15, 1998, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1998/montana-freemen-trial-may-mark-end-era>. As explained in the previous chapter, the Freemen utilized punctuation additions and omissions as a tactic to declare their sovereignty from the federal government.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Hamby, “‘Beliefs, Fear and Anger’: The Roots of the Freemen Still Entrenched 25 Years Later,” *Billings Gazette*, May 9, 2021, https://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/beliefs-fear-and-anger-the-roots-of-the-freemen-still-entrenched-25-years-later/article_8f9c737c-c901-593c-8bb1-2cae5e59b0d1.html.

¹⁰⁶ Kate Freedlander, “Holy War on the Range: Greed, Violence and Apocalyptic Visions Inside the Freemen of Garfield County,” *Missoula Independent*, April 4, 1996.

¹⁰⁷ Freedlander, “Holy War on the Range.”

“Hitler wrote our Gun Control Act of 1968!”¹⁰⁸ Clay then went on to warn citizens about the government’s intent to hold a second Constitutional Convention with the express goal of taking away the right of Americans to bear arms and concluded, “In order for this to happen, all true American patriots will have to die, and then only our dead will be free.”¹⁰⁹ At this point, Clay also started signing his letters as “An American Patriot, Clay Taylor.”

Clay followed up the next month with a long letter warning of government overreach and stating that the government licenses required to sell firearms, carry concealed weapons, get married, drive a car, and handle some pesticides transferred the public’s right to do things into a privilege granted by the government.¹¹⁰ According to Freemen ideology, in receiving these licenses citizens were relinquishing their god- and country-given rights and instead were subjugating themselves to the government.

This popular Freemen argument was explained in a self-published book titled, *The Montana Freemen: The Untold Story*, by Freemen supporter J. Patrick Shannan after his visit to Jordan in May and June of 1996 during the standoff. Shannan admired the Freemen and found them extraordinarily smart and knowledgeable about the Bible, state and federal constitutions, common law, and the federal banking system, including the Uniform Commercial Code.¹¹¹ He did his best to explain the complex rationale used by the Freemen, taking pains to explain, if never very clearly, why the Freemen abhorred the

¹⁰⁸ Clay Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, August 5, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” April 5, 1993.

¹¹⁰ Clay Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, December 2, 1993.

¹¹¹ J. Patrick Shannan, *The Montana Freemen: The Untold Story* (self-pub., n.d.), 27.

Fourteenth Amendment that, they claimed, conferred citizenship to everyone in the United States only when they accepted government privileges, a transactional exchange trading away rights for privileges. According to Shannan, the Freemen had to declare their sovereignty to regain their Constitutionally protected rights that were bestowed by God, not the government. Accepting any form of government-granted rights “even a simple convenience such as a bank account - the signature form is a contract - or applying for a driver’s license, business license, hunting and fishing license or anything asking for government privilege, was merely the flypaper of the king’s jurisdiction.”¹¹² Freemen, therefore, had to rescind all contracts with state and federal governments and develop their own township in order to deal with the “foreign country” of the United States of America. Many Sovereigns declared citizenship status by announcing their free status through an official announcement, often through the legal notices in the newspaper.¹¹³

By early 1994, the Taylors employed another popular tactic used by Freemen — they started to sign their letters with the address, “Montana Republic,” instead of Jordan. In Sovereign Citizen parlance, the couple argued that federally designated zip codes “took away sovereign rights and gave us a numbered federal zone for the New World Order regions!”¹¹⁴ A few months later both Clay and Karen wrote letters that were

¹¹² Shannan, *The Montana Freemen*, 25.

¹¹³ One such group mentioned earlier was the Constitutionlists in Ravalli County who declared their desire to separate from the U.S. government in the classified pages of the *Ravalli Republic* in the fall of 1993.

¹¹⁴ Karen Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, February 17, 1994. The use of punctuation and other techniques used by Sovereign Citizens/Constitutionalists was discussed in the previous chapter.

published the same day. Clay discussed the fraudulent federal reserve system and signed his letter as an “American Patriot.” In her letter Karen refuted rumors that she was in a “dangerous cult” and said she was not stockpiling weapons or planning to secede from the state and county.¹¹⁵ Karen intimated that she and her family could be targets of the same government that murdered citizens at Waco and argued that the Posse Comitatus was not a cult, but rather something into which all citizens over the age of fifteen could be summoned to serve by the sheriff.

After asserting that she and her family were not seceding she also said she refused to have anything to do with “the United Nations which is ‘the New World Order’ and the Communistic takeover of our free America!” Karen then signed her letter “A True American Patriot, Karen Thomas Taylor” but added “MT USA - MCA 30-1-207 & USS 1-207 ‘without prejudice’ (reservation of my unalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence).”¹¹⁶ Through this signature, Karen was using a popular tactic used by Freemen to denote her status as a sovereign citizen.¹¹⁷ The Taylors were not the only ones to do this; a Lewistown resident complaining about the Montana Human Rights Network categorizations of Constitutionals and its “sadist agenda” to “initiate a Waco or Weaver incident here in Fergus County” signed his name “Jay Brand, Lewistown, Montana, U.S.A. ‘Without

¹¹⁵ Karen Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, November 25, 1993.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, “Letters to the Editor,” November 25, 1993.

¹¹⁷ “The Sovereign Citizen Movement: Common Documentary Identifiers and Examples,” Anti-Defamation League, 2016, 3, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/reports/sovereign-citizen-movement-common-documentary-identifiers-examples>.

Prejudice' UCC 1-207.”¹¹⁸ Sovereign citizens across the nation used these techniques to declare their sovereignty.

Justus Township

Using signatures and rejecting licenses were two ways to separate from the “illegitimate” federal government. But these actions did not go far enough for the Jordan group now calling themselves Freemen.¹¹⁹ According to the Freemen, the US and Montana Constitutions had been “perverted,” requiring them to act as their own government officials.¹²⁰ In revoking all contracts with the federal government, they had become sovereign and were no longer subject to government laws and courts and instead only subject to common law. Once freed from US jurisdiction they could create their own common law courts and justices and negotiate with the foreign entity of the federal government.

In the fall of 1995, the Freemen escalated their anti-government activities by founding their own government on the foreclosed Clark ranch about twenty miles west of Jordan. They created Justus Township and rescinded all connections with the state and

¹¹⁸ Jay Brand, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, January 20, 1994.

¹¹⁹ It is unclear when the term “Freemen” was applied to the residents involved in the Sovereign movement in the Jordan area. In a November 1994 editorial Guptill noted that Vermont adapted its State Constitution to remove all male references. For example, the word “voter” would be used instead of “freeman.” Guptill mused, “Interesting the word ‘freeman’ kept cropping up so frequently. Well in Vermont after the editing process, it shouldn’t crop up there, unless someone is listening to a TV broadcast from Montana, specifically Garfield County.” Presumably, by this date, “Freemen” was a term used in relation to some around Jordan. Others in the nation who shared the Freemen ideology also referred to themselves as Freemen as well as Sovereigns and Constitutionals. Janet Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, November 18, 1994.

¹²⁰ “Garfield County Freeman Gets Maximum Sentence,” *Great Falls Tribune*, March 3, 1995.

federal government. According to one Freeman supporter, Justus Township was a “legal govt [sic] entity with a commission, a court, a justice of the peace and a constable. Having dedicated the Constitutionally required minimum of 640 acres out of their some 9000 acres to the township, the Sovereigns set aside one acre for a school and one acre for a courthouse, and set up a court.”¹²¹ After founding Justus Township, the Freeman created their own courts and named Supreme Court justices and other officers in their court that was ruled with an absolutist view of the Constitution and Biblical law. As the *Billings Gazette* noted, the Freeman group “have opened their own courts, claiming to follow the law based on their interpretations of the Constitution, Magna Carta, and the Bible,” although merging interpretations of these different texts meant that their arguments in court were often convoluted.¹²² In this fashion, the Freeman believed they had invested themselves with a degree of authority rivaling that of local and federal governments, authority based on God’s laws, not man’s.

After founding Justus Township and replacing legitimate governmental institutions with their own structures, the Freeman proceeded to hold court in absentia, render unenforceable judgements, issue liens, and create other phony legal documents to harass or intimidate anyone they saw as an enemy. Freeman issued phony checks around the region and filed liens against public officials, citizens, and journalists, claiming that

¹²¹ Scott McMahan Bowman, *Turning Point: A Personal Account of the ‘Freemen’ Standoff* (self-Pub., Salem, OH: Thumbprint Graphics, 1997), 25. According to FBI documents, the Freeman farm was only 960 acres, but still large enough to form a township.

¹²² Clair Johnson, “5 ‘Freemen’ Convicted by Judge,” *Billings Gazette*, August 2, 1994.

the money was owed to them for offenses against their sovereignty.¹²³ Even though the filings were frivolous, targets of the Freemen often had to hire attorneys to clear the title to their property that took considerable time and money. Since the Freemen believed they were not under the jurisdiction of the federal government or US law, they created their own “common law” courts to issue criminal charges against individuals and government officials. In reality, these courts allowed the Freemen to abuse the system and engage in paper terrorism specifically involving “fraudulent legal documents and filings, as well as the misuse of legitimate documents and filings, in order to intimidate, harass and coerce public officials, law enforcement officers and private citizens.”¹²⁴ These tactics had been used by the Posse Comitatus, and such common law filings continued to be used widely and liberally by the Freemen and other anti-government activists.

Ravalli officials saw a clear link between the Freemen and local Ravalli County agitators stating that documents filed locally were similar to those used by Freemen in central Montana.¹²⁵ The *Billings Gazette* explained that the Freemen “interpret the U.S. Constitution as rendering much of existing government invalid and typically file many documents in the court system citing common law and the Bible as the basis of their

¹²³ Staff, “A Timeline of Events Leading to the Standoff and Trials,” *Billings Gazette*, March 25, 2006.

¹²⁴ “Sovereign Citizen Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/sovereign-citizen-movement>.

¹²⁵ Patricia Sullivan and Greg Lakes, “‘Militia’ Threats Spook Ravalli Officials,” *Missoulian*, March 3, 1995. As of 1997, common law courts functioned in 35 states. Lori Linzer and David Rosenberg, “Vigilante Justice: Militias and ‘Common Law Courts’ Wage War Against the Government,” Anti-Defamation League, 1997, 1, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/adl-report-1997-vigilante-justice.pdf>.

arguments.”¹²⁶ Ann Stanton, the Garfield County Clerk and Recorder, stated that the documents received from Freeman were about a foot and a half high when stacked.¹²⁷ In an early trial of a few of the Freeman, Gregory Mohr, the Justice of the Peace for nearby Custer County, called out the hypocrisy of the Freeman in claiming sovereignty while overloading the court system: “to use a system when it benefits oneself and then, when it doesn’t for whatever reason, assert that there is a parallel system of justice out there that is not written down or codified, is known only to a few and has no definite rules or appeal system is absurd.”¹²⁸ According to the *Gazette*, some judges issued orders to “stop further filings of frivolous common law documents in court and in county offices. Government officials said such filings are intended to clog the system.”¹²⁹

Examples of the documents and common law filings Freeman produced included “True Bills” to send to their enemies as well as “covenant letters” – prewritten confessions listing enemies’ alleged crimes. The Freeman then held trials in the Justus Supreme Court, in absentia, and found defendants guilty and filed liens on their properties.¹³⁰ True Bills could be for any amount: a million or even a billion dollars. One Lutheran minister in nearby Roundup was sent a covenant letter for the crime of refusing to preach that only white people could be Christian.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Clair Johnson, “U.S. Forecloses on Tax Protester-Farmer,” *Billings Gazette*, August 9, 1994.

¹²⁷ Johnson, “5 ‘Freemen’ Convicted.”

¹²⁸ Johnson, “5 ‘Freemen’ Convicted.”

¹²⁹ Clair Johnson, “‘Freemen’ Mail Claims - 56 Times,” *Billings Gazette*, April 27, 1994.

¹³⁰ Freedlander, “Holy War on the Range,” 10.

¹³¹ Freedlander, “Holy War on the Range,” 10.

Government officials were the most common targets of harassment. Freeman filed “legal-looking” documents in all of Montana’s fifty-six counties “that seek \$50 million from Governor Marc Racicot.¹³² In early 1993 they filed a lien against Murnion, the Garfield County Attorney, for \$500 million.¹³³ And when one of the Freeman, Ralph Clark, had his property foreclosed, the Freeman filed civil suit as common-law justices and “asked for the imprisonment, removal from public office and deportation of certain defendants [who had participated in the foreclosure process]. They also requested damages of \$1,244,444,444.”¹³⁴ In declaring this lawsuit frivolous, the US Magistrate Jack Shanstrom noted that the documents did “not appear to be grounded in reality. They are long, rambling and confusing...None of the documents filed by the Plaintiff even come close to proffering a cognizable legal theory or any facts which could support one.”¹³⁵ In his opinion, the suit was designed to “harass or cause the defendants unnecessary delay and expense.”¹³⁶ And filing grievances against one’s enemies in common-law courts became a popular tactic with other sovereign citizens around the nation.¹³⁷ Sovereign citizens sought to replace the legal system with vigilante courts in order to issue judgements in their favor and cause great grief for their targets.

¹³² Johnson, “Freemen’ Mail Claims.”

¹³³ “FBI Standoff with the Montana ‘Freemen’: A Chronology,” Suzanne Cavanagh and David Teasley, 1 May 1996, Box 79, Folder 79/5, MSS 239, Pat Williams Papers Series II, University of Montana Special Collections, Missoula.

¹³⁴ Clair Johnson, “Common-Law Civil Suit Thrown Out,” *Billings Gazette*, April 15, 1994.

¹³⁵ Johnson, “Common-Law Civil Suit.”

¹³⁶ Johnson, “Common-Law Civil Suit.”

¹³⁷ Linzer and Rosenberg, “Vigilante Justice,” 4. Militias also used common law courts as a relatively risk-free way to punish government officials and other enemies.

The Montana Freeman adopted another popular tactic of sovereign citizens in their repudiation of the federal government and assertion that the Federal Reserve Act and the 1933 removal of US currency from the gold standard made US currency worthless and rendered every monetary decision the US government has made since, including lending, taxing, and foreclosures, unlawful.¹³⁸ Their declaration of the illegality of the federal government made it unnecessary to pay back any loans or follow foreclosure proceedings. Because of their insistence that US currency had no value, the Freeman asserted that paper money was invalid and meant they could create new forms of money, most commonly money orders and comptroller's warrants. Employing a tactic they learned from Roy Schwasinger, a Colorado resident, who had been instructing farmers and ranchers how to print and use fraudulent money orders and checks in the belief that American currency was worthless, the Freeman printed and distributed thousands of fake money orders and checks to undermine government agencies and the national banking system.¹³⁹

The Freeman claimed they had found loopholes in the system that they could exploit to benefit financially while simultaneously proving the illegitimacy of the

¹³⁸ Michael W. Babcock, "The 'Freemen' Have Put a Bounty on the Judge and the Sheriff Has Formed a Posse. Tension's High as Things Get Jumpy in Jordan: Government Has No Legitimacy, Believers Contend," *Great Falls Tribune*, March 27, 1994.

¹³⁹ Bill Morlin, "Bogus Checks and Balances Run Amok," *Spokesman-Review*, March 26, 1996. LeRoy Schweitzer, one of the main leaders of the Freeman had attended one of Schwasinger's "We the People" classes in Billings in 1992. For \$300 Schwasinger taught his students that US currency was useless and citizens could "collect their share of \$600 trillion in gold that...had been secretly collected in a covert U.S. military operation." At the time of the standoff Schwasinger was serving a fifteen-year sentence for threatening judges.

government. They embraced creating and using false financial documents and opening bank accounts to deposit fake money orders. They were unsuccessful in some of these attempts: In the summer of 1994 one such fraudulent money order for \$7,777,777.77 was refused by every bank attempted. But other fraudulent checks and money orders were accepted by businesses and even the IRS.¹⁴⁰

The Freemen offered classes on their common-law theories and check schemes. These classes drew interested students from around the country. At least eight hundred people from thirty states came to the remote township to “hear the Freemen’s gospel of ‘constitutionalism,’ apocalypse, and racism, and to learn how to get away with writing fake money-orders and not paying taxes.¹⁴¹ In a letter to the editor in the *Jordan Tribune*, Clay Taylor let readers know in the opening sentence that “THERE IS NO REAL MONEY” and then went on to explain why the current federal monetary system was illegal, encouraging readers to investigate the monetary system for themselves. Clay noted that “If you or I [printed money] it would be counterfeiting,” but the Federal Reserve did it with no repercussions.¹⁴²

Clay and the other Freemen determined that it was, in fact, not illegal for them to create their own money. In their classes, the Freemen taught how to print fake checks and

¹⁴⁰ “FBI Standoff,” 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II. In the trial, *United States of America v. Leroy Schweitzer, et al*, the US Prosecuting Attorney, Jim Seykora, described how the IRS accepted checks from the Freemen for double the amount of their taxes and then requested a refund for the extra amount.

¹⁴¹ Shannan, *The Montana Freemen*, 28. One author sympathetic to the Freemen and their fight against the federal government said the Freemen had claimed over 1800 students had sat in their classrooms over a three-year period and many of the students had taught the same classes in their Home Counties.

¹⁴² Clay Taylor, “Letter to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, March 17, 1994.

write legal and Biblical justifications in vast amounts of documents and engage in paper terrorism in the students' local courts. Each visitor was charged \$100 and left the classes with false financial instruments in hand.¹⁴³ These seminars were particularly attractive to farmers and ranchers, many of whom had gone into bankruptcy in the 1980s because of an overinflated market and high interest rates.¹⁴⁴ As farms foreclosed in the 1990s, the Freeman appealed to desperate farmers and ranchers, among others with financial problems, charging for seminars to learn how to pay off their debt through Schweitzer's fraudulent schemes. His workshops resulted in scams totaling more than \$1.8 million against the government, banks, and private businesses.¹⁴⁵ By the time of the standoff, Freeman-style checks had been issued across the nation. These tactics had been used by the Posse Comitatus, but the Freeman refined and disseminated them through publications and seminars offered around the nation in the 1990s.

Absurd or not, the Freeman's court filings inundated the county courthouses around the state and, in 1994, the Freeman used their common-law courts to embark on a more antagonistic campaign targeting government employees and enemies of Justus Township. In January, more than thirty Freeman briefly took over the courthouse in Garfield County attempting to establish their own government called the "Supreme Court of Garfield County-comitatus."¹⁴⁶ Freeman signed documents appointing Clay Taylor as

¹⁴³ "Federal and State Law Enforcement Announce Arrests of Garfield County Fugitives," *Jordan Tribune*, March 29, 1996.

¹⁴⁴ Hamby, "Beliefs, Fear and Anger."

¹⁴⁵ Lorna Thackeray, "The Freeman Standoff," *Billings Gazette*, March 26, 2006. The Freeman wrote checks totaling \$18 billion dollars. Since most were rejected by banks, the total cashed was about \$1.8 million.

¹⁴⁶ Thackeray, "The Freeman Standoff."

the justice of the peace.¹⁴⁷ The Freemen then offered bounties targeting judges and other law enforcement officials. Garfield County Attorney Nick Murnion and Sheriff Phipps, among others, had million-dollar bounties for their arrests and trials in the Justus court. One of the group threatened the sheriff that he would be “tried, convicted and hung. [The sheriff] asked if they would build a gallows in Jordan. He said he’d just tie a rope to the bridge and throw me over the bridge.”¹⁴⁸ The Freemen were ramping up their violent threats, fraudulent schemes, and acts of paper terrorism. Law enforcement, which had been employing a low-key approach to the Freemen in the hopes of avoiding bloodshed, began responding more forcefully to the Freemen’s antics.

Responses to the Freemen

As the Freemen gained notoriety, many residents became increasingly frustrated with the illegal activities and growing public focus on their small town. Local law enforcement officials were among the first to respond to the Freemen. To combat their increasingly provocative actions, Murnion began charging them with a variety of misdemeanor and felony charges. In March 1994, he filed misdemeanor charges against thirteen Freemen for impersonating public officials in their common law courts filings. One Freemen was charged with a kidnapping felony for posting bounties against Murnion, the Sheriff, and other officials.¹⁴⁹ In another case Murnion brought a felony charge of criminal syndicalism, among other charges, against one of the Freemen

¹⁴⁷ “‘Freeman’ Stanton Charged with Three Felonies,” *Great Falls Tribune*, October 21, 1994.

¹⁴⁸ “‘Freemen’ Offer Reward: Officials Fear Vigilante Threats,” *Billings Gazette*, March 19, 1994.

¹⁴⁹ “FBI Standoff,” 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

leaders.¹⁵⁰ Murnion stressed that he hoped severe charges would caution other Freemen that they would be held responsible for their actions.¹⁵¹

Garfield County Sheriff Charles Phipps held a meeting to update the local citizens' posse after four Freemen prevented the sheriff and undersheriff from repossessing a tractor and combine from a fellow Freeman's farm. Fifty out of the posse's eighty-four members attended the informational meeting where Garfield County Attorney Nick Murnion stated that residents were frustrated with the Freemen's activity and the public was "100 percent supportive of law enforcement."¹⁵² As one reporter noted, the escalating confrontations between anti-government activists and law enforcement were challenging "Montana's traditional tolerance of rugged individualism."¹⁵³ Law enforcement officers from around the state rallied to support Phipps and expressed concern about the rise of anti-government activists in central Montana.¹⁵⁴ While posse attendance was strong, the members had few enforcement

¹⁵⁰ According to Montana Code Annotated 1997 45-8-105, criminal syndicalism is the "advocacy of crime, malicious damage or injury to property, violence, or other unlawful methods of terrorism as a means to accomplish industrial or political ends. By spring 1995, sixteen Freemen had been charged with criminal syndicalism, but only William Stanton was convicted of the charge along with writing a bad check for \$25,000 and given the maximum sentence - ten years in prison - even though he had no previous criminal record. See Chapters One and Four for more on the historical context of criminal syndicalism in the state of Montana.

¹⁵¹ "Sentence Received," *Local Paper*, March 10, 1995.

¹⁵² "Sheriff Calls Out Posse Following Confrontation," *Missoulian*, April 19, 1995.

¹⁵³ David Foster, "Militia Groups Flourish; Confrontations Spread," *Billings Gazette*, March 25, 1995.

¹⁵⁴ Clair Johnson, "Law Officers Rally Around Sheriff," *Billings Gazette*, March 29, 1994.

powers; the sheriff noted they were not authorized to carry weapons or act as police officers.¹⁵⁵

As anti-government activists targeted even local citizens, Guptill realized that advocating for the dissatisfied in her community had repercussions. In the spring of 1994, three women involved with the incipient Jordan Freeman issued “writs of protection” against the sheriff and others in Garfield County.¹⁵⁶ The writs stated that they lived in fear for their lives along with those of “freemen character” in the county who were targets of a “full blown criminal conspiracy.”¹⁵⁷ They included Guptill as one of those of “freemen character,” “who has unfailingly published our truths in certain documents, and other pleadings in the local newspaper.”¹⁵⁸ Apparently outright association with the burgeoning Freeman movement was too much for Guptill who denied any association with the Freeman and stated that she merely listened to their side of the story.¹⁵⁹

Guptill’s subsequent editorial on the subject defended the newspaper’s prior stance and stated that after the writs had been issued, she had contemplated rejecting all articles, letters, advertisements, and legal advertisements written by or about the Freeman from the pages of the paper. Guptill went on to say that she did not want to appear intimidated by either the Freeman or their opponents and would leave all freemen-related news to “the Big Boys” of area newspapers who reveled in sensationalism and topical

¹⁵⁵ “Sheriff Calls Out Posse.”

¹⁵⁶ Clair Johnson, “Publisher ‘Shocked’ by Writs,” *Billings Gazette*, March 30, 1994.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, “Publisher ‘Shocked.’”

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, “Publisher ‘Shocked.’”

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, “Publisher ‘Shocked.’”

stories.¹⁶⁰ Guptill continued explaining that newspapers were responsible for telling both sides of the story, which is why she published editorials, letters to the editor, and articles with a specific point of view. Guptill often employed this tactic, finishing some of her most inflammatory editorials with the comment that she was simply encouraging her readers to think through issues.

While Guptill attempted to portray the goal of her editorials as presenting a fair and balanced view, a letter to the editor addressed her perceived support of the Freeman. The writer, a former Jordan resident, commented, “The simple fact is, that the editorial powers of the Local Paper did not once imply that they were anything other than supportive of the ‘Freemen.’”¹⁶¹ The letter, written by the sister-in-law of Nick Murnion, the embattled County Attorney targeted by Freeman with liens and bounty posters, continued, “Some of us perceive the ‘Freemen’ as radical extremists who, because they didn’t get their way with the government have decided that it is invalid, and intend to make their own brand of government...the Editor of the Local Paper should, at the very least, not encourage the behavior of the ‘Freemen’ movement in Garfield County and those who encouraged them in the first place.”¹⁶²

Another Jordan resident openly challenged the Freeman in his letter to the editor when he described the unrest the Freeman were causing in the community “because of their affidavits of Removal from office, commanding people to appear in their ‘Freemen’

¹⁶⁰ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 7, 1994.

¹⁶¹ Dianna G. Murnion, “Letter to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, April 7, 1994.

¹⁶² Murnion, “Letter to the Editor.”

courts, offering as punishment, contempt of court charges, death, jail, etc.”¹⁶³ Jordan resident Bill Sherer noted that the Freeman made up approximately twelve of the nine hundred and twelve registered voters in the county and complained about their use and abuse of county offices.¹⁶⁴ He also named the Freeman and asked them to elucidate their goals and demonstrate how they were helping the rest of Garfield County’s residents.¹⁶⁵ Sherer received responses from two of the Freeman but the newspaper noted that, due to the length and content of the letters, the paper would not print them. These omissions were perhaps due to the earlier criticisms that the paper was the instrument of the Freeman, but the paper did note that residents could stop by the *Tribune*’s office to see the letters.¹⁶⁶

In another move to distance the paper from the Freeman, who had been sending in “long and frequent letters on the same subject,” Guptill changed the letter writing policy. Now letter writers could only send in two letters a month and they could not be on the same subject.¹⁶⁷ Whether due to the Freeman writs that included Guptill’s name, the letters condemning her support of the Freeman, or perhaps her recognition that things had gotten out of hand, in the year preceding the standoff the Freeman content in the *Jordan Tribune* for the most part disappeared.

After the Oklahoma City bombing, many began to view the Freeman in a new light – no longer kooks, they represented an armed threat against the government. Guptill

¹⁶³ Bill Sherer, “Letters to the Editor,” *Local Paper*, May 20, 1994.

¹⁶⁴ Sherer, “Letters to the Editor.”

¹⁶⁵ Sherer, “Letters to the Editor.”

¹⁶⁶ “Freemen Send Letters,” *Local Paper*, June 10, 1994.

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, “Publisher ‘Shocked.’”

wrote that the act was “unthinkable” and violence was not the answer to government tyranny even in cases of government overreach such as the Berger raid, Waco, and Ruby Ridge. While decrying violent acts against the government, she also tried to explain how the government’s actions caused an understandable level of frustration that could lead some to contemplate more extreme responses:

in this county we have been wondering about the so called ‘freemen’ movement because we happen to have some of those people with strong beliefs living here. People whom we’ve known, who are or have been friends, neighbors, or relatives. We have wondered about what they really believe. Some seemed to be only trying to get out of or over some financial problems. Some seemed to feel that gun control was upon all of us. Some seemed to think that the country’s financial system was about to run amuck because the nation was moved off of the gold standards some years ago. Some seemed to feel that there were too many rules and regulations. Some seemed somewhat radical in their beliefs.¹⁶⁸

Guptill then summarized her thoughts on how far oppressed citizens should take their actions against the government:

While it appears that the government has at times made some mistakes, has even admitted those mistakes, the point of this editorial is that even though there may have been several seemingly wrongful mistakes, by the government in several incidents, they do not add up to make the Oklahoma bombing or any other similar action that takes lives, right. It is pure and simple - It is Wrong! No matter what the issue, the end does not, can cannot justify this type of means!¹⁶⁹

Montana Senator Max Baucus also saw a connection between Timothy McVeigh and the rising extremist groups in Montana, including the Freemen. Baucus delivered a message on the floor of the Senate after Oklahoma City and commented obliquely on the Freemen:

¹⁶⁸ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Local Paper*, April 28, 1995.

¹⁶⁹ Guptill, “Editorial,” April 28, 1995.

We Montanans like to call our state the ‘last, best place.’ We take pride in our low crime rate and our civil society. And we like to think we are immune to the crime and violence that so sadly affects our country...Our easy-going ways now seem to attract some of the worst elements in our country. We find that right-wing extremists and terrorists believe they can find a home in our state.¹⁷⁰

Baucus connected the Militia of Montana (MOM) with Neo-Nazi Aryan Nations groups and categorized the Freemen as even more extreme stating, “This group says in public that the income tax is illegal and the federal government is a conspiracy. In private, it says people who are not white are ‘beasts,’ and the Bible was written for the ‘white race.’ With these organizations come hate, lawlessness, and terror.”¹⁷¹ Baucus went on to describe the Freemen’s targets: federal government officials, Jewish people, women, and particularly law enforcement officials who had bounties posted for them by the Freemen.¹⁷² While Baucus noted that Freemen lived across the state, he also dismissed the notion of the widespread appeal of their claims stating there were not more than thirty core Freemen and Militia members around the state: “The hard-core leaders in many cases, are common criminals. They refuse to pay their taxes and will not live by the laws...Most Militia members are not Nazis or potential terrorists - merely loud, deluded people who are an embarrassment but not a threat. And all of us need to show them that hate has no place under Montana’s big sky and no place in America.”¹⁷³ Although Baucus saw the Freemen as mostly harmless, the Oklahoma City bombing increased scrutiny of the Freemen and their claims.

¹⁷⁰ “Baucus Denounces Hate Groups in Montana,” *Local Paper*, April 28, 1995.

¹⁷¹ “Baucus Denounces Hate Groups.”

¹⁷² “Baucus Denounces Hate Groups.”

¹⁷³ “Baucus Denounces Hate Groups.”

While the Freemen were a select group of extremist anti-government protestors who chose to take on the federal government, many of whom were from Montana, they were not representative of the community or the state at large. Although MOM and other extremist groups dominated news headlines for a few years and experienced some increases in membership numbers, one state-wide poll done in 1995 (just before the standoff) found that “a pronounced majority,” almost seventy percent of Montanans, did not share the views of MOM and the Freemen.¹⁷⁴ According to the poll, opposition to extremist groups was shared through political and demographic subgroups in the state, although Democrats and college graduates were more opposed to the Freemen beliefs than Republicans and those with less formal education. Most interestingly, eastern and central Montanans were more opposed to the extremist groups than those in Western Montana.¹⁷⁵ The activities of Freemen in the Jordan area may have contributed to reduced tolerance among their neighbors in eastern Montana. In fact, in the early days of the standoff, one reporter noted that Jordan residents were in support of the FBI and did not want to be associated with the “constitutional crazies.”¹⁷⁶

Although most Montanans and Jordan residents did not subscribe to the Freemen ideology, the small group in Jordan were not alone in their beliefs. Others across the state also employed Freemen tactics. Even more residents, as evidenced in the letters to the editor and editorials, believed that the federal government had overstepped the rights of

¹⁷⁴ Press Release, “Poll Finds Most Montanans Oppose Views of Militia,” University of Montana, August 1, 1995

¹⁷⁵ “Most Montanans Oppose.”

¹⁷⁶ Freedlander, “Holy War on the Range,” 11.

American citizens who needed to be prepared to defend themselves from government tyranny. Equally, they believed that the government no longer represented western rural residents and their concerns but instead aligned themselves with special interest groups. Authorities noted a rise of anti-government activities throughout the state in the early 1990s, with central and eastern Montana as particular hot spots. A small, but very vocal, group of more than a dozen dissatisfied residents in Garfield and Musselshell counties created their own common-law courts and flooded state courts with bogus legal documents issuing arrest warrants targeting judges and other law enforcement officials.¹⁷⁷

Despite the disproportionately small minority that supported or held Freemen views, 1995 saw the continuation of the Freemen's anti-government campaign and the noxious spread of their ideology throughout the state. Their views attracted others in the state including a resident of Cascade, Montana, located about 250 miles directly west of Jordan. Mayor Tom Klock published a legal notice in the local paper that he wanted to create a Freemen town and used common Freemen language and quotations from the scripture, "declaring the Town of Cascade a common law jurisdiction under our sole and exclusive right provided by our Constitution of Montana..."¹⁷⁸ In addition to his plans to create a Freemen town, Mayor Klock found the financial schemes of the Freemen attractive and deposited \$20 million in Freemen money orders in Cascade's only bank.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ The anti-government protests in Ravalli County on the western side of the state were discussed in the previous chapter.

¹⁷⁸ Michael W. Babcock, "Mayor 'Freemen' Campaign Splits Town," *Great Falls Tribune*, March 2, 1995.

¹⁷⁹ Michael W. Babcock, "\$20 Million in Bogus Money Orders: 'Freeman' from Jordan Case Issued Cascade 'Orders,'" *Great Falls Tribune*, March 3, 1995.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Klock's adoption of Freemen politics came at the same time that the EPA threatened the town with \$125,000 in fines for not complying with EPA and state guidelines on wastewater.¹⁸⁰

Others in Cascade did not share Klock's Freemen convictions. In a town meeting following Klock's deposit of Freemen money orders and the announcement that the FBI was investigating the situation, all members of the city council called for Klock's resignation. The Cascade City Attorney reported that Klock had delivered an incomprehensible document to his office along with a threat that if the attorney did not respond favorably, "he would owe the freemen more than \$100 million."¹⁸¹ Klock denied any wrongdoing and refused to resign, stating that he had deposited the money orders "in good faith." He also refused to explain why he had done so.¹⁸² Authorities eventually charged Klock with two counts of bank fraud.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Michael W. Babcock, "Cascade Council Wants Mayor Out: Residents Pack Gym for Meeting," *Great Falls Tribune*, March 3, 1995.

¹⁸¹ Babcock, "Cascade Council Wants Mayor Out."

¹⁸² Babcock, "Cascade Council Wants Mayor Out."

¹⁸³ Bob Anez, "Ex-Cascade Mayor Gets Light Sentence: Judge Says Letters from Citizens Swayed Decision in Montana Freemen Bank Fraud Case," *Helena Independent-Record*, May 26, 2000. Klock was originally charged with criminal syndicalism, among other charges, but that felony was dropped before he went to trial. His support of Freemen had dissipated by the time he went to trial for bank fraud for depositing the Freemen money orders. By his trial in early 2000, Klock's attorney claimed that he had been duped by Freemen into believing the money orders were real and himself had decades-long disillusionment with the government due to his CIA work in Southeast Asia. After almost two hundred of Klock's friends and family members wrote letters asking for a lenient sentence for Klock, he was sentenced to eight months of house arrest, \$20,000 in fines, 1000 hours of community service and told to immediately pay three years of delinquent federal income taxes. The maximum prison term for bank fraud was just over five years in prison.

The Standoff

For more than two years before the standoff, the Freeman caused issues for state and local government officials. Tensions escalated even higher after their takeover of the Garfield County Courthouse and installation of their own common law supreme court in January 1994. In the subsequent months, the Freeman stepped up their campaign of paper terrorism, illegal financial schemes, and attempts to dispense their own brand of justice according to their interpretations of the Bible, Constitution, and other documents. In early 1994, fifteen Freeman were charged with misdemeanor charges. Later that summer, five Freeman were tried for impersonating public servants. In retaliation, Freeman sent all forty-five potential jurors in the trial writs threatening their persons and property.¹⁸⁴ In late September, the Freeman established their Justus Township headquarters on Ralph Clark's foreclosed farm near Jordan, and, in October, a group of them accosted an ABC news crew and took their camera equipment worth \$66,000. Even with the escalating incidents of aggression, federal officials kept their distance from Jordan, prompting Murnion to testify at a House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime in November that he feared that bloodshed was inevitable between the government and Freeman.¹⁸⁵

Freeman harassed and assaulted another reporter outside of Justus Township in February 1996 and by March, area newspapers were noting the growing local opposition to the Freeman. Jordan residents had been waiting for the FBI to take action and when that did not happen, locals planned to summon another posse to take action against the

¹⁸⁴ "FBI Standoff," 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

¹⁸⁵ "FBI Standoff," 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

Freemen.¹⁸⁶ Between the threat of a posse engaging with the heavily armed Freemen and news breaking the same month that the Freemen had attempted to buy \$1.4 million worth of military-style weapons for a two hundred member militia, an unsuccessful attempt because the money order bounced, the feds could no longer ignore the situation.

The standoff started on March 25, 1996, when more than one hundred FBI agents and local law enforcement officers surrounded the Clark farm and issued federal indictments charging the Freemen with conspiracy, mail and bank fraud, armed robbery, and threats against local and federal officials. At the beginning of the standoff there were about eighteen armed Freemen on the ranch, as well as children and women. The FBI, fearing another Ruby Ridge or Waco, employed a low-key siege approach to avoid bloodshed.¹⁸⁷

Support for the Freemen during the standoff was more limited than they might have hoped. A rally in nearby Lewistown to show support for the Freemen saw the Freemen admirers outnumbered four to one by reporters. Although only eight militia members attended, organizer Ed LeStage, spokesman for the Idaho-based Freemen Patriots of the Northwest, predicted that more allies would come to prevent a violent confrontation between Freemen and federal agents.¹⁸⁸ While they may not have attended the rally, some local letter writers did share the Freemen's paranoia, such as one who commented,

Our Government is dying to have another Waco - preferably several Waco's in different places. The Government seems to think that they need to keep

¹⁸⁶ "FBI Standoff," 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

¹⁸⁷ "FBI Standoff," 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

¹⁸⁸ "Eight-Man March," *Missoulian*, April 2, 1996.

the fear in honest people. They have yapped and howled most of '94 about a few so-called Freemen. They are not Freemen at all - they are constitutionalists... Today our enemy is not across the ocean and our enemy is not a dozen or so of the so-called Freemen that want us to get back to the Constitution of the good old U.S.A. Our enemy today is our corrupt Government from the very top to the very bottom. Wake up America before it is too late and it may be too late already.¹⁸⁹

Twenty militia activists from eleven states issued a declaration of support for the Freemen and warned the FBI that any injury to the Freemen would be considered an act of war.¹⁹⁰ Some militia groups sent out members to monitor the situation, particularly around April 19th, the anniversary of Waco and the Oklahoma City bombing, when many feared that confrontation could explode lethally.¹⁹¹

Ohio militia member Scott McMahon Bowman traveled to Montana with a small group of fellow militia members to offer his support to the Freemen. Upon leaving Ohio, Bowman made sure he was well armed, both with the tools of his legal trade – legal-sized notepads – as well as a rifle, a pistol, a twelve-gauge shotgun and night vision goggles.¹⁹² Bowman self-published an account of his few weeks in Jordan in the early days of the standoff and his book reveals the constant level of paranoia shared by anti-government agitators, both those who were holed up on Justus Township and their supporters. Bowman displayed the shared mindset of Freemen supporters; everything triggered his

¹⁸⁹ Dave Huston, “Letters to the Editor,” *Jordan Local Paper*, March 10, 1995.

¹⁹⁰ Linzer and Rosenberg, “Vigilante Justice,” 6.

¹⁹¹ Bowman, *Turning Point*, 68. Bowman and others were convinced that the government planned to attack the Freemen on April 19, just as the government had attacked their own citizens in the popular conspiracy theory that the Oklahoma City bombing had been planned and executed by federal operatives. Bowman and his small group of militia members returned home from Jordan after April 19th passed without incident, secure in their knowledge that their presence stopped the federal government’s planned slaughter of the Freemen and their family members.

¹⁹² Bowman, *Turning Point*, 3.

fears of the federal government, from cars passing him on the road, to restaurant patrons, and even other militia members – all of whom could have been undercover FBI agents sent to spy on him and his fellow patriots.

Bowman reiterated a common refrain of the Freeman supporters: the Freeman's money schemes were not only legal but revealed the duplicitous nature of the federal government. The elaborate and convoluted rationales employed by the Freeman to prove that their liens and money orders were legitimate were not done to benefit the Freeman but to inform the American public of the tyranny and illegitimacy of the federal government. Bowman commented on the Freeman's genius in cutting to the heart of this vast governmental conspiracy: "As you can imagine, I found all of this information quite incredible and, needless to say perhaps, my head was spinning. It wasn't that I couldn't understand what the Sovereigns were claiming because it all appeared to make perfect sense. It was just all too fantastic that this group of Montana Constitutionals had most likely beaten the Federal Reserve Bank (FED) at its own game."¹⁹³

Bowman noted that his presence in Jordan, even if for only a few weeks, was necessary to protect the Freeman, especially the wives and children living at Justus Township. Although the promises from other militias to send supporters never panned out, Bowman believed that his small group of fellow militia members reminded the government that militias across the nation would rally together if fighting broke out in Montana thereby protecting the Freeman from a federal massacre.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Bowman, *Turning Point*, 27.

¹⁹⁴ Bowman was so supportive of the Freeman that he returned to represent Daniel Petersen in the Freeman trial in Billings in May 1988.

However, as in the years preceding the siege, the Freemen may have had small pockets of support, but the vast majority of Jordan residents and other Montanans did not come to their aid, perhaps because, rather than keeping their sights on the feds, the Freemen targeted too many members of their own community to generate lasting support. Citizens had a vested interest in distancing themselves from the Freemen and sweeping the whole sordid incident under the rug. In his book on the standoff, Bowman noted that he and his fellow militia members expected the Freemen standoff to rally militia members from across the nation and were therefore surprised at the low numbers of supporters they found around Jordan. After arriving in the area, Bowman, who had heard that MOM had upwards of 60,000 troop members, discovered that only thirty-five were in the area.¹⁹⁵ Bowman consoled himself with the idea that “thirty-thousand like-minded people were nearby - home watching TV was all anyone could guess.”¹⁹⁶

In contrast to the meager militia support, fifty residents signed a petition to urge the Freemen to surrender.¹⁹⁷ Guptill broke her self-imposed ban on Freemen-related stories right before the standoff started. In an editorial responding to judgements of her editorials over the last few years she deflected much of the criticism. Guptill noted that the paper received many letters to the editor from angry residents who felt their rights were being violated “They were upset by the Big Open proposal, they were upset by the Bergers being raided...They were upset in general with many of the federal government’s rules and regulations and they took the time to write about them.” Guptill also addressed

¹⁹⁵ Bowman, *Turning Point*, 9.

¹⁹⁶ Bowman, *Turning Point*, 37.

¹⁹⁷ “FBI Standoff,” 1 May 1996, Pat Williams Papers Series II.

her critics who complained about the letter writers saying, “The freeman [sic] issue did not happen overnight. It rather seemed to evolve. Whether it has been cold calculated effort, or whether circumstances have made the situation as it wants today, will probably never be determined. But it is here, not just here in the county, but in many places throughout the country.¹⁹⁸ Guptill concluded by promising that she would not print Freeman-related news in the paper: “However, I will not make any attempt to print the rumors, street gossip, or the innuendoes that are floating on the telephone, the conversations at any gathering, including church, or what seems to come around plain hot air and the pleasure some get from hearing their own voice on the subject.”¹⁹⁹

Ending her editorial, Guptill asked readers if they would prefer further division in their community or would work to put the county back together. Guptill stood by her decision to avoid news about the Freeman unless it came from the AP or another newspaper. Four days after the standoff began, the *Tribune* front page articles were titled “Bow Hunter Class Scheduled,” “Extension Offers Water Testing Program,” “Lambing and Calving Keeping Ranchers Busy,” and “Shrine Club to Hold Screening Clinic.” News on the Freeman did not appear until page five when the paper noted “In an effort to follow our policy, the news releases from the Montana U.S. Attorney’s Office in Billings will be printed verbatim as they were received from that Office.”²⁰⁰ For the next three months, Guptill refrained from writing or printing editorials and letters about the

¹⁹⁸ Guptill, “Editorial,” *Jordan Tribune*, March 22, 1996.

¹⁹⁹ Guptill, “Editorial,” March 22, 1996.

²⁰⁰ “Federal and State Law Enforcement Announce Arrests,” March 29, 1996.

Freemen unless the news came in the form of a press release. Even after the Freeman surrendered on June 13, 1996, the paper generally maintained its silence on the siege.

Freemen Trial

Although the Freeman had pledged to never surrender to the federal government, after eighty-one days of negotiations with the FBI the siege ended without a shot being fired. One negotiator who met with the Freeman suggested that disappointment that other anti-government groups did not rally to their side might have been a reason the Freeman left the ranch.²⁰¹ The twelve Freeman faced nearly five hundred charges including,

conspiracy to impede the governmental function of the United States; conspiracy to prevent by force, intimidation or threat the performance of official duties [of federal and county officials]; threats to assault, kidnap and murder [federal judge] with the intent to impede, intimidate or interfere with the performance of his official duties; and mailing of a threatening communication to [federal judge]

as well as

conspiracy to devise and implement a scheme and artifice to defraud and to obtain money and property through false and gradient representations and conspiracy to devise and implement a scheme to defraud federal institutions and to obtain money or property under the custody and control of financial institutions through false and fraudulent representations...interference with commerce by threats or violence in connection with the theft of an ABC news crew's equipment.²⁰²

Yet, even in the face of numerous and serious charges, the Freeman continued to assert their sovereignty and the righteousness of their cause.²⁰³ And in the years leading up to

²⁰¹ Bob Anez, "Ohs: Moderate Clark Key to Negotiations," *Billings Gazette*, June 14, 1996.

²⁰² "Federal and State Law Enforcement Announce Arrests," March 29, 1996. By the time of the trial in May 1996, fourteen Freeman were charged with 126 counts.

²⁰³ In total, juries convicted fifteen out of twenty-four Freeman in three separate trials in 1998. Another six Freeman defendants struck plea deals and two defendants were

their trial, the Freemen remained antagonistic towards the federal government, defiant and disrespectful, refusing to recognize the authority of the federal court and its officers, and repeatedly stating that the court had no jurisdiction over them.²⁰⁴ Richard Clark claimed,

I have lawfully expatriated from the corporate United States. I'm a free-born American national, and a Freemen character. I do not come from the District of Montana. I live in the country of Montana state, small S. I do not waive extradition from my country of Montana state, which is in fact me, into the corporate United State. While I do not waive extradition into your corporate state, will never waive extradition into your corporate state, I do not grant you venue. And without venue, you have no jurisdiction.²⁰⁵

This common refrain was repeated by many Freemen including Jon Nelson: “This court does not have venue or jurisdiction. Your court does not have venue or jurisdiction. I am a — I am not a U.S. citizen. I am an American national. This is the wrong court here.”²⁰⁶

Leroy Schweitzer argued, unsuccessfully, that the common law Supreme Court created

acquitted of all charges. The trial in May, USA vs. Schweitzer, et al., included the defendants Leroy Schweitzer, Belgrade, MT; Rodney Skurdal, Roundup, MT; Dale Jacobi, Thompson Falls, MT; Dana Dudley, Four Oaks, NC; Russell Landers, Four Oaks, NC; Daniel Petersen, Winnett, MT; Cherlyn Petersen, Winnett, MT; John McGuire, Calistoga, CA; William Stanton, Brusett, MT; Agnes Stanton, Brusett, MT; Richard Clark, Grass Range, MT; Ralph Clark, Brusett, MT; Emmett Clark, Brusett, MT; and Cornelius John “Casey” Veldhuizen, Woodstock, MN.

²⁰⁴ The pre-trial hearings had different judges presiding and they responded to the Freemen’s defiance in different ways. The repeated outbursts, arguments, and refusals to work with the judges or attorneys were frustrating for everyone involved. Some judges tried to negotiate with the Freemen and ask them to be polite. One judge tried a folksy approach and explained his history on the bench. Another judge also tried a conciliatory tone and welcomed Leroy Schweitzer as an equal calling him Chief Justice Schweitzer, recognizing his common law Supreme Court. A third justice, after multiple interruptions, lost his temper and told to the Freemen to “shut up.” No matter what approach the judges took, the Freemen refused to recognize the court’s validity and insisted on their sovereignty and common-law legal rights.

²⁰⁵ Tr., *United States v. Petersen et al.*, at 27 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

²⁰⁶ Tr., Hr’g. *United States v. Emmett Clark et al.*, at 118 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

by the Freeman overrode the US federal court – “I am not here to discuss cases. I am here to present law. We are the Supreme Court. We have discovered the Supreme Court. I know the fraud. I understand that you are participating in fraud. You have been removed from the [sic] your executive bench under articles of impeachment.”²⁰⁷

Freemen also refused legal representation saying that the court appointed defense lawyers were representatives of the federal government thus invalidating their authority. Many of the Freeman had the same experience as Russell Landers: In the two years since Landers had been assigned a lawyer, he had one conversation with him and refused all other contacts.²⁰⁸ In a February 1998 status hearing, Dan Petersen stated that he had made a \$956 million claim against the judge thereby disqualifying him from participating in the trial.²⁰⁹

In an effort to maintain their sovereignty, Freeman used the same tactic they had employed with their addresses: very specific punctuation and capitalization in their names. This practice proved very clumsy in court as can be seen in court transcripts:

That would be sufficient if the container were labeled in the proper nom de guerre, Russell Dean period comma Landers, capital R, capital U, capital S, capital — or excuse me, small u, small s, small s, small e, small l, small l, capital D, small e, small a, small n, period comma, capital L, small a, small n, small d, small e, small r, small s, as I am a white Christian man and I am not an artificial entity as created by a large capitation depictions within a nisi prius or contractual context of corporation.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Tr., Faretta Warnings. *United States v. Hance, et al.*, at 72 (Mont. Dist. Ct., September 17, 1996).

²⁰⁸ Tr., Sentencing. *United States of America vs. Russell Landers*, at 3 (Mont. Dist. Ct., November 6, 1998).

²⁰⁹ Tr., Hr’g. *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.*, at 6 (Mont. Dist. Ct., February 5, 1998).

²¹⁰ Tr., Faretta Warnings. *United States of America vs. Hance, et al.*, at 30 (Mont. Dist. Ct., September 18, 1996).

The Freeman's insistence on denying the authority of the federal court and establishing their sovereignty led to lengthy pre-trial hearings, but finally the first of two trials of the Freeman started in Billings on May 26, 1998.²¹¹ Their commitment to the Freeman ideology was strong. One of their lawyers commented that the defendants had a lot of hostility and bitterness against the attorneys, and "at first we were hit with the religious-socio-political belief structure that these people adhere to so strongly."²¹² The defendants rejected the authority of the presiding judge, called the court officers perverts, refused to answer questions, refused to cooperate with their court appointed defense counsel, and interrupted the court proceedings with lengthy diatribes. The Freeman were so disruptive in the courtroom that they eventually had to be connected to the court from a jail cell in Yellowstone County jail via CCTV.²¹³

²¹¹ The first trial against the Freeman ended on July 8, 1998. Eight of the fourteen defendants chose to represent themselves in the trial that ended with the jury reaching verdicts on half of the 126 total counts brought against the defendants and the judge declaring a mistrial on the remaining counts. The retrial of the Freeman began on October 23, 1998 and ended in mid-November. In this trial, ten defendants were charged with bank fraud and armed robbery. One defendant was acquitted and the nine others were convicted of most or all the charges.

²¹² Tr., *Ex Parte Hr'g. United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.*, at 8 (Mont. Dist. Ct., May 20, 1996).

²¹³ Schweitzer and other Freeman were so disruptive in their arraignment after being arrested that the judge and lawyers discussed options for restraining the defendants, including gagging them. Eventually the judge decided to remove the defendants from the room. Since Billings, Montana, did not have equipment to set up the defendants in another room for the hearing, the court had to order the video technology from Denver, which allowed the defendants to watch the proceedings on a tv in a separate room. Once the hearings continued a few days later, the defendants were often given a chance to meet in the courtroom but were moved to the adjoining room. Eventually they were connected to a room in the county jail by CCTV.

Ninety-two witnesses testified at the six-week-long trial and several common themes were repeated by those involved in the trial. Murnion noted one common factor for those who participated in the common law courts – they all had financial or legal problems.²¹⁴ Ralph Clark, for example, was a long-time local on whose ranch the Freemen based their headquarters. Clark was a third-generation farmer whose grandfather homesteaded near Jordan in 1914.²¹⁵ The Clark family had tried to keep the family ranch afloat but ran into trouble during the farm crisis of the 1980s.²¹⁶ There is a reason that Farm Aid, the annual benefit conference for farmers, was first held the summer of 1985: the farm crisis of the mid-1980s was the worst crisis to hit agriculturalists since the Great Depression. Families lost their farms and accumulated wealth, and rural communities suffered as farms lost their value. Between 1983 and 1990 five hundred thousand people lost their farms and ranches annually. The farm crisis peaked in 1986 with over a million foreclosures.²¹⁷ As the decade progressed, farmers such as Ralph Clark and his family

²¹⁴ “Trail [sic] Results in Convictions,” *Jordan Tribune*, August 5, 1994. The American Defamation League has identified three types of people who are drawn to sovereign citizen movements, such as the Freemen: people having financial problems and looking for solutions to get out of debt or foreclosure, those who are angry at the government, particularly government regulation, and those who are looking for quick riches. All three types were represented among the Freemen. “The Lawless Ones: The Resurgence of the Sovereign Citizen Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, August 9, 2010, 10, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/lawless-ones-sovereign-citizen-movement-2010.pdf>.

²¹⁵ Michael W. Babcock, “Freemen Say They’ve Been ‘Stomped On’ by Government,” *Great Falls Tribune*, March 27, 1994.

²¹⁶ In his dissertation, Steven Shay takes the view that the Clarks tried to survive the farm crisis but losing their farm pushed them to desperate measures and the Freemen offered solutions.

²¹⁷ Shay, “Here Once the Embattled Farmers Stood,” 75.

struggled to hold on to their family farms. The Clarks eventually lost their twelve thousand acre ranch that went on the auction block on April 14, 1994.

Montana State Legislator Karl Ohs, who had family ties to the wife of one of the Freeman, was instrumental in working out a resolution to the Freeman conflict. Ohs was a diligent negotiator and met with the Freeman almost twenty times during the standoff. Ohs asserted that the FBI wanted to avoid incidents like Ruby Ridge and Waco and decided to use third party intermediaries, such as himself, who had connections within the group and “could try to start and crack things up before it got totally out of hand.”²¹⁸ Ohs sympathized with many of the Freeman, especially the Clarks: “There were some like the Clark family that were pretty decent folks. I could relate to them. They had just made some really bad decisions and continued to make bad decisions.”²¹⁹ According to Ohs, the Clarks had let their anger and rage consume them, but they were still good men.²²⁰

From Ohs’ perspective, some of the Freeman were true believers or, at least, had understandable issues with the federal government. However, Ohs was less sympathetic toward other Freeman who were not local, such as Leroy Schweitzer, seen by many as the leader of the Freeman. Ohs argued that residents like the Clarks found the Freeman ideology attractive because they were in financial trouble and wanted to blame someone

²¹⁸ Karl Ohs, interview by Bob Brown, 4 August 2007, Bob Brown Oral History Collection, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana.

²¹⁹ Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection.

²²⁰ Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection. Several members of the Clark family were involved with the Freeman, but the main two were Richard and his son Emmett.

for their misfortune and the government was a long-time target for those in Jordan. Ohs saw the standoff as an offshoot of the Farm Crisis of the 1980s and saw Ralph and Emmett Clarks' Freemen identity through that lens: "So it's easy to blame the bank or a nameless, faceless government for all your troubles. Then you're not responsible for anything. They're responsible for all your faults."²²¹ Schweitzer and other Freemen did not have the same connections to the land as the Clarks making Ohs suspicious of their adoption of the Freemen ideology: "If there were 18 or 20 people in there, there were 18 to 20 reasons why they were in there. There were some that were just crooks. They were just looking for a place to hide out."²²²

Multiple defense lawyers described their clients as generally law-abiding citizens who got in over their heads with the Freemen. Pat McGuire's attorney noted that he had previous "misfortunate" encounters with law enforcement, but before those, "He had never been arrested. He was a conservative law and order businessman himself."²²³ Richard Clark was described by his lawyer as a sixty-eight year old farmer who, "was not an educated man...[he] didn't even finish the eighth grade...He can probably answer any questions that there might be about farm and ranch or crops, but he knows nothing about banking and finance, and certainly didn't understand the complex reasoning behind Leroy Schweitzer's documents."²²⁴ An attorney for Russell Landers continued along this

²²¹ Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection.

²²² Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection.

²²³ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.*, at Vol. XVI, 3936 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 17, 1996).

²²⁴ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XXI, 5536. (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 26, 1998).

somewhat dismissive vein stating that the people who came to Justus Township for help were desperate and “Maybe you could call them socially-challenged individuals.”²²⁵

Many of the defense attorneys focused in on Schweitzer’s culpability as the leader of the Freeman. Ebert Stanton, a notary in the Freeman common-law court, testified that he had been brainwashed by the Freeman leaders.²²⁶ Murnion agreed that most of the Freeman were following Schweitzer’s charismatic leadership and stated, “These people are being scammed.”²²⁷ One lawyer asked a witness (the wife of one of the Freeman) to describe Schweitzer’s persuasive abilities. She noted that “he kind of reminds me of somebody that I have read about.” When asked to elaborate, she said that Schweitzer reminded her of Hitler.²²⁸ Another defense attorney stated that most of the Freeman would not have been in the standoff situation but that a small core group of three or four duped them into taking on the federal government.²²⁹

While the Freeman may have been “duped” they were also very committed to their ideology, a commitment that was used by their attorneys as a defense: they believed in what they were doing, they believed what their leaders said, they believed their financial instruments were valid, and they were patriots peacefully protesting an

²²⁵ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3945 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 17, 1996).

²²⁶ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3847 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 17, 1996). Ebert’s father, William Stanton, had been convicted of criminal syndicalism about a year before the standoff started. Ebert pled guilty to two charges before the trial and testified against his co-defendants.

²²⁷ Clair Johnson, “Freemen Lost Battles Against Justice System,” *Billings Gazette*, July 2, 1994.

²²⁸ Tr., Val Stanton Testimony. *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3704 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 16, 1996).

²²⁹ Lorna Thackeray, “The Freeman Standoff,” *Billings Gazette*, March 26, 2006.

illegitimate and tyrannical government. Some of the defendants pushed back against the defense's characterization they were clueless pawns of Schweitzer. McGuire's attorney noted that he had studied the law on his own in search for justice and, once he heard of the common-law movement, he attended meetings and seminars to learn more.²³⁰

In his testimony, defendant Daniel Petersen explained how he took the Freeman's arguments seriously and backed them up with his own research: "I have studied the law immensely for the last five years at the rate of about 16 hours a day, seven days a week, trying to figure out how this country went astray and who is causing the problem."²³¹ Many Freeman prided themselves on their extensive knowledge of the Bible and legal jargon. In keeping with the elaborate justifications of their beliefs and actions, the Freeman had collected massive amounts of documentation. Ohs agreed that the Freeman had thousands of documents to prove their point; in fact, he drove a Ryder truck filled with Freeman documents out of Justus township on June 13 as part of the surrender agreement. As judges and others including Ohs noted, however, the extensive documentation did not mean the Freeman proved their point since their arguments were incomprehensible to those outside the group. Especially considering that one of the Freeman's strategies was to inundate and overwhelm courts with documents to prove their point.²³² Ohs explained, "Eventually it got carried to prove that the governor didn't

²³⁰ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3938 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 16, 1996).

²³¹ Tr., Faretta Warnings. *United States of America vs. Hance, et al.*, at 30 (Mont. Dist. Ct., September 18, 1996).

²³² Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection.

have the legitimacy to do anything. You could separate yourself from the country. It went so far as that you had a right to do whatever you wanted to.”²³³

At the start of the Freeman’s defense in the trial, Russell Landers’ attorney argued that the Freeman had been pushed to the brink by a government that no longer represented them: “They were seeking answers to the wrongs they perceived having been done to them by the government, and they could not find remedies in our form of government as it now exists. They had no place to turn, except their own court systems, which they did do under good faith, in a good-faith effort.”²³⁴ He concluded his initial defense comments comparing the Freeman to early American patriots and said, “Finally, they surrendered at the end. If these people intended to be criminals, they did it all wrong. They were testing the system such as the Boston Tea Party was doing.”²³⁵

Defendant Dana Landers, Russell’s partner, commented that the Freeman had been mischaracterized in their quest to warn the American people: “We are not violent people. We are trained to get our country back for our children and our grandchildren as all the other people in this room ought to be doing. The government is totally out of control.”²³⁶ In his court testimony, Lyle Chamberlin noted that the Freeman took a less pacifistic approach towards those who represented the illegitimate federal government. When asked about a hanging noose in the common law classroom, Chamberlin said, “I

²³³ Karl Ohs, interview, 4 August 2007, Oral History Collection.

²³⁴ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3946 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 16, 1996).

²³⁵ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3946 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 16, 1996).

²³⁶ Tr., *United States v. Petersen et al.*, at 36 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

guess [it was] the final destination of people that might commit treason or any other law that they said they had committed a crime.”²³⁷

Scott Bowman, not surprisingly, presented an extreme defense of the Freemen, particularly Petersen, his client. As mentioned, Bowman, who was part of the Ohio militia, came to Jordan early in the standoff to offer support to the Freemen, particularly on April 19, when he, along with other supporters, believed that the federal government might choose to enact another Waco or Ruby Ridge by attacking Justus township. Bowman dismissed Petersen’s crimes as a “few bounced checks.”²³⁸ He also described the Freemen’s actions as political dissent and not of criminal intent: “I think the facts will show here that the Freemen are the victims in this case. I think that when lawful political dissent is turned into punishable criminal intent, then something is wrong with that system. The Freemen wanted to bring to light their evidence of unlawful financial activity.”²³⁹ In fact, according to Bowman, the Freemen were heroes: “They believed by bringing their evidence forward, they could save the people from what they saw as slavery on a global plantation, run by the one-world new-world-order crowd. You guessed it, the International banks.”²⁴⁰ While few other defense attorneys went this far in their defense, most agreed that the Freemen had acted in good faith, they believed their

²³⁷ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVII, 4316 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

²³⁸ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVI, 3957 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 17, 1996).

²³⁹ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVII, 3961 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

²⁴⁰ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XVII, 3961 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 18, 1996).

financial instruments were valid, and they did not deliberately engage in criminal activities.

The prosecuting attorney challenged these arguments, painting the defendants as petulant, poor losers who created common-law courts so they could always win their grievances, telling the jury “They are asking you to believe that they fell off the cabbage truck yesterday. No one is as stupid as these defendants...want you to think that they are.”²⁴¹ If the Freeman had only used their checks as currency between them, no one would have cared. But they disseminated the checks across the nation. They also threatened to kill and kidnap government officials who prevented them from getting what they wanted: “We’re left with defendants who created their own world, their own society, because they couldn’t have it their way.”²⁴² Although the Freeman continued to assert their sovereignty and financial beliefs, they were not successful at convincing juries of the same and almost all received lengthy prison sentences.²⁴³

Legacy of the Freeman

Ten years after the standoff, one former defense attorney of the Freeman commented that the standoff didn’t have much lasting significance. He argued it was a “sociological eruption” and was not indicative of anything larger.²⁴⁴ In some ways, he

²⁴¹ Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XXI, 5292 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 25, 1998).

²⁴² Tr., *United States of America vs. Leroy M. Schweitzer, et al.* at Vol. XXI, 5350 (Mont. Dist. Ct., June 25, 1998).

²⁴³ As the identified leader of the Freeman, Schweitzer received the longest prison sentence: over twenty-two years. Many of the other Freeman received sentences between ten and twenty years. Schweitzer and Landers both died in prison.

²⁴⁴ Thackeray, “The Freeman Standoff.”

might have been right. The ten-, twenty-, and twenty-five-year anniversaries of the standoff received little attention, even in state newspapers. One article in the *Billings Gazette* ten years after the Freeman noted that the residents of Jordan were not eager to reminisce about the past: “The quickest way to get booted out of a bar [in Jordan] is to start talking about the freemen standoff...Nobody in Jordan will commemorate this dubious anniversary with enthusiasm.”²⁴⁵ While the standoff brought an economic boom to Jordan as motels and restaurants filled to capacity with FBI agents, reporters, and Freeman supporters, residents noted that the situation had split the community. The same story reported that there were still residents in Garfield County who continued to share Freeman ideology, but “they don’t harass the county clerk with volumes of incomprehensible filings that cite such things as the Book of Deuteronomy and the Magna Carta.”²⁴⁶ One old-timer commented that the standoff had ruined the community, and according to the reporter, “for all the intrigue, it was a tough time for the locals. Longtime friends, neighbors and even relatives found themselves on opposite sides of the spectacle that drew international attention. It sowed division in an incredibly close-knit community.”²⁴⁷ When newspapers did reference the Freeman, they usually connected them with the arrest of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who was arrested near Helena in the first weeks of the standoff. Both the Unabomber and the Freeman have been portrayed as symbols of an anti-government fervor in Montana in the mid-1990s. This

²⁴⁵ Thackeray, “The Freeman Standoff.”

²⁴⁶ Thackeray, “The Freeman Standoff.”

²⁴⁷ Phoebe Tollefson: “Overrun: 25 Years After Freeman standoff, feelings still raw in Jordan,” *Billings Gazette*, May 9, 2021.

perception of the state as the lawless Wild West might have also been reinforced by the fact that the state did not have a speed limit at the time.²⁴⁸

Those concerned with the rise of anti-government groups in the West did not view the Freemen in benign terms. In the years after the standoff, the Freemen and their teachings had quite a wide-reaching impact. In 1997, just a year after the standoff, federal authorities had arrested or were investigating one hundred fifty-one people in twenty-three states with Freemen ties.²⁴⁹ Many of these people had taken classes from Schweitzer.²⁵⁰ One protégée of the Freemen – Elizabeth Broderick – returned to her home in California to follow what she had learned in the Freemen classes. Broderick allegedly distributed fraudulent checks totaling more than \$800 million based on bogus liens filed against the federal government.²⁵¹ Another seminar attendee paid off more than \$50,000 in delinquent federal income taxes with fraudulent checks after visiting Justus Township.²⁵² A former police officer in Washington also tried to pay his delinquent

²⁴⁸ Although Montana did not have a numerical speed limit, it adopted the rule of “reasonable and prudent” daytime driving, which had been state law before federally mandated speed limits of 55 mph were enacted in all states in 1974. Montana’s long resistance to federal authority resulted in \$5 tickets for violating the speed limit, however the tickets were not for a moving vehicle violation, but rather a fuel conservation violation for wasting gasoline. When Congress repealed the federal speed limit in 1995 with the National Highway System Designation Act, Montana reverted to its former rule. The Montana Supreme Court decided that the states “reasonable and prudent” law was unconstitutionally vague in 1998 and the next year the state legislature instituted 75 mph as the daytime speed limit.

²⁴⁹ Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 198.

²⁵⁰ Wessinger, *How the Millennium*, 198.

²⁵¹ Broderick received a sixteen-year sentence in prison for conspiracy, fraud and money laundering for her bogus-check scam. Andrew Blankstein, “Freemen Devotee Gets 16 Years for Check Scam,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1997.

²⁵² Morlin, “Bogus Checks and Balances Run Amok.”

federal income taxes with a freemen check.²⁵³ A judge in Florida sentenced an accountant to four years in prison for trying to pass more than \$300,000 in fake checks created by the Freemen.²⁵⁴ We the People, Schwasinger's Denver anti-government group, was convicted by Federal prosecutors in connection with a Freemen scam of more than \$2 million.²⁵⁵ The Freemen may have made their headquarters in a remote community in Montana but their reach spread across the nation.

Former Assistant US Attorney Jim Seykora, lead prosecutor on the Freemen case, argued that the group had a lasting effect, which he witnessed as he worked on cases based on the Freemen's financial schemes in Mississippi, Oklahoma, Washington, Texas, and North Carolina.²⁵⁶ The Freemen inspired other common law court activists in twenty-three states to "file bogus liens, pass phony checks and deny the legitimacy the U.S. Government."²⁵⁷ The American Defamation League noted in 2010 that while the militia movement garnered more attention and publicity, sovereign citizen movements such as the Freemen were growing in popularity, were larger than the militia movement, and engaged in a greater amount of criminal activity.²⁵⁸

Like many in Montana and throughout the West, Jordan residents felt increasingly out of step with the rest of the nation. They believed their way of life was under attack from environmentalists, gun rights activists, liberal elites, academics, eastern urbanites,

²⁵³ Bill Morlin, "Freemen Convicted of Tax Evasion: IRS Turned Down 'Certified Money Order' for \$278,000," *Spokesman-Review*, June 21, 1996.

²⁵⁴ "Accountant Gets Prison for Fraud," *Billings Gazette*, December 18, 1998.

²⁵⁵ Linzer and Rosenberg, "Vigilante Justice," 16.

²⁵⁶ Thackeray, "The Freemen Standoff."

²⁵⁷ Linzer and Rosenberg, "Vigilante Justice," 15.

²⁵⁸ "The Lawless Ones," 1.

and most concerning of all, the federal government. As evidenced in the local Jordan newspaper, many believed the federal government had not only sided with those groups but that the government had also overstepped its regulatory role in their lives. In fact, in Ruby Ridge and Waco the government had proven that it could and would use force against those who dissented. The Freemen, among a number of anti-government groups that were active in the 1990s, represented an extreme response to federal oversight, but their frustration was shared by many in the West and proved that simmering tensions could spark when conditions were right.

While most did not go to the extremes of outright rebellion, the anger expressed by the Freemen was widely shared and did not dissipate after their surrender. Militias, sovereign citizens, and other anti-government groups used the tools available to them to spread their message: local newspapers, fax machines, videotapes, shortwave radios, newsletters, and magazines. They also tapped into the internet, which exploded in use in the mid-1990s.²⁵⁹ The Freemen uprising represents an extreme politics of resentment in that they separated from the United States, formed their own township and judicial powers, took out bounties on local officials, and took up arms to protect their rights. The SPLC saw these growing movements as connected to a perception of Montana's identity

²⁵⁹ "A Short History of the Internet," Science+Media Museum, December 3, 2020, <https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/short-history-internet>. According to the Science+Media Museum, between 1993 and the beginning of 1996, the number of websites grew from 130 to over 100,000. By 1995, the World Wide Web and internet were in popular use - by 1995, Netscape Navigator, which was the most popular browser of the time, had around 10 million global users.

as a rugged frontier populated by white, gun-toting individuals.²⁶⁰ This identity, paired with a historic distrust of the federal government shared by many westerners as well as the state's remote landscape far distant from centers of government power and diverse populations, has been attractive to anti-government and extremists from the Freemen, the Montana Militia, and the Unabomber, among others.

If the Freemen were truly an "eccentric eruption" as White described, perhaps they could be viewed with some nostalgia as yet another "weird" Montana event in the late twentieth century. Granted, the Freemen are not identified as champions by far-right extremist groups today. Waco and Ruby Ridge still possess the ability to rally anti-government patriots, but the Freemen, at their basic level, based their ideology on a criminal pursuit, one that was incredibly complex and confusing. If the FBI had stormed Justus township, maybe Leroy Schweitzer and Ralph Clark would be remembered in the same way as Vicki Weaver and the children in Waco. Although they do not hold the same place in patriot ideology, they represent an intense anger at the federal government that has not dissipated. This same anger, couched in the same conspiracy theories, was on display in the US Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021. The Freemen acted on a rural anger that has not lessened over time. Twenty-five years after the standoff, Daniel Petersen and Rodney Skurdal still harbored the anger that sent them to prison for more than twenty years. Although both in their 70s, the men stand defiantly in their photos in

²⁶⁰ Ryan Lenz, "A Gathering of Eagles: Extremists Look to Montana," *Intelligence Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center, November 15, 2011, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2011/gathering-eagles-extremists-look-montana>.

the *Billings Gazette*, Petersen wearing a hat that says “#3 Montana Freeman/Where We Failed Trump Will Succeed.”²⁶¹

²⁶¹ Hamby, “Beliefs, Fear and Anger.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT: EPA WATER REGULATIONS IN A SMALL
MONTANA TOWN

Ronald Fulbright was angry. The bank was foreclosing on his Coffee Creek ranch. Fulbright had sought protection from creditors by filing for bankruptcy but had so far been unsuccessful. The rancher claimed that he had been unable to make payments because of drought and health issues and was desperate to fix the situation and prevent the loss of his 700-acre family ranch. Fulbright had a plan to stop the foreclosure, however, one that was growing in popularity with other frustrated ranchers and farmers in the West – he filed citizen’s arrest warrants against the judges trying his case to stop them from moving forward with the foreclosure. His plan worked, initially, as two of the judges recused themselves from his case to prevent a conflict of interest since they were the subjects of his legal suits.

Fulbright, self-proclaimed Freeman, sovereign, and common law citizen of the Montana Republic, learned his techniques from others who shared his beliefs in the illegitimacy of the federal government and its currency system.¹ Fulbright was the regional director of We the People, an anti-government extremist group founded by Roy Schwasinger in Colorado. In 1992, We the People held a meeting in Great Falls and offered to help financially distressed farmers and ranchers fight the federal government by filing liens and other documents against public officials. Schwasinger and Fulbright

¹ Clair Johnson, “Freemen’ Property Sold at SBA Auction,” *Billings Gazette*, May 25, 1994.

also encouraged attendees to pay \$300 to help fund a \$600 trillion lawsuit that Schwasinger had against the federal government, promising that when he won, Schwasinger would share his huge settlement with those who had supported him.² Fulbright continued to use Freeman tactics to forestall his ranch's foreclosure and, like other sovereign citizens, he fought the government by filing volumes of documents based on common law theories and sprinkled with Latin phrases and Bible quotations.³ Fulbright filed two federal civil suits against numerous government, quasi-government, and other defendants, alleging that they violated his civil rights and charged them with fifty crimes "including sedition, high treason, bank fraud and armed robbery."⁴

In December 1993, Fulbright's legal posturing stopped as he was indicted on federal charges of "conspiring to intimidate public officials and obstruct justice by attempting to file legal-looking documents and bogus liens."⁵ Government prosecutors charged that Fulbright intended to clog the court system and create chaos in the government. Fulbright had his day in court the same time that other Freeman were suffering setbacks in their fights against the US government. Schwasinger awaited sentencing in Texas for harassing judges, seven Jordan Freeman faced misdemeanor

² Clair Johnson, "Rancher Guilty of Threats," *Billings Gazette*, June 24, 1994. Schwasinger did not win his trillion-dollar case and was convicted of conspiracy to harass federal judges in 1995 and was received a fifteen-year sentence. Carey Goldberg, "The Freeman Sought Refuge in an Ideology that Kept the Law, and Reality, at Bay," *New York Times*, June 16, 1996.

³ Clair Johnson, "Freemen Lose Battles Against Justice System," *Billings Gazette*, July 2, 1994.

⁴ Lorna Thackeray, "Judge Sentences We the People Leader," *Billings Gazette*, September 12, 1997.

⁵ "Crackdown on Freeman: Timeline of Key Events in the Freeman Saga," *Billings Gazette*, March 31, 1996.

charges in Garfield County, eight others were on the lam for the same charges, and the government had carried out foreclosure auctions on the properties of three of the Freemen.⁶ Ten attorneys, representing county, state, and federal government agencies had petitioned the federal judge in Fulbright's case to dismiss four civil suits brought by Fulbright and other Freemen "on the grounds that they were unintelligible, frivolous, and constitute[d] harassment" and asked that the group be prevented from filing in the future unless they had the court's permission.⁷

The judge found Fulbright guilty of conspiring to injure the judges who presided over his ranch foreclosure and sentenced him to twenty-seven months in prison. Federal, state, and county law enforcement officials welcomed his conviction as a powerful message to those who believed they were not required to follow the law.⁸ Montana Attorney General, Joe Mazurek called Fulbright part of the "no responsibility movement" and claimed that Fulbright's conviction meant that he had to play by the same rules as everyone else.⁹ These legal proceedings, however, did not have the effect that law enforcement officials hoped, as the Freemen around Jordan continued to issue arrest and death warrants for government officials and ramped up their seminars that taught how to create bogus money orders and checks for millions and how to issue punitive, unfounded liens against one's enemies. Within two years of Fulbright's sentencing, the Freemen

⁶ Johnson, "Freemen Lose Battles."

⁷ Clair Johnson, "Attorneys Attack 'Freemen' Lawsuits," *Billings Gazette*, June 14, 1994.

⁸ Clair Johnson, "Freemen Lose Battles."

⁹ Clair Johnson, "Freemen Lose Battles."

would establish the Justus Township and engage in an armed standoff with the federal government.

Fulbright never had the chance to join the other Freemen in Jordan, if that had been his goal. He was defiant throughout the sentencing process, saying that he had done nothing illegal and his actions had been in good faith as he was just trying to draw attention to his plight.¹⁰ Eventually two of his convictions were overturned on technicalities and he was sentenced to six months in jail. He also lost his ranch, which had been auctioned off by US Marshals in March 1994 as anti-government activists protested nearby.¹¹ Unlike some of the more recalcitrant Freemen, Fulbright did appear to change his mind after his conviction and joined the Board of Directors for the Pro Se Corporation that assisted US and Canadian farmers and ranchers in navigating the legal system, government agencies, and financial crises. In a sentencing meeting in 1997, Fulbright's attorney noted that he had helped to convince some farmers and ranchers that they needed to use legal processes and arguments as they negotiated with the government.¹²

Ronald Fulbright was more unique for renouncing his sovereign convictions than he was for having them in the first place. Anger at the government had been growing in Montana before Fulbright lost his case. Kathy Cramer, in *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, explored how rural

¹⁰ Lorna Thackeray, "Freemen' Fulbright Goes to Jail," *Billings Gazette*, September 16, 1994.

¹¹ Clair Johnson, "Protestors Stay Away from Sale," *Billings Gazette*, March 30, 1994.

¹² Lorna Thackeray, "Judge Sentences We the People Leader."

residents, many of whom have struggled economically, often vote for less government in their lives.¹³ Cramer called this response a “politics of resentment” whereby rural voters supported corporate-friendly Republican candidates who then voted against rural residents’ best interests. Fulbright and other Freemen took a more extreme position – they repudiated the government and some deployed a militant response. As examined in the last chapter, the Montana Freemen, for example, engaged in an armed standoff with federal agents in 1996 in Jordan, Montana. Most rural residents, however, have not responded to the federal government in such an extreme way. In Denton, a small rural community in neighboring Fergus County, residents have navigated decades-long issues with large water infrastructure projects for nitrate and other contamination. The financial costs to the community have been burdensome, and many residents found the regulations frustrating and time consuming. They did not, however, take up arms against the government.

This chapter examines how residents in a small Montana community navigated expensive and complex water regulations, which they found unnecessary. They responded, as Cramer suggests, with a politics of resentment. Many communities respond in a similar way. I argue, however, that rural residents in Montana in the last decades of the twentieth century responded in a spectrum of ways: from violent, far-right armed rebellion, to urgent appeals for help, to a resigned acceptance of regulation. This chapter employs interviews I conducted with local residents, as well as the historical record, via

¹³ Kathy Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

town council minutes found in the town hall and area newspapers, to document the responses to federal regulation found among residents in Denton. While the nearby community of Jordan showed an extreme reaction to federal resentment, Denton revealed a more passive and quotidian response, one that can be characterized by an attitude of resignation.¹⁴

Located about 150 miles west of Jordan, Denton is a small rural community that shares many of the same economic, social, and cultural challenges facing Jordan, and is six miles from the site of Fulbright's Coffee Creek ranch. Unlike Fulbright and other Freemen, Denton's locals did not give into their frustration with the federal government through armed conflict. Residents did not form a militia to challenge federal regulation. For Denton's residents, the politics of resentment – formed through ongoing compliance violations of federal requirements for the town's water supply – adopted a much more

¹⁴ Coffee Creek Water Company to Margaret J. Livingston, Office of Enforcement, Compliance, and Environmental Justice, Environmental Protection Agency, November 4, 2011, [https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/rhc/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/19352A5D61FF22038525795700210C90/\\$File/SDWA0820120001%20ANSWER.pdf](https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/rhc/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/19352A5D61FF22038525795700210C90/$File/SDWA0820120001%20ANSWER.pdf). Denton has not been alone in its frustrations with EPA nitrate regulations. Fulbright's community, Coffee Creek has a long history with nitrates in their drinking water. Many Denton residents who I interviewed mentioned Coffee Creek's negotiations with the federal government. Instead of following EPA recommendations for nitrate compliance, i.e., installing a new water system, Coffee Creek residents implemented a more affordable method of planting trees around the cistern, which they argued would naturally reduce nitrate levels. Residents also petitioned the Montana Legislature for a bill providing bottled water to residents. Negotiations eventually broke down and the EPA cited the community and instituted penalties. Denton residents repeatedly commented on the long, drawn-out negotiations, which eventually proved futile, and the extreme anger and frustration felt by many Coffee Creek residents. In the end, Coffee Creek did not have to install a new drinking water system as its population dropped below twenty-five, which was the minimum number for public water system regulation.

passive form of the politics of resignation. Residents' resentment towards and ultimate resignation to the government centered around four main frustrations: a belief that the state and federal governments exert unnecessary and tyrannical control over local communities; a general distrust of the science about nitrates, one of the main issues with Denton's water supply; concerns about the financial burden on small communities for water infrastructure improvements; and the belief that the improvements did not address Denton's true challenges. Many shared similar feelings with Jordan residents: the belief that others – the federal government, state government, and regulators – did not understand the experiences and concerns of small-town life. To these residents, the regulations and funding requirements for large water projects were often unnecessary, and often too expensive, for small, rural communities, but they still worked with the EPA to solve their water problems.

Denton and its Public Water System

Since Denton's early days, the community has relied on agriculture, and its history mirrors other rural communities in eastern and central Montana. Residents founded Denton in 1915 along a rail line, which connected them with Great Falls to the north and Harlowton to the south. Various rail companies have owned this short line, which has been operating as the Central Montana railroad line since 1985.¹⁵ The line moved area grain stored in Denton's grain elevators to larger markets for more than a century. Agriculture, in the form of grain and cattle, has been the main economic force in

¹⁵ Edward, Lewis. *American Shortline Railway Guide*, 5th ed. (Waukesha, WI: Kalmbach Publishing Company, 1996), 69.

the area, which is part of the Judith River Watershed (JRW), a semi-arid region in Central Montana. Ranching and farming lifestyles typify the JRW and the reliance on these commodities has characterized the area with “economic dependence on farming and services, relatively low economic diversity, and unchanging or declining population.”¹⁶ This description has applied to Denton since its heyday in the 1950s when the town’s population peaked with 435 residents.¹⁷

Denton’s population, like Jordan’s, has decreased substantially since the mid-twentieth century. With a 2020 population of two hundred and five residents, the town still offers a number of local businesses: a bank, garage, bar, grocery, small implement and hardware store, post office, restaurant, and library that doubles as the town hall for council meetings and other city business.¹⁸ While businesses remain on Broadway Avenue, also known as Montana Highway 81, many residents fear for the town’s future and bemoan the declining number of available agricultural properties. Economic and climatic impacts on agriculture have encouraged farming and ranching families to sell their land – to local Hutterite colonies, to the American Prairie Reserve, and to other, larger ranches.¹⁹ Denton was not alone in this shift: in the late twentieth century, across

¹⁶ D. Jackson-Smith et al., “The Road Less Traveled: Assessing the Impacts of Farmer and Stakeholder Participating in Groundwater Nitrate Pollution Research,” *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 73, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 612, DOI: 10.2489/jswc.73.6.610.

¹⁷ Riley Moffat, *Population History of Western U.S. Cities and Towns, 1850-1990* (Lanham, MA: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 129.

¹⁸ “Denton Town, Montana,” *United States Census Bureau*, accessed October 10, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?g=1600000US3020425>.

¹⁹ The American Prairie Reserve (APR) was established in 2004 with the goal of becoming the largest wildlife refuge in the continental United States. The APR is not well

the nation and in Montana, livestock production moved from a large number of small farms to fewer, larger operations.²⁰ For Denton residents, the loss of land from local hands meant fewer agricultural jobs and a subsequent decline in the numbers of residents who remained in town.

The historic importance of Denton as a transportation hub on the short line railroad also diminished as grain transport by truck became cheaper, and trucks bypassed Denton for larger grain elevators in other communities.²¹ By 2020 the grain elevators had been damaged by wind. A former employee at the local grain co-op, the Central Montana Cooperative, feared the elevators would be torn down forcing farmers to move their grain to other elevators in the region and resulting in the loss of three more jobs.²² Moving into the twenty-first century, Denton's economic and demographic outlooks were dim.

Adding to the challenges that Denton residents faced, their drinking water system had long-standing problems, and federal requirements necessitating the improvement of the water infrastructure left many residents with ambivalent feelings about government regulation. Built in 1917, the public water system piped water from nearby Gilcrest Springs. The spring has historically supplied the town with free-flowing water that

received by many residents in central Montana. See *americanprairie.org* for FAQs and mission statement.

²⁰ Neil M. Dubrovsky, et al., "The Quality of Our Nation's Waters – Nutrients in the Nation's Streams and Groundwater, 1992-2004," US Geological Survey Circular 1350 (2010): 136, <https://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1350/pdf/circ1350.pdf>.

²¹ Fred W. Frailey, "The Empire of BNSF: The Railroad That Would Be King," *Trains* (June 2001): 39.

²² Denton resident "Curtis," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 11, 2020. A fast-moving wildfire caused by a downed powerline in early December 2021 burned down the grain elevators and nearly fifty homes and businesses in town. The wildfire destroyed over 10,000 acres, but luckily no lives were lost.

residents described as good-tasting. Town council minutes, however, reveal that water quality and quantity, and the associated costs for both, have been issues for residents since the system was first built. Two recent large-scale water infrastructure projects, (one in the mid-1980s and the other started in 2016 and completed in 2020), dictated by the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), reveal tensions between the state and federal government and Denton residents. In the spring of 2020, sixteen Denton residents gave interviews about their experiences with Denton's drinking water regulations and infrastructure improvements.²³ These residents had varied experiences with the water infrastructure in Denton: from mayors to town council members to public works directors to long-time residents. In addition, six partners who assisted with the infrastructure improvements in Denton participated in interviews as well, including engineers, DEQ employees, and funding specialists.

Public Water System Regulation

Government regulation over water quality has a long history, both federally and in the state. Montana started regulating water quality in response to a typhoid outbreak in the Milk River Basin in 1907. The resulting law dictated treatment of sewage discharged into public water supplies and was first in a series of water quality statutes collectively

²³ Denton and Partner Interviews were conducted in winter of 2019-2020 and the summer of 2020 for the Consortium for Research on Environmental Water Systems (CREWS), an NSF EPSCoR RII Track-1 project. These interviews were done under the supervision of Dr. Julia Haggerty, Associate Professor, Earth Sciences, Montana State University. The interviews met Montana State University IRB protocol and the interview subjects were granted anonymity, so pseudonyms are used in this chapter.

known as the Montana Water Quality Act.²⁴ Sixty years later, the Montana Legislature passed several public health laws that set the foundation of the current water regulations and stated that Montana would “protect, maintain, and improve quality of water.”²⁵ Soon after, the 1972 Montana Constitution reiterated Montana’s commitment to the environment, including clean water: “The state and each person shall maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment in Montana for present and future generations.”²⁶ Thus, the protection of clean water became the responsibility of each individual as well as the state.

Preceding Montana’s 1972 Constitution, the federal government addressed water quality issues, albeit obliquely. The US Constitution does not explicitly grant the federal government jurisdiction over the nation’s waters but does give Congress authority over water issues, which were national in scope, including management of waterways, flood control, and water pollution, as well as the right to regulate interstate commerce, including navigable waters. This power over commerce has served as the basis for almost every major environmental and public health law passed by Congress, including the Clean Water Act in 1972.²⁷ The Clean Water Act gave states the authority to protect the

²⁴ Jason Mohr, “Program Evaluation: Water Quality Division of the DEQ,” Water Policy Interim Committee Report, Montana State Legislature, September 2018, 4, <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2017-2018/Water-Policy/Meetings/Sept-2018/ProgEval-WaterDiv-DEQ-edited.pdf>.

²⁵ Mohr, “Program Evaluation,” 4

²⁶ Mont. Const., art. 9, §1.

²⁷ Jay Austin and Bruce Myers, “Anchoring the Clean Water Act: Congress’s Constitutional Sources of Power to Protect the Nation’s Waters,” An Environmental Law Institute White Paper, July 2007, 1, https://www.eli.org/sites/default/files/eli-pubs/d17_07.pdf.

chemical, biological, and physical aspects of their water bodies. In 1974, Congress followed up with the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) focused on ensuring clean drinking water in the United States. While there is some overlap between these two statutes, SDWA is concerned with public health and safe drinking water and the Clean Water Act focuses on clean, fishable and swimmable waters.²⁸ Both Acts were implemented through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and in 1977 national safe drinking water standards required all public water systems to undergo testing on a routine basis to ensure that the water was safe to drink.²⁹ Thus, by 1977, all public water systems had to be tested for contaminants, the public had to be notified if health standards or testing requirements were not met, and the systems had to meet nationally uniform and systematic testing processes.³⁰ In 1977, twenty-two contaminants were regulated by the EPA.³¹ Over time, more and more contaminants have been added to the list. By 2006, the EPA regulated ninety-four contaminants in drinking water.³²

The relationship between Montana and the EPA is longstanding and focused on protecting the environment: in 1974 the EPA delegated Montana to enforce water quality

²⁸ “Guide to Montana Water Management: Who Does What With Water Resources?” Montana Water Center, Montana State University, updated January 2014, 7, https://waterquality.montana.edu/resources/files_images/who_does_what_with_montanans_water.pdf.

²⁹ US Environmental Protectional Agency, “EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards Go Into Effect,” US EPA press release, June 25, 1977, <https://archive.epa.gov/epa/aboutepa/epa-safe-drinking-water-standards-go-effect.html>.

³⁰ “EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards.”

³¹ “Regulation Timeline: Contaminants Regulated Under the Safe Drinking Water Act,” US Environmental Protection Agency, updated September 2015, https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-10/documents/dw_regulation_timeline.pdf.

³² “Regulation Timeline.”

laws through the Montana Water Quality Act yet still retained final authority to implement or enforce any part of the Clean Water Act.³³ Congress intended the states to be the primary regulatory body of water quality, but the EPA assumed responsibility if the state could or would not assume that responsibility.³⁴ The SDWA gives states the authority to set and enforce their own drinking water standards, as long as they are at least as rigorous as the EPA's national requirements. Montana's Water Quality Act follows the directives of the Clean Water Act and incorporates both state and national policy.³⁵ Through this Act, Montana DEQ protects the state's drinking water and regulates communities' public drinking water systems. For communities, especially small rural ones, meeting the DEQ's regulations can be time-, cost-, and labor-intensive. And all these costs increase if water infrastructure improvements or construction are necessary to address water quality issues such as nitrates.

Government Regulation

For several Denton residents interviewed, meeting water quality regulation was often frustrating and, they believed, designed to allow the government, through Montana DEQ and the EPA, control over communities. One Denton resident, Gloria, described her exasperation in dealing with water regulation, "But mainly you're feeling shoved. And as a citizen you're just feeling you got to do this and there wasn't this explanation as much

³³ Jason Mohr, Michael Kakuk, and Michelle L. Bryan Mudd, *A Guide to Montana Water Quality Regulation*, Montana Environmental Quality Council, Montana Legislature, Water Policy Interim Committee, Revised 2015, 14.

³⁴ "EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards."

³⁵ Mohr, Kakuk, and Mudd, *Guide*, 2.

as there was you have to do this. And we weren't used to that."³⁶ Brad agreed that regulation was designed to favor the government: "Then they want you to set up a water district, which is a recognized government entity...And they have their thumb on you and control your every move."³⁷ Lois also noted annoyance at the government's position of power saying "We're controlled by the government. And we don't maybe all like it, which I don't either."³⁸ Residents reiterated a common complaint that the government exerted authority, oftentimes perceived as excessive, with little to no concern for the community's ability or willingness to meet the demands.

In addition to regulatory oversight, the high cost of water infrastructure projects often necessitated funding assistance from the government. In 1997, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (MT DNRC), along with the DEQ, implemented the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, which offers low interest loans for public health-related water infrastructure improvements.³⁹ This State Revolving Fund, along with other state grants and loans, provides financial support for communities as they navigate infrastructure improvements. For the first half of the twentieth century, drinking water infrastructure costs fell on local governments. Denton, for example, met its water project funds through selling water bonds.⁴⁰ Federal support of drinking water

³⁶ Denton resident "Gloria," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 18, 2020.

³⁷ Denton resident "Brad," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 12, 2020.

³⁸ Denton resident "Lois," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 19, 2020.

³⁹ "Drinking Water State Revolving Fund: Intended Use Plan and Project Priority List, State Fiscal Year 2022," Montana Department of Environmental Quality, July 6, 2021, 1. https://deq.mt.gov/files/Water/WQInfo/Documents/2022%20DWSRF%20IUP_FINAL.pdf.

⁴⁰ Minutes, Denton Town Council, 7 July 1919, Denton Town Hall, Denton, MT; Minutes, 8 February 1935; and Minutes, 23 May 1949.

infrastructure started after World War II and increased after the Clean Water Act.⁴¹ While many communities needed assistance in funding expensive water improvements, these opportunities were not always appreciated by the residents who saw this support as a catch-22 whereby the state required improvements, and the only way communities could afford costs was to work with the state on funding. Gloria noted that the government used the project funding to ensure compliance from the community: “There are regulations and there are standards and if you’re a town you meet them. If you don’t want to be that then you unincorporate and you take your chances. But you’re going to lose all your government funding. There’s not going to be anybody there to pay for half of it for you.”⁴² While bonding continues to be an option for funding water improvements, Denton’s recent water project cost around \$2.5 million – far too much money for this small rural community to fund without government loans and grants.

Non-profit agencies, such as Montana Rural Water, also help communities navigate the regulatory process and secure funding. While some residents appreciated the non-profit’s assistance, others, such as Brad, saw the agency as an agent of government enforcement:

[Montana Rural Water] were just in my opinion, they were just another arm of the EPA or DEQ. To me there was no difference. They would come in and say they want to help you. No, they were just there to help get the EPA and DEQ what they wanted. To me it was all just us against them. Didn't matter, which one it was, Rural Water, DEQ, EPA, they were all the same.⁴³

⁴¹ Michael B. Cook and Kevin Rosseel, “Securing Improvements in Water Quality: EPA and Water Infrastructure Financing,” *Journal of Project Finance* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 30.

⁴² “Gloria” resident interview, February 18, 2020.

⁴³ “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

When asked, Denton resident Henry shared the same sentiment and argued that the nonprofit took the side of the government:

I guess I don't see that if the government wasn't in your business all the time you could run your own water system. I don't even see a need for [Montana Rural Water] in a lot of ways...And basically it's there to keep communities from fighting with the government. [If] the government was operating in the best interest of communities instead of their best interest we wouldn't need them."⁴⁴

Not all interviewed felt such strong animosity towards regulation. While Gloria noted frustration with government oversight, she also allowed that regulation was a feature of modern farming life. In her opinion, regulation might have been more of a sticking point for older residents who had farmed with fewer governmental regulations and now "they're not used to somebody telling them they have to do. They have more government regulations now with farming and stuff than they've ever had when my dad farmed."⁴⁵ Gloria acknowledged that regulation had a purpose, even if it frustrated residents, but Bruce took a more lighthearted approach to the DEQ. When asked if, as a small town, Denton was overlooked or forgotten in the regulatory process, he joked, "I definitely don't think we're slipping through the cracks. Sometimes I wish we would slip through the cracks."⁴⁶

Nitrates Regulation

Meeting basic water system compliance can challenge smaller communities with limited resources, but their commitment becomes even more time- and resource-

⁴⁴ Denton resident "Henry," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 17, 2020.

⁴⁵ "Gloria" resident interview, February 18, 2020.

⁴⁶ Denton resident "Bruce," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 13, 2020.

consuming when contaminants of concern like nitrates are found in the water. High levels of nitrate in drinking water can be dangerous for public health. The JRW has a historic problem with nitrates, but high nitrate levels in drinking water extend well beyond Denton and the JRW. The 1974 SDWA authorized the EPA to set national standards to protect public drinking water, currently from more than ninety contaminants, both naturally occurring and human made.⁴⁷ Nitrates, like other contaminants, are subject to a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) that determines the maximum amount of contaminant allowable in drinking water. When setting an MCL, the EPA weighs the technical and financial barriers of meeting the MCL with public health protection.⁴⁸

Nitrates are of concern to the EPA because of the danger they pose to human health, particularly to infants. The EPA set the nitrate MCL at 10 mg/L (or ten parts per million) to protect from infant methemoglobinemia, a potentially fatal condition. The EPA believes that exposure below this level will not cause significant health problems.⁴⁹ Drinking nitrate-contaminated water can turn the hemoglobin in infants' red blood cells into methemoglobin, which cannot transport oxygen. Blue baby syndrome, the common name given to methemoglobinemia, when the infant's skin turns blue-grey or lavender due to the lack of oxygen in the blood stream, reveals high levels of methemoglobin,

⁴⁷ "History of Drinking Water Regulations," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reviewed April 25, 2019, accessed April 1, 2021,

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/surveillance/drinking-water-reg-history.html>.

⁴⁸ "Drinking Water Requirements for States and Public Water Systems," US EPA, updated July 27, 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/dwreginfo/chemical-contaminant-rules>.

⁴⁹ "What Are U.S. Standards and Regulations for Nitrates and Nitrites Exposure?" Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, US Department of Health and Human Services, reviewed January 16, 2014, <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/csem/nitrate-nitrite/standards.html>.

which can lead to coma and death.⁵⁰ While other factors can increase methemoglobin levels, nitrate-contaminated water is cited as the most common environmental agent.⁵¹ Infants under six months old are particularly susceptible to methemoglobinemia and can be contaminated through water used to mix baby formula. Infant deaths from blue baby syndrome are rare in the United States, but other countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe, see exposure to nitrate-contaminated water as a common public health problem.⁵²

While infant health and mortality concerns drive EPA regulation of nitrates, blue baby syndrome is not the only concerning outcome of high nitrate levels in drinking water. Pregnancy complications, including fetal deaths, spontaneous abortions, and birth defects have been associated with maternal drinking of water nitrates.⁵³ The relatively few epidemiologic studies done since 2005 evaluating health and cancer risks from drinking water nitrates suggest a link between drinking water nitrates and colorectal cancer, thyroid disease, and neural tube birth defects.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Lynda Knobeloch, et al, “Blue Babies and Nitrate-Contaminated Well Water,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 108, no. 7 (July 2000): 675, DOI: 10.1289/ehp.00108675.

⁵¹ Knobeloch, et al, “Blue Babies,” 675.

⁵² Knobeloch, et al, “Blue Babies,” 676. In parts of Romania, methemoglobin rates ranged from 24 to 363 per 100,000 in the early 1990s. In comparison, the CDC linked six infant deaths across the nation to methemoglobin between 1979 and 1996.

⁵³ Mary H. Ward, et al., “Drinking Water Nitrate and Human Health: An Updated Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15, no. 7 (2018): n.p., DOI: 10.3390/ijerph15071557.

⁵⁴ Ward, et al, “Drinking Water Nitrate.”

Due to the public health dangers from water-borne diseases and contaminants, the EPA's website states that "protecting America's drinking water is a top priority."⁵⁵ To this end, the EPA focuses its regulation on public water systems (PWS), which supply water to about ninety percent of the US population (the ten percent not served by public water systems get their water through private wells, which are not federally regulated although regular testing for contaminants is encouraged).⁵⁶ All PWS must comply with nitrate requirements dictated by the EPA and testing schedules are implemented depending on nitrate levels.⁵⁷ Once nitrate levels are found at or above 10 mg/L, and repeated samples confirm the nitrate levels, then the system is in violation of MCL standards.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ "Safe Drinking Water Act," US Environmental Protection Agency, updated October 6, 2020, <https://www.epa.gov/sdwa>.

⁵⁶ "Drinking Water Requirements," US EPA. Although the EPA does not regulate nitrate levels in private water systems, the agency is still concerned about nitrate levels found in private domestic wells. According to the EPA, Montana has a very low percentage of the state with groundwater nitrate concentrations above 5 mg/L: about 1,135 square miles, or one percent of the state, are of concern. While the state area affected with groundwater nitrate contamination is low, the population of the state who receives drinking water through private wells is among the highest in the nation – Montana ranks fourth in the nation for the percentage of residents using private wells for drinking water at 32% following Maine (44%), New Hampshire (42%), and Alaska (35%). US EPA, "Estimated Nitrate Concentrations in Groundwater Used for Drinking," updated August 3, 2020, <https://www.epa.gov/nutrient-policy-data/estimated-nitrate-concentrations-groundwater-used-drinking>.

⁵⁷ "Nitrate Monitoring Requirements: Community and Non Community Water Systems," US Environmental Protection Agency, January 2008, <https://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyPDF.cgi?Dockey=P1009V6P.txt>. Nitrates are tested for at least once a year if the levels stay below 5 mg/L. If nitrates are found between 5 mg/L quarterly testing samples are required.

⁵⁸ "Nitrate Monitoring Requirements."

The EPA touts “[o]ver 92 percent of the population supplied by community water systems [PWS] receives drinking water that meets all health-based standards all of the time,” but rural water systems, such as Denton’s, often have concerning nitrate levels.⁵⁹ Human-made sources are the most common source of nitrate contamination, including industrial wastes and septic systems. However, the largest source of nitrate concentrations is agriculture, particularly fertilizers, irrigation, livestock wastes, and dryland farming.⁶⁰ Though nitrates can occur naturally in the ground, agricultural intensification of the twentieth century increased nitrogen levels in soil with a corresponding increase of nitrates in surface and ground water.⁶¹ One USGS study found that since 1975, nitrate levels in groundwater have risen commensurate with fertilizer use, which increased ten-fold between 1950 and 1980.⁶² The JRW reflects this trend as concerns about the quality of agricultural water are supported by testing that shows that ground water draining from agricultural land has been found to have six times the amount of nitrates than naturally occurring environmental background levels.⁶³

⁵⁹ “Safe Drinking Water Act.”

⁶⁰ Robert J. Madison and Jilann O. Brunett, “Overview of the Occurrence of Nitrate in Ground Water of the United States,” *National Water Summary: Hydrologic Events, Selected Water-Quality Trends, and Ground-Water Resources*, United States Geological Survey, United States Government Printing Office, 1985, 97.

⁶¹ “Estimated Nitrate Concentrations.” Naturally occurring nitrates can be found in groundwater (often from geologic sources), but when the nitrate levels are greater than 3 mg/L, human-caused contamination is often indicated.

⁶² Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 15.

⁶³ W. Adam Sigler, et al., “Connections Among Soil, Ground, and Surface Water Chemistries Characterize Nitrogen Loss from an Agricultural Landscape in the Upper Missouri River Basin,” *Journal of Hydrology* 556 (2018): 247, DOI:10.1016/j.jhydrol.2017.10.018.

High nitrate levels are dangerous in any water system, but the EPA does not regulate private domestic wells, which have higher incidences of elevated nitrate levels than PWS because they often draw from shallow water sources and/or are located in agricultural areas.⁶⁴ Private wells remain a prominent domestic source in the nation as well as the Central Montana region.⁶⁵ Because the SDWA does not regulate privately owned wells, the EPA encourages well owners to submit water samples for regular testing. In contrast, public water systems often source their water from deep wells and aquifers and usually do not see high nitrate levels. A 2010 USGS report, however, found that in coming decades nitrate levels are expected to increase in deep aquifers as nitrate-laden groundwater moves further underground.⁶⁶ Because nitrates do not dissipate in water and can persist for decades, this transfer of nitrates is expected to continue even if nitrogen use on the land decreases.⁶⁷ Contamination of these aquifers poses serious concerns because they are commonly the source of public water supplies and their inaccessibility makes them a challenge for cleanup.⁶⁸ As of 2010, three percent of sampled PWS nationally had elevated nitrate levels.⁶⁹ This relatively small percentage of PWS with concerning nitrate levels could increase in the future and challenge the resources of even more rural communities.

⁶⁴ Knobloch, et al., “Blue Babies,” 677. Estimates are that 40,000 infants are living in homes with nitrate-contaminated water from private, unregulated well systems.

⁶⁵ Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 107

⁶⁶ Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 19.

⁶⁷ Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 19.

⁶⁸ Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 36.

⁶⁹ Dubrovsky, et al., “Our Nation’s Waters,” 10.

Nitrates in Denton's PWS

Nationally concerns about the association between nitrate-contaminated water and blue baby syndrome began in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷⁰ The Montana State Board of Health echoed this concern when they sent a letter to the Denton town council in September 1953 notifying that an excess of nitrates in the water had been found through testing.⁷¹ In perhaps a precursor to the town's contemporary ambivalent attitude to nitrate testing, the council decided not to publicize the nitrate information to the community as long as doctors in Lewistown, Montana knew of the situation.⁷² The State's letter instigated the development of a new spring at the site to supply additional water, which was not completed until the summer of 1957.⁷³ This remedy proved to be short-lived as the State Board of Health continued to communicate with the town council about unfavorable nitrate levels through the late 1950s and early 1960s. Near the end of 1961, the town council expressed frustration with the ambiguity of nitrate testing. Discrepancies between water tests done by a private lab versus those done by the state lab led the council to state they "almost reached the conclusion that nitrate samples of water can be tested just about any way that can be named."⁷⁴ Notations of elevated nitrate levels and a deteriorating

⁷⁰ Knobeloch, et al, "Blue Babies," p. #.

⁷¹ Administration of water quality regulations has transferred over time to different Montana agencies: Montana State Board of Health, 1901 – 1967; State Department of Health, 1967 – 1971; Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, 1971 – 1995; Department of Environmental Quality, 1995 – present

⁷² Minutes, 21 September 1953.

⁷³ Minutes, 15 November 1954; 10 June 1957; 17 June 1957; 1 July 1957; 5 August 1957; 19 August 1957; and 16 September 1957.

⁷⁴ Minutes, 4 December 1961.

water system continued sporadically in town council minutes for decades with little action to remedy the drinking water situation in town.

While the town council meeting minutes often addressed drinking water issues, nitrate levels were not the sole focus of council members. Six non-partisan council members and a mayor comprise Denton's town council.⁷⁵ Council members serve for four years and many of them have served multiple terms.⁷⁶ The mayor and town council handle the administrative and executive responsibilities for the town. One hundred years of town council records show that the responsibilities of the town council ranged broadly over many aspects of the day-to-day lives of residents. Town council meetings have discussed infrastructure construction, repair, and maintenance since the early days of the community, with much attention given to street maintenance, sidewalk construction, and pothole repairs. Other issues have taken up time at the monthly meetings as well: town and grounds maintenance, authorizing building permits to residents, staffing at the public pool, flooding and sewer concerns, and dog and chicken ordinances. In the mid-twentieth century, when Denton's population peaked, discussions about the town ambulance and airport often occurred in town meetings. But water quality and quantity remained a perennial topic of discussion for the council.

In the late 1970s, the State notified the town that drinking water had exceeded nitrate MCL, with annual testing showing a peak of 26.2 mg/L and an average content of 14.8 mg/L.⁷⁷ During this same time period, the original water system installed in 1919

⁷⁵ Charter of the Town of Denton, May 3, 1976.

⁷⁶ Information from town council meeting records.

⁷⁷ "Town of Denton Water System" n.d., included in Town Council Minutes.

required considerable repairs.⁷⁸ With these concerns, the public water system dominated many council discussions in the early 1980s. By the end of the decade, Denton had undergone drinking water infrastructure improvements to address high nitrate levels. This process, however, left some residents frustrated, disillusioned, exhausted, and above all, resentful of having to deal with suspect and expensive governmental regulation to address an issue they did not believe existed.

In November 1980, the town council discussed dog concerns, questions about installing streetlights, and unauthorized calls made on the town phone – the town council minutes show that council members, like their peers in small towns across the nation, often dealt with mundane and unglamorous issues. The council also addressed continuing high nitrate levels with a suggestion that the town look for a new source of water.⁷⁹ Almost two years later, at a special public meeting on grant opportunities for town improvements, residents recommended a new water system to address nitrates, as well as a new sewer system, improved streets, and swimming pool maintenance.⁸⁰ According to those in attendance, not everything in Denton needed improvement; residents were happy with the school, park, library, health service, senior center, restaurant, and housing.⁸¹ Even with community support for many aspects of the town, water quality remained a top concern for council members and those in the audience. In fact, the severity of Denton's

⁷⁸ "Town of Denton Water System."

⁷⁹ Minutes, 3 November 1980.

⁸⁰ Minutes, 3 August 1982.

⁸¹ Minutes, 3 August 1982.

nitrate issue qualified the town for grants and loans, presumably to use for water infrastructure improvements, through the Montana Water Quality Bureau.⁸²

Even with funding options, the town did not immediately address the nitrate issue, which led to drastic action from the state. In October 1984 the state filed a civil suit against the town, which “required the Town to continue to pursue providing water users a system complying with the Montana Public Water Supply Act, Title 75, Chapter 6, MCA.”⁸³ The town responded to the lawsuit by hiring an engineering firm to find a new drinking water source since nitrate removal was an expensive process.⁸⁴ While the council conducted regular town business for the next few years, the developing water project directed many of their discussions. In May 1985 the engineering company presented proposals for addressing the nitrate issue: drill a new well, install reverse osmosis filters at the school, restaurant, and bars and continue to supply bottled water to pregnant women and infants under the age of six months, or replace the water mains.⁸⁵ While a new distribution system would not affect the nitrates in the water, it would tackle the system leakage wasting town water at approximately fifty-five gallons a minute.⁸⁶ The engineering company noted that the cost to replace the entire water distribution system would be \$700,000.⁸⁷ This cost was in addition to the burgeoning repair costs

⁸² Minutes, 3 August 1982.

⁸³ “Town of Denton Water System.”

⁸⁴ Minutes, 26 November 1984.

⁸⁵ Minutes, 25 May 1985.

⁸⁶ Minutes, 25 May 1985.

⁸⁷ Minutes, 25 May 1985.

already undertaken by the town to address corrosion in the system that had developed since Denton's early years.⁸⁸

In the late summer of 1985, in addition to deciding to publicly name dog owners who let their dogs off their properties, the council heard an update from the engineering firm.⁸⁹ The firm deemed that a reverse osmosis system was too costly, and the best option was to drill a new well and blend that water with spring water to reduce nitrates.⁹⁰ While the council adopted this option, the process did not go smoothly. The initial bids for well construction were too high for the state loan, so the engineers and council members had to revise the specifications to lower the cost.⁹¹ In accordance with the requirements for public input on the water project to secure loans, questionnaires were sent out to residents to assess their input on applying for a federal grant. With a seventy-eight percent return rate on the questionnaire, no one objected to applying for a federal block grant, although one resident noted an objection to federal help overall.⁹² While most council meetings were attended solely by the town clerk and council members, water project meetings often drew a crowd. Twenty-six people attended the meeting that dealt with the questionnaires.⁹³ A second meeting to discuss a community block grant had thirteen attendees who heard how the process of applying for a grant would work.⁹⁴ The engineer

⁸⁸ "Town of Denton Water System." The Denton water system repair costs had increased by 270 percent between 1981-1982 and 1984-1985.

⁸⁹ Minutes, 6 August 1985.

⁹⁰ Minutes, 6 August 1985.

⁹¹ Minutes, 3 June 1986.

⁹² Minutes, 14 July 1986

⁹³ Minutes, 14 July 1986.

⁹⁴ Minutes, August 18, 1986.

asked how residents felt about increasing the monthly water rate from \$27.00 to \$42.00 but no attendees responded.⁹⁵

In the months that the council deliberated on funding for the water system, the state did not stay idle. In August 1986, the council noted the State Health Department had issued an “injunction against the town because of the high nitrate readings but also the cast iron water pipes are leaking and causing a loss of water.”⁹⁶ The complexities of the engineering, funding, and construction processes were left to the engineering firm who reported in May 1987 that the grant application had to be revised and resubmitted to address only “the worst parts of the water system” to meet the loan and grant requirements.⁹⁷ This decision was followed up by a public meeting attended by seventy-six community members in which a summary of the water project was given by the mayor that detailed the “steps [the town council] had taken to try and improve the quality and quantity of the water system since receiving the injunction from the State Health Dept. in 1984, for high nitrates.”⁹⁸ The meeting also discussed the cost of the project and what funds would be used to pay for it. After the meeting, the council met and passed a resolution “that the Town of Denton would work to find a suitable quality and quantity of water to elevate the high nitrates and abide by the State mandate.”⁹⁹ This step took place almost three years after the state sued the community for high nitrate levels in their water. Once the resolution passed, the community (and hired engineers) moved relatively

⁹⁵ Minutes, August 18, 1986.

⁹⁶ Minutes, August 18, 1986.

⁹⁷ Minutes, May 12, 1987.

⁹⁸ Minutes, June 4, 1987.

⁹⁹ Minutes, 4 June 1987.

quickly. The council approved drilling a well for a new water supply (September 1987), bids were put out for the construction (Summer 1988), and the construction occurred that winter.

The new well was drilled near the existing springs and the water was blended to dilute excess nitrates in the water.¹⁰⁰ This mixture was necessary because the well water was unpalatable for residents: the nitrate-laden spring water proved to be better tasting than the well water, which had naturally occurring iron bacteria and manganese. Both contaminants were not dangerous to public health but affected the taste of the water. Since the well was installed, Denton's water operator has crafted a mixture of sixty-five percent spring water and thirty-five percent well water. This mix was not determined through scientific research, but rather kept residents "happy" with the water quality while still balancing nitrate levels.¹⁰¹ Walter explained the inexact process of blending the water sources: "You know you'd send your sample in and see what the nitrates were. And if they were down around six, well you could run more spring water because nobody liked the well water. Cut back on the well water. Try to keep it under ten most of the time it worked."¹⁰²

Consequently, while the water project addressed long-standing nitrate issues with Denton water, it also produced drinking water that some Denton residents believed was inferior to the original spring water source and with a high cost- and time-commitment. Denton resident Eric described the water project and its outcome:

¹⁰⁰ Minutes, 6 August 1985.

¹⁰¹ Denton resident "Walter," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 13, 2020.

¹⁰² "Walter" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

When I was a kid around here, we had plenty of water. It was cold, it tastes good, it had no chemicals in it and everything was just fine. As time went on we started ending up with nitrates in the water so we eventually drilled a well out there to blend off the spring water and well water to get the nitrates down. We used to have really good water and now we don't have quite so good of water.¹⁰³

Walter, another resident, agreed that the blending of spring water and well water did not improve the quality: "Because the water was fine, it was spring water. Good and clean. And then we started running the well water, we got the iron and the sulfur and all that extra stuff that comes with well water."¹⁰⁴ Henry gave his succinct opinion stating, "No, we had the best water in the world, and they ruined it. We had great water and we have crappy water now."¹⁰⁵ Overall, residents felt that required infrastructure improvements decreased the quality of water. Their negative opinions towards required improvements were compounded by the belief that the entire process to remediate nitrate levels was unnecessary as well.

Resentment to Regulation

Dentonites overwhelmingly doubted the danger from nitrates. Their lived experiences convinced them that the best science regarding nitrates was not reliable, and that nitrate regulation was burdensome and too rigorous considering the minute possibility of a blue baby. While no one wanted their children to get sick, nitrates, as a contamination source, were questioned. Some argued that nitrates had always existed and no one had ever gotten sick before. For these residents, the fact that at least some of the

¹⁰³ Denton resident "Eric," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 26, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ "Walter" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁰⁵ "Henry" resident interview, February 17, 2020.

nitrates could be connected to the geology of the area reduced the dangers from nitrate contamination. Walter dismissed concerns about nitrates explaining “the nitrates were come out of what they called Colorado Shale. It’s naturally occurring, and everybody blamed it on fertilizer but I guess it was coming out of this Colorado Shale. So, it’s always been there... Yeah, it’s not going to go away.”¹⁰⁶ Brad agreed that the nitrates came from natural sources and not from agricultural processes: “the nitrate levels were exact same level then as they are now after we’ve been using fertilizer for all these years.”¹⁰⁷ Oliver reinforced the idea that naturally occurring nitrates were safe and stated that high nitrates had always been an issue in town, since “Day One. But there’s never been any negative results because they were using spring water. And that was before fertilizer was even used in this country so it’s just a natural nitrate situation.”¹⁰⁸ Not only did the residents believe that the nitrates occurred naturally in the area, but they also saw that the connection between geological conditions and nitrate levels made nitrates a benign natural feature rather than a toxic contaminant.

Regardless of whether residents believed that the nitrates came from the local geology or the local agriculture, those interviewed tended to question the danger posed from nitrate contamination. Not surprisingly, many residents stated that they cared about the health of their children, but without evidence of the dangers of nitrate contamination they saw no need for the DEQ’s severe nitrate regulations. Bruce asserted that, of course Dentonites cared about their families. It was just that the nitrate regulations were over the

¹⁰⁶ “Walter” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Denton resident “Oliver,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 19, 2020.

top. According to Bruce, residents would be concerned if the nitrates were “at some crazy level that was super dangerous,” but “high nitrates never bothered me.” Bruce finished with a common refrain shared by Denton residents: “There’s never been a blue baby in Denton, there never would’ve been, there never will be. No one has ever died because of the water. I drank it my entire life and I’m fine so that’s what I feel about it.”¹⁰⁹ Other residents also asserted that the lack of blue babies in town was proof nitrates were not a problem. Bob sheepishly related how the town responded to earlier nitrate warnings from the DEQ:

I probably shouldn’t say this but when I was on the town council we handled the water system somewhat differently than it’s been handled other times. We’d get the notice from the state that we had high nitrates. They’d send us a thing in the mail and we’d throw it in the garbage and that was the way we handled the high nitrate problems...There weren’t any blue babies. There was nobody sick. Everybody was getting along fine.¹¹⁰

Rose had a different rationalization for why the water was not unhealthy – it was “good” water that provided some health benefits. She stated that “the water before they had to mix it was really good water but of course it just had too many nitrates, couldn’t use it. My husband drank that water all of his life and he never had a cavity in his mouth.”¹¹¹

Brad not only rejected any blue baby concerns, he employed an entirely different rationale that “Nobody lives forever, why are we putting all these restrictions on this water and costing people lots of money when the health risk is basically nothing, we can’t

¹⁰⁹ “Bruce” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Denton resident “Bob” interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 13, 2020.

¹¹¹ Denton resident “Rose,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 19, 2020.

prove it.”¹¹² Without blue babies or other evidence of health problems directly linked to drinking the spring water, residents discounted or dismissed any risks from nitrates.

In fact, many argued that the evidence of elderly residents in Denton proved that dangerous nitrates levels were not an issue there. Bruce said, “I found a lot of people here with the water, they die old. They’re like the oldest people in the world here in Denton. I don’t think the water is bad in Denton.”¹¹³ Gloria affirmed this assumption stating, “And so I think the hard part is hearing you have to do this because your water is not fit to drink. We’ve been drinking it for thirty years and we haven’t died yet.”¹¹⁴ No one interviewed spoke of loved ones who died before their time. They shared a consensus that the long-lived population of the town who had relied on spring water for most of their lives attested to the “good” qualities of the water.

Time and again, the lived experiences of these residents told them that the water was safe. These material experiences put them at odds with DEQ regulation. Engineers and DEQ staff understood how residents could deny the dangers from nitrate contamination without visible negative consequences from nitrates. One partner, Paul, explained how some people might get the impression that nitrate regulation was unnecessary because blue babies were not reported by public health agencies. For Paul, the classification of blue baby syndrome was the problem. Because the syndrome was not a communicable disease, the CDC did not report cases to health care providers: “That system is in place, but because the blue baby syndrome is not communicable, it’s

¹¹² “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

¹¹³ “Bruce” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹¹⁴ “Gloria” resident interview, February 18, 2020.

environmental, it's never been added to that list.”¹¹⁵ Even with that clarification, Paul noted that the regulations had worked over the years, saying, “if you look at Montana’s history we had number of outbreaks in the last 120 years and they’ve been decreasing over time because we’ve gotten a lot better and more diligent and since we implemented the recommendations of health professionals, we don’t have people getting sick and dying because of the drinking water.” Paul cautioned that fewer illnesses related to drinking water did not negate the value of the regulations, after all, “the absence of a dead body in the street is not justification that we can throw [away] the rules is the way I see it.”¹¹⁶ While residents believed that the absence of blue babies in Denton proved the water was safe to drink, this partner argued that the regulations prevented illnesses. As mentioned, the causal relationship between high nitrate levels in drinking water and the risk to human health, particularly to infants, has been long established, and the EPA has regulated nitrate levels in drinking water since the 1970s.¹¹⁷ Although Denton’s spring water had been tested for high nitrate levels since 1953, many residents denied the

¹¹⁵ Denton partner “Paul,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, August 5, 2020.

¹¹⁶ “Paul” partner interview, August 5, 2020.

¹¹⁷ According to a 1951 study titled “Survey of Literature Relating to Infant Methemoglobinemia Due to Nitrate-Contaminated Water,” the scientific study of nitrate and methemoglobinemia started in the mid-nineteenth century and the first association between an infant death and high nitrates occurred in 1933. Graham Walton, “Survey of Literature Relating to Infant Methemoglobinemia Due to Nitrate-Contaminated Water,” *American Journal of Public Health* 41, no. 8, pt. 1 (August 1951): 986-996. Studies of nitrates, drinking water, and public health have been prolific in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In her updated review of these studies, Mary Ward stated that more than thirty epidemiologic studies examined drinking water nitrate and public health outcomes between 2005 and 2018. Ward, et al., “Drinking Water Nitrate,” p. #.

dangers inherent in nitrates and challenged the EPA and DEQ's regulation of their water system.

Residents interviewed harbored other suspicions about nitrate testing, often arguing that improved scientific instrumentation used in testing for nitrates meant that the DEQ found higher levels of nitrates than before. In other words, the amount of nitrates overall in the water did not increase but the improved testing practices and instruments found more nitrates and therefore the situation looked worse than it really was. Dentonites supporting this argument often explained their point with convoluted reasoning. Bob, for example, argued that the nitrate levels had been set with the technology of the time. As testing and instrumentation became more sophisticated, Bob argued that the better testing found more nitrates. But the same amount of nitrates existed. In Bob's words, "You shouldn't leave the requirements at a level that you determined years ago was publicly safe at the level that our technology [found]. But as we get able to do a more refined system of testing for nitrates and all of that we have to adjust the other end of it a little bit to compensate for the fact that now we're finding more than was really here."¹¹⁸ Many residents argued this point – that improving technologies were finding more nitrates than had been found in the past. The explanations were always a bit confusing to the interviewer but were a popular talking point for many.

While some residents argued that the nitrate MCL should change as testing technology improved, other residents believed the EPA and DEQ had lowered their nitrate MCLs arbitrarily with no scientific reason in recent history – from 20 mg/L to 10

¹¹⁸ "Bob" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

mg/L. The shared belief that allowable nitrate levels had been reduced convinced them that the regulatory system was rigged against them. Oliver remembered that higher nitrate MCL in the 1960s of 20 mg/L. But then, he said, the government kept lowering the standards for no other reason other than to control citizens: “It was almost like no problem with it yet, let’s lower it and see what we can get. We got to get them under our thumb...that [at] 15 [ppm] we were good. So then that was in I think the early ‘90s...I think that’s when that standard changed and dropped [to 10 mg/L]. And they pretty much forced the town to go in and try to drive a well down to blend with it.”¹¹⁹ Brad agreed that the standards had changed, but the water quality had not. In fact, he believed that the nitrate levels in Denton had always been in the mid-teens, and there had never been a blue baby.¹²⁰ The partner disagreed that nitrate MCLs had been adjusted arbitrarily by the DEQ. Paul said that some contaminant MCLs had been adjusted since the implementation of the Safe Drinking Water Act, “for nitrate it’s been 10 since I’ve...I don’t know the full history of it but I’m pretty sure 10 was in the original Safe Drinking Water Act when nitrate was first introduced in the late ‘70s. And it didn’t change.”¹²¹

Residents gave various reasons why they believed the EPA and DEQ had arbitrarily changed the nitrate MCL. Brad charged that the DEQ changed nitrate levels for self-serving reasons so that the DEQ could employ more people. For Brad, the requirements were not based on public safety, they were set low to employ regulators to police communities: “My only explanation is they can provide jobs. It’s the government

¹¹⁹ “Oliver” resident interview, February 19, 2020

¹²⁰ “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

¹²¹ “Paul” partner interview, August 5, 2020.

feeding on itself to make more jobs.”¹²² Bruce believed that the government changed the standards merely because they had the authority to do so and as a means of controlling residents. He found this “an utter crock for lack of a better word. Because it’s like every year they’re just going to drop it because they can and feel like it and they can just add regulations.”¹²³

There is, in fact, a nationwide nitrate standard. The Safe Water Drinking Act sets the nitrate MCL at 10 mg/L for all public water systems.¹²⁴ States are not allowed to adopt lower drinking water standards than those set by the EPA. They are, however, able to implement variances and exemptions for a local water system “where serious economic or other problems are encountered. However, variances and exceptions may not be granted where there is an unreasonable risk to public health....”¹²⁵ One expert addressed these exceptions and the confusion shared by some residents and explained that there was “a really weird provision in the Safe Drinking Water Act” which allowed very specific public water systems to have a 20 MCL. But, as Paul asserted, it was a very rare circumstance: “We have two in the state that meet that right now...A good example of a system that would qualify for that would be a mining camp or a business... [which] essentially do not have kids on site. Communities are not eligible for that [exemption] at

¹²² “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

¹²³ “Bruce” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹²⁴ California’s nitrate standards meet the EPA’s MCL of 10 mg/L for public water systems. “Nitrates and Nitrites in Drinking Water,” California Water Boards, last updated November 18, 2020,

https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/Nitrate.html.

¹²⁵ “EPA Safe Drinking Water Standards Go Into Effect.”

all.¹²⁶ Whether or not this rare exemption was the reason so many residents believed that the nitrate MCL had been higher in the past is not clear. But residents were convinced that the MCL had dropped over time.

The Financial Burden of PWS

Testing public water systems and meeting the water regulations can be time- and labor- intensive for communities. Over ninety different contaminants require sampling through the DEQ, and each contaminant has its own monitoring schedule. Nitrates, for example, require annual sampling. If any sample has a nitrate level greater than or equal to fifty percent of the MCL, then monitoring increases to quarterly samples.¹²⁷ When nitrate levels surpass 10 m/L daily sampling is required.¹²⁸ Oliver like many residents,

¹²⁶ “Paul” partner interview, August 5, 2020. “Paul” is referencing MT DEQ’s three categories for public water systems: community, non-transient non-community, and transient non-community. Most public water systems in the state are community water systems. Non-transient non community water systems include public water systems that are not serving the community, such as workplaces and schools. Transient non-community water systems do not regularly serve the same 25 individuals for six months each year. Examples of transient non-community systems include restaurants, cafes, bars, campgrounds, and motels. “Drinking Water Regulations Summary Community and Non-Transient Non-Community Water Systems,” Montana Department of Environmental Quality, June 2016, 1,

<https://deq.mt.gov/files/Water/PWSUB/Documents/docs/CNTNCSummary.pdf>.

¹²⁷ “Drinking Water Regulations Summary.”

¹²⁸ Montana DEQ has a website that lists drinking water violations for public water systems in the state: Montana DEQ, “Drinking Water Branch: Violations,” accessed October 25, 2021, http://sdwisdww.mt.gov:8080/DWW/JSP/Violations.jsp?tinwsys_is_number=2391&tinwsys_st_code=MT. On this webpage, Denton is listed as having nitrate MCL violations in 1981, 1984, 1987, 2012 and 2016. Interestingly, no violations are noted through the DEQ in 2006 or 2007, but the EPA placed Denton under an Administrative Order at this time for nitrification violations. David J. Janik and Diane L. Sipe, “Administrative Order In the Matter of Town of Denton,” United States Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8, July 5, 2007,

found this repeated sampling exhausting and expensive, saying “The biggest thing was the testing that was coming. You had so many cycles of testing on water and just, it was never ending. There is a schedule annually, they would come in this period of time you’ve got to do this test, this test, and this test, and then this test. It was a weekly basis you were sending samples in. And it wasn’t cheap either.”¹²⁹ In his report to the town council in March 1990, Denton’s water operator commented that soon “we will have to test for about 51 new contaminants and each year thereafter there will be between 25 and 40 additional tests.”¹³⁰ Two years later the mayor reported that he had attended an out-of-town water meeting on water quality and that water regulations would require testing annually for twenty-five different elements.¹³¹ The time and costs of these required and frequent tests added up in a small town with finite capacities. And if the testing showed that infrastructure improvements were necessary as well, costs could far exceed the capacity of small rural communities.

As the state requires compliance with drinking water standards, it also understands that water infrastructure can be costly to communities, especially smaller towns. Several state and federal funding programs existed to assist communities like

[https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/935569523A340FDF8525764E0068791B/\\$File/SDWA0820070059AO.pdf](https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/935569523A340FDF8525764E0068791B/$File/SDWA0820070059AO.pdf).

¹²⁹ “Oliver” resident interview February 19, 2020.

¹³⁰ Minutes, 7 March 1990. In 2021, the Montana DEQ Drinking Water website links to the EPA National Primary Drinking Water Regulations, which establish MCL standards for more than 90 contaminants. US EPA, “National Primary Drinking Water Regulations,” last updated January 5, 2021, <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/national-primary-drinking-water-regulations>.

¹³¹ Minutes, 7 July 1992.

Denton with funding for drinking water infrastructure improvements.¹³² Over the years, town council minutes revealed water system improvement funding discussions about bonding, loan, and grant options. Denton residents noted the paradoxical situation where state water regulations required expensive infrastructure improvement projects that could only be met through state funding.

Two options did help with Denton's water projects: the Treasure State Endowment Program (TSEP) and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF).¹³³ TSEP requires communities match funds dollar for dollar for grants and because the Montana Legislature approves project funding, applications are only accepted in the spring of even numbered years.¹³⁴ Due to the biannual cycle of TSEP awards and the competitive nature of the funding system, communities might have to go through multiple funding cycles to get funding, a process many found frustrating. Bruce explained "it was a long and strenuous process. But anything dealing with government money and government projects is going to be." Bruce found the recent funding process particularly annoying because the state only funded the top twenty-five projects and

¹³² Common sources of state and federal funding assistance for water and waste water projects in Montana include the Treasure State Endowment Program (TSEP), DNRC Renewable Resource Grant and Loan Program (RRGL), Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), State and Tribal Assistance loans and grants, USDA Rural Development (RD), and the DEQ Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF). "Financial Assistance Programs Available to Fund Water, Wastewater and Solid Waste Projects in Montana," Montana Association of Counties, 2021, <https://www.mtcounties.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/fiscal-information/summary-financial-options-rrgl.pdf>.

¹³³ The 2021 Montana Legislature changed the name of the Treasure State Endowment Program to the Montana Coal Endowment Program.

¹³⁴ "Montana Coal Endowment Program," accessed October 19, 2021, <https://comdev.mt.gov/Programs-and-Boards/Montana-Coal-Endowment-Program/Project-Grants>.

Denton repeatedly fell outside that list. As Bruce said, “Then we had all the projects in place and everything but didn’t get our funding. So, then it was back to square one. And then of course regulations changed. So, we had to start all over with the engineer. And finally, we got our funding...But yeah, it’s discouraging at times. Just the amount of time it took.”¹³⁵

DWSRF provides below-market loans for public health-related infrastructure improvements and is administered through the DEQ. Unlike TSEP, these loans are not tied to a legislative schedule. Even though the loans are low interest, they still place long-term financial burdens on small, rural communities.¹³⁶ Residents overwhelmingly expressed frustration at the high cost of water infrastructure improvements. Gloria was surprised at how expensive these projects were: “It’s shocking what it costs. And you think just because you are little, 200 people, it doesn’t have to be as expensive but a water system is...in your mind you’re thinking well there’s only this many of us how can it be that expensive?”¹³⁷ One of the state partners who helped with water infrastructure funding agreed that costs were high for communities already fiscally struggling: “Treating for nitrates is expensive. Treating surface water is expensive. And so those are two of the things that we see a lot of towns really struggle with, especially small towns

¹³⁵ “Bruce” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹³⁶ “Montana Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Annual Report for State Fiscal Year 2020 (July 1, 2019 Through June 30, 2020),” Montana DEQ and Montana DNRC, October 27, 2020, 8,

https://deq.mt.gov/files/Water/TFAB/DWSRF/AnnualReports/2020DWSRFAnnualReport_FINAL.pdf. For the 2020 state fiscal year, DWSRF awarded sixteen loans to nine communities totaling \$20.3 M. Small communities (defined as having less than 10,000 residents) received 57.5% of the loans awarded.

¹³⁷ “Gloria” resident interview, February 18, 2020.

because it's such a financial burden for them...for a town of 500, that's huge. That's a lot of money that a few people have to pay.”¹³⁸

While residents usually complained that the costs of infrastructure improvements led to higher water user rates, one government partner saw the need for these increases: “I would say Montana rural communities, they are worried about the economy of their towns, so they don't increase [water] rates. Infrastructure starts getting old, it starts failing, it starts having a problem and it never gets any cheaper.”¹³⁹ The same partner explained that the communities are very resistant to infrastructure development because of the costs: “They always think it's too expensive. It's a waste of taxpayer dollars to do these big projects. For the most part we try our best to give them the project they need for the price that they can afford. But they're all very expensive. Of course, the community views that as oh my goodness, really do we need this?”¹⁴⁰ Communities like Denton have water systems that had been built a century before and had received few upgrades. When the costs of infrastructure improvements come due on old systems, they are expensive.

Denton's Continuing Water Problems

Denton's 1988 water project took four years for financing and construction, but the new well did not end the town's water problems, which continued to dominate town council meetings and require town funds. The decision to blend spring water and well water proved to be a less than optimal solution for dealing with high nitrate levels.

¹³⁸ “Paul” partner interview, August 5, 2020

¹³⁹ Denton partner “Tim,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, July 29, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ “Tim” partner interview, July 29, 2020.

Denton water continued to violate nitrate MCLs in the early 2000s.¹⁴¹ In the summer of 2007, the EPA issued an Administrative Order against the town for repeated nitrate violations, specifically listing August 16, 2006, November 27, 2006, and February 27, 2007 as dates where the PWS exceeded MCLs for nitrates and failed to follow up with confirmation samples within twenty-four.¹⁴² Due to these violations, the EPA required the town to “continue to provide bottled water to families with infants under six months of age.”¹⁴³

In early 2008 the EPA required daily nitrate testing of the town water supply and the council authorized the purchase of a \$600 portable tester to meet this requirement.¹⁴⁴ Later that year, the town council admitted that infrastructure costs might raise water rates: “Our expenses have gone up so much that we are exceeding our budget in the water fund and will seriously need to look at an increase of at least \$5.00 per month. Our reserves are almost depleted as we have had higher expenses with all of the required testing and increases in operating materials.”¹⁴⁵ The well continued to have issues – in addition to poor tasting water, iron bacteria accumulated in the well. This contaminant was not dangerous to human health, but it did damage the well’s pump. In November 2014, the water operator notified the council that the well needed to be “shocked,” a process used

¹⁴¹ August 7, 2007 and January 8, 2008 town council minutes have references to high, at times “very high,” nitrate levels in the drinking water.

¹⁴² Janik and Sipe, “Administrative Order.”

¹⁴³ Diane L. Sipe to the Town of Denton, certified letter, July 5, 2007, [https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/935569523A340FDF8525764E0068791B/\\$File/SDWA0820070059AO.pdf](https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/Filings/935569523A340FDF8525764E0068791B/$File/SDWA0820070059AO.pdf).

¹⁴⁴ Minutes, 8 January 2008

¹⁴⁵ Minutes, 2 December 2008.

to temporarily remove the iron.¹⁴⁶ In the December council meeting, the operator stated that the cost for shocking the well would be over \$40,000.¹⁴⁷ The next year, the pump failed and the town purchased a new one for \$6000.¹⁴⁸ Without a pump the town could not blend water, and on January 5, 2016, the town council reported, “The nitrate levels spiked to above the drinkable state (per DEQ) and we were advised to give notices and a Reverse 911 call to community members letting them know the water was undrinkable.”¹⁴⁹ The pump was replaced and blending resumed to manage nitrate levels, but other concerns about the water system had come to light – the DEQ determined that Denton’s century-old water system was being contaminated by surface water pathogens.¹⁵⁰ This violation started another water project to improve Denton’s public water system that was completed in 2020 at a cost of \$2.5 million.¹⁵¹

Resentment Toward Larger Communities

Over the last thirty years the town of Denton has funded two major water projects, multiple infrastructure repairs, and frequent testing of their public water system. As the costs of maintaining and improving their water system have increased their water bills, Denton residents developed a belief that rural communities pay more than their fair share

¹⁴⁶ Minutes, 4 November 2014.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes, 2 December 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Minutes, 1 December 2015.

¹⁴⁹ Minutes, 5 January 2016.

¹⁵⁰ Minutes, 4 September 2012.

¹⁵¹ Mark Smith, “Finding of No Significant Impact for the Town of Denton Water Treatment Plant Project,” Montana DEQ, April 10, 2019. The new water project did not remedy the nitrate situation (blending still occurs), but did include new water transmission lines, a filtration water treatment plant, and a new storage tank.

for clean drinking water.¹⁵² Water infrastructure projects are expensive and smaller communities do bear that burden. Montana DNRC compiled water rate comparisons between 2013 and 2019 to determine what rate payers across the state pay for water and wastewater services. Community water rates were presented as a monthly dollar amount and as a cost ratio of the local Median Household Income (MHI). The target MHI is 1.4 percent for water rates. The DNRC found that Montana communities with a population above 7,500 had an average monthly water bill of \$34.59 or one percent of the local MHI. For communities, between 500 and 7,500 residents, the average bill was \$41.46 or 1.4 percent of the MHI. And for communities under 500 residents, like Denton, the average bill was \$49.48 or 1.6 percent of the MHI, which puts those communities slightly above the target MHI for the state. The report further shows that, at least for this century, small towns have paid above the MHI in water fees since 1999, when they paid 2.3 percent MHI.¹⁵³

No interviewees mentioned the DNRC water rate comparison reports, but residents often commented that they believed they paid higher water rates than larger communities. One resident said that his niece in Denver paid less than \$20 a month for water while he paid between \$50 and \$60 per month.¹⁵⁴ Brad explained his understanding

¹⁵² John McDunn, “Town of Denton Water Treatment Plant and New Storage Tank Improvements Project Environmental Assessment,” Montana DEQ, April 5, 2019. For Denton’s 2016 water project the DEQ estimated that Denton’s average monthly water rates would increase from \$54.40 to \$74.40 to fund the water system improvements.

¹⁵³ Anna Miller, “DNRC Rate Comparison: 2013, 2015, 2017 & 2019,” Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, March 2020, <http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/cardd/docs/rate-study/DNRC.Rate.Study.2019.pdf/view>.

¹⁵⁴ “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

for the disparities between those amounts – Denver had many more residents to pay for water system improvements. Nitrate remediation was an expensive remedy and smaller communities could not afford it. Brad said, “We’re paying four times as much for the same service as they’re getting in Denver. Where probably our per capita is less than theirs.”¹⁵⁵ He concluded his thoughts on water rates by guessing that Denver residents paid about two percent of their income on water rates and Denton residents paid ten percent. While his percentage for Denton was not correct, he reiterated a common complaint that small towns were unfairly burdened by their water infrastructure costs.

Some interviewees expressed concern for the burden of increased water rates on fixed-income seniors. Gloria said that the older residents, who lived on a fixed income, think, “Wow, if I have to spend \$89 per month on water and sewer, I’m going to go broke.” According to Gloria, her mother was overwhelmed by potential water rates and so she had cut back on some grocery purchases.¹⁵⁶ Gloria also expressed resentment when a state representative came to a town meeting to explain the rising costs of water. The representative explained that it was important to conserve water because other cities, like Las Vegas, needed water. She described the community’s response saying, “That went down like a hot lead brick...that we would have to conserve water because big cities need it. They’re sitting there and this is our water. I don’t care if Las Vegas goes dry there’s too many people there and they’re using too much water anyway.”¹⁵⁷ The

¹⁵⁵ “Brad” resident interview, February 12, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ “Gloria” resident interview, February 18, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ “Gloria” resident interview, February 18, 2020.

plight of larger cities' water supplies did not resonate well with residents who already felt overburdened by their water bills and the immediacy of their town's needs.

When repairs and renovations needed to be done, Denton residents felt like they were competing for funds against the larger, more powerful, communities in the state. Bob discussed how competitive funding could be, saying that funding options were limited: "You know a lot of times these big grants come into the state and one large project will suck all the money out of it and nobody else gets a dime. There was a big bunch of money come in for infrastructure development a while back. And it was millions and millions of dollars. And it all went into the Bozeman Airport Interchange. The whole wad went there and nobody else in the state got a thing out of it."¹⁵⁸

Denton struggled to get state assistance for infrastructure projects. Grant money, or money that did not have to be repaid by the community, was particularly difficult to get. As mentioned, the competitive nature of funding combined with the two-year legislative cycle meant that Denton had to reapply for TSEP grants over the course of multiple funding cycles before the town received assistance. Many communities need funding and the state can only assist so many. One government partner described the competitive process to gain funding saying, "There's like twenty systems that want to get in line and [the state can] only fund five or six. Like there's at least twenty systems that do not get funded every year."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ "Bob" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ "Paul" partner interview, August 5, 2020.

Concerns About Denton's Future

Completion of the project did not mean that residents' concerns disappeared. Small, rural communities like Denton face varied and complex challenges. For many Denton residents, the new water infrastructure did not address those challenges. Residents often cited declining population as Denton's main concern, using student enrollment as an indicator of the town's health. The Denton school continues to operate although student enrollment numbers worry many. Cliff explained that a town without an operating school had no future: "Our school's got thirty-two kids K-12 next year. And the farms, instead of having ten little farms, the same area has got one farm. There's no kids coming. And when the school closes up there won't be much going on. So, if you want to buy a house, you can buy mine. Sell before it's too late!"¹⁶⁰ The decreasing student population was not the only indicator of the town's decline. Gloria noted other problems around town: "Our streets are bad and I don't think there's any [funding] program going to help us with the streets...Sewer is going to be the big issue for us. And streets are always an issue."¹⁶¹

Residents disagreed on whether water infrastructure projects would improve the town's prospects. Rose believed that the water project might help the town's future: "If we're ever going to get anybody else to come to this community, we got to have water."¹⁶² She reiterated that although some might bristle at the cost of the water project, "if we want our community to survive we have to support this."¹⁶³ Eric stated that water infrastructure was expected by prospective residents and not an enhancement that would

¹⁶⁰ Denton resident "Cliff," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 11, 2020.

¹⁶¹ "Gloria" resident interview, February 18, 2020.

¹⁶² "Rose" resident interview, February 19, 2020.

¹⁶³ "Rose" resident interview, February 19, 2020.

encourage someone new to move to town: “I honestly don’t think it’s going to have much of an impact on the future as far as making people come here because we got a new well. People aren’t going to come here because there’s no jobs. If they do find a job here they’re expecting to have water. I don’t see it being a big boost or anything. It was a necessity.”¹⁶⁴ Mark, expressing his concern that the water project would, in fact, be a burden borne by the younger generations in town explained, “And it’s sort of sad that the little communities have to come up with all these grants and stuff. Of course then you have a population, elderly population that’s getting smaller and smaller and smaller. So, the younger generation is going to end up having to pick up the bill on this.”¹⁶⁵

Bob expressed the ambivalence that many shared about the improved water infrastructure: “Well, I think from the standpoint of a good water system [residents] are happy about that. Probably from the standpoint that it costs them a lot they’re not happy about that. As far as will it bring people to town? Probably not. Will it keep people here? Probably not.”¹⁶⁶ Cliff agreed with this sentiment. When asked about the recent infrastructure project, he responded, “Waste of money but it’s nice to have it...I mean that’s just a joke, but I am hoping we can get more people in here but there’s nothing to bring them here. We need something here that takes a workforce to get people to move here to go to work.”¹⁶⁷ For most residents, water quality was not the pivotal issue on which new residents would decide whether or not to move to town. The economic

¹⁶⁴ Denton resident “Eric,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 26, 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Denton resident “Mark,” interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 12, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ “Bob” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ “Cliff” resident interview, February 11, 2020.

opportunities for residents were clearly what many saw as the most important factor. Gloria pessimistically summed up her view on Denton's future: "When I moved here they kind of thought about where we will be in fifty years. I think now they're thinking where are we going to be in five. How many people are going to live here? There's no jobs, no economy here. Nothing!"¹⁶⁸

Community Responses to Regulation

Interviews from Denton residents revealed a persistent level of frustration with the state and federal governments. They found regulations restrictive and unnecessary; did not trust the scientific evidence on nitrates; balked at the expense of infrastructure; felt they were being unfairly burdened by water regulation; and believed that the new water infrastructure would have little input on Denton's future. Generally, residents resented the imposition of regulations on water quality, and they developed tactics to respond to the requirements. As Bob, a former town council member explained, the mayor and council routinely threw away the high nitrate warning notices they received from the state. He described how all the council members decided to ignore the notices, and once "a different group of people took over the town and they decided that it was more important [to reduce nitrate levels]." ¹⁶⁹ Charlie agreed that the town worked to forestall changes wanted by the DEQ, saying "Well up until we absolutely, absolutely had to we didn't do anything. You know and then it got to the point where it had to be done."¹⁷⁰ The town council in Denton, like many other Montana communities, was made

¹⁶⁸ "Gloria" resident interview, February 18, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ "Bob" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Denton resident "Charlie," interview by Jennifer Dunn, February 12, 2020.

up of volunteers who worked full-time jobs and had a list of improvements to make in the town. Sometimes water regulations were not their top priority.

While some residents might have felt empowered by throwing letters in the trash and stonewalling DEQ requirements, those tactics only worked in the short term. Eventually the town had to comply with DEQ regulations. Oliver admitted nitrates had existed for a long time in Denton water, but he dismissed any related health issues and found the continual testing requirements and working with the DEQ exhausting. For these reasons, he admitted he, “was kind of dragging my feet to be honest,” in meeting DEQ requirements, “And then all of a sudden this one gal I had talked to a couple times up there at DEQ, she sent a letter and within a week I got two more letters from different individuals. And then I got a letter, registered, certified letter, that action is going to be taken on the state’s part.”¹⁷¹ Oliver related that playing games with the DEQ only worked for so long. He could put off requests and misplace letters, but “all of a sudden boom, certified mail and it was fines and all this and that. And possible jail sentences could result from this. And I said you son of a bitch, I’m calling you right now.”¹⁷²

It is not clear what letter Oliver refers to specifically, but the town of Denton did receive a certified letter in June of 2007 from the EPA regional office in Denver notifying the town that the EPA had issued an Administrative Order regarding the town’s PWS. The Order found that the water system had “violated National Primary Drinking Water Regulations...for exceeding the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for nitrate, failure to

¹⁷¹ “Oliver” resident interview, February 19, 2020.

¹⁷² “Oliver” resident interview, February 19, 2020.

take confirmation samples following a nitrate MCL, and failure to notify the State of the violation.”¹⁷³ This particular letter did not threaten any residents with jail time, but it did warn that the EPA could impose “a penalty of up to \$32,500 per day of violation of the Order.”¹⁷⁴ While the Administrative Order noted that the DEQ had primary authority to enforce the SDWA in Montana, the EPA noted that the DEQ had not taken “appropriate enforcement action” against the town, and so the EPA had issued the Order to require compliance.¹⁷⁵ Similar to the 1984 injunction filed by the state, this Administrative Order compelled the town council to act on nitrate violations. After the town’s reluctant compliance, the EPA lifted the Order in January 2008 and the town returned to quarterly nitrate sampling.¹⁷⁶

Town council members expressed their frustration with governmental regulation in many ways, from complaining, to ignoring letters, to working at their own pace regardless of what the DEQ required. They could only slow the regulatory process, however, and not permanently avoid meeting the water quality requirements. As Walter explained about the 1984 state injunction when the community was out of compliance on nitrates: “Well they send you nasty letters and say they’re going to do this and that. Eventually they put an injunction against the town. So, we were pretty much forced just to drill the well.”¹⁷⁷ Gloria agreed that fighting the regulation was a losing battle. When asked about the DEQ, she stated, “I’m not saying they’re my favorite people. They’re all

¹⁷³ Sipe to the Town of Denton, July 5, 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Sipe to the Town of Denton, July 5, 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Janik and Sipe, “Administrative Order.”

¹⁷⁶ Minutes, 3 February 2009.

¹⁷⁷ “Walter” resident interview, February 13, 2020.

about getting the job done and you're out of sync and your tests aren't good and you've got to do something about it or we'll shut off your water and fine you. Well, we can't pay one week's worth of fines. And nobody is going to loan us the money to pay fines. So, you fix it."¹⁷⁸ Residents may have tried to ignore or circumvent the regulations, but their tactics were short-term and gave them only illusory control in the process. Winning the battle might have felt good, but the DEQ always won the war.

Although Denton residents adopted a variety of tactics to resist regulation, they also knew they could only hold out against the government for so long. Paul, a government partner, understood, to some degree, residents' frustrations and observed that water issues tend to be less contentious than other regulatory areas. Paul found that most of the frustration expressed by the residents was not over the regulations themselves, but the cost of compliance. Paul believed that communities generally wanted safe drinking water. He saw that regulations on mining and the coal program were much more contentious, and "for drinking water, people want good drinking water."¹⁷⁹ Bruce agreed that when residents attended council meetings about the water regulation, money usually ranked at the top of their complaint list: "No one likes their water rates raised. That was the biggest concern they had. Like water is fine, leave us alone. That's it. No one was ever really concerned too much about the quality."¹⁸⁰ Henry agreed: "As long as their water bill wasn't going up they were fine with whatever happened."¹⁸¹ Walter succinctly

¹⁷⁸ "Gloria" resident interview, February 18, 2020.

¹⁷⁹ "Paul" partner interview, August 5, 2020.

¹⁸⁰ "Paul" partner interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁸¹ "Henry," resident interview, February 17, 2020.

shared residents' reactions to increased water bills. When asked about how the community felt he laughed and replied, "They weren't really overjoyed about it."¹⁸² A government partner agreed: "And it's interesting because until you raise rates nobody attends a public meeting. Nobody really cares. So, unless their water doesn't run one day...or their rates get raised, then they often show up after the fact I would say."¹⁸³

Low attendance at most town council meetings supports this assertion. During the well project in the mid-1980s, only a few meetings saw any attendees beyond the council members and other presenters on the meeting agenda.¹⁸⁴ The meetings with any noticeable interest from residents occurred between June 1986 and September 1987. Twenty-six residents attended a July fourteenth meeting to discuss an application for a federal grant to supplement the costs of a new well.¹⁸⁵ The next month thirteen people joined a meeting about the possible installation of water meters and how to best implement reasonable pricing for water.¹⁸⁶ Fourteen residents attended a meeting in May 1987 where the project engineer gave an overview of Denton's community block grant application needed to help fund a new water system. By far the most attendees in decades attended a meeting on June 4, 1987. In this meeting, seventy-six residents listened to the mayor summarize how the council had worked to improve the quality and quantity of the water system since the State had filed suit against Denton in the fall of 1984. While this

¹⁸² "Walter" resident interview, February 13, 2020.

¹⁸³ Denton partner "Carol," interview by Jennifer Dunn, July 29, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ State and federal loans and grants usually require special public meetings in order to qualify for water infrastructure funding. Generally, these required informational meetings had the largest attendance numbers of town council meetings.

¹⁸⁵ Minutes, 14 July 1986.

¹⁸⁶ Minutes, 18 August 1986.

meeting covered many technical aspects of the proposed water project, council members also discussed information that impacted local water bills: an expected monthly increase in water rates and a proposal to obtain a government loan to install water meters on the homes in town.¹⁸⁷

The next meeting with any conspicuous attendance by residents was that fall when the town council held a special public water meeting to answer questions about the water project. While the mayor once again reviewed Denton's water history and the regulation, most questions dealt with water meters and whether water rates would be raised.¹⁸⁸ Between 1984 and 1988, the town council held required monthly meetings and often had bi-monthly meetings to discuss the water project. Only four of those meetings had any appreciable interest from residents, and all dealt with funding issues and water rates. This sporadic interest was repeated in the second water project when a September 2014 town council agenda had water rate increases listed as a topic. Thirty-two residents attended. After that date, most meetings about Denton's drinking water system had very few residents attend.¹⁸⁹ Residents' focus on the costs of water infrastructure made sense to one government partner who stated, "I can't think of a single individual who really looks forward to a large increase in their monthly water or wastewater bill. And that's what typically comes out of these projects, increases of the cost to local citizens."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Minutes, 4 June 1987.

¹⁸⁸ Minutes, 15 September 1987.

¹⁸⁹ Minutes, 12 September 2014.

¹⁹⁰ Denton partner "Brian," interview by Jennifer Dunn, August 13, 2020.

Conclusion

Jordan and Denton share many similar characteristics. Both are rural farming and ranching communities with declining populations and both have been buffeted by economic forces. Both are peripheral communities tied to larger economic forces that disadvantage them. Both share a healthy distrust of government, particularly the federal government and its regulatory oversight. In interviews, Dentonites commented that they found nitrate regulation for their PWS unnecessary. Denton town council members employed a number of tactics to slow the regulatory process, although they eventually had to undergo two major drinking water improvement projects to address the nitrate and other contamination issues. Many in town found the regulatory process frustrating because they did not believe that nitrates were harmful and meeting the requirements placed a financial burden on a town that was struggling to retain residents and businesses. Finally, the residents overwhelmingly believed that the new water system did not address the challenges that Denton faced for the future. Yet, even with their general discontent, residents met the regulations and maintained relationships with state and federal government officials.

A different situation unfolded in Jordan where conspiracy theories and paranoia dominated the newspaper and a group of armed anti-government Freemen threatened local and state government employees. Both communities, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, had residents who were angry at the federal government. In Denton residents grumbled and complained and put off necessary water system improvements until they were in danger of accumulating massive fines. They did not, however, engage in One World Government conspiracy theories, which encouraged the small group in

Jordan to engage in armed conflict with the government. These differing responses reveal that rural resentment encompasses a spectrum of responses, which are shaped by forces both inside and outside the community.

CHAPTER FIVE

A RISKY OCCUPATION: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE LIBBY TIMBER
INDUSTRY

In the spring of 2021, Logger Days, Libby, Montana’s sixty-one-year celebration of the area’s forest-heavy heritage, came to an end. The event was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and residents faced summer without any community celebrations. Kenny Rayone, a US Navy veteran, believed that celebrating the nation’s independence during the pandemic was essential and organized “Liberty on Parade” through downtown Libby followed by fireworks in the evening. The event was so popular with residents in 2020 that Rayone decided to make it an annual tradition after receiving funding from the Lincoln County commissioners to do so.¹ The problem was that Logger Days no longer fit on the schedule. While one county commissioner said that he hoped the celebration would return, no one stepped forward to resurrect the event; Libby no longer celebrates Logger Days.

Why does it matter that Logger Days ended in Libby? This festival represented a significant aspect of Libby’s heritage and the community’s long history of economic reliance on resource extractive industries—specifically logging. When Logger Days began, Libby supported five timber mills. As the timber market declined in the latter decades of the century and the town’s population decreased, Logger Days persevered,

¹ Derrick Perkins, “Commissioners Favor Bringing Back Logger Days in Some Form,” *Western News*, May 4, 2021. <https://thewesternnews.com/news/2021/may/04/commissioners-favor-bringing-back-logger-days-some/>.

outlasting the closure of Libby's last lumber mill in the early twenty-first century.

Although *Logger Days* ended, the town's strong connection with resource-extractive industries and the ways those industries shaped their heritage and communal identity played an important role in the community's responses to the many challenges they faced in the twentieth century.

In this chapter, I explore how extractive industries and their inherent risks have come to define the history and heritage of Libby, in this case, viewed through the lens of logging. I argue that the community's economic successes from resource extraction reinforced residents' perceptions that they could control the hazards to their bodies and livelihoods from the same industries. Libby's unique relationship to logging and its well-documented history offer the best insights into the community's identity as an extractive resource economy and the toll the death of that industry had on residents. I draw on the concept of risk as a transactional social decision made by Libby workers who weighed the physical and economic hazards of their work against their perception of the benefits they gained from their industries. To this end, I first explore how Libby, a timber and mining community, has been a place defined by risk: to the bodies of workers and to the economy. I then move to the 1917 northwest logging strike, a tumultuous time in Lincoln County's early history when workers organized in an effort to protect their bodies and communities. The construction of Libby Dam mid-century is next explored as a time when the community and workers again faced tremendous challenges but also reaped substantial rewards. Finally, I end with Libby's economy and residents on the precipice of disaster, which sets the stage for my chapter on Libby's quick decline and desperate, if

reluctant, need for government assistance as residents discover they have been exposed to toxic contaminants.

The goal of this chapter is not to provide an analytical interpretation of how Libby residents perceived risk in their community, but rather to explore the historical response of residents to risks in their jobs and lives. The study of risk perception reveals how people perceive risk and respond to it. Risk perception research developed out of an interdisciplinary milieu, mainly from the social sciences – geography, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science – which generally shows that individuals and groups perceive risk through a combination of social, psychological, political, and cultural factors instead of scientific risk assessments.² In other words, people do not respond directly to the risks they are exposed to; rather they respond to their perceptions of those risks. Interestingly, experts in risk are prone to the same factors as the general public when they rely on their own intuition instead of data to determine risks.³ Risk perception studies have shown that people often have difficulties understanding the statistical process of determining risk, especially when they are exposed to biased media coverage and factor in their own personal experiences that can suggest different risk outcomes to them. In many cases, the public often misjudges risks by overestimating them or underestimating them and believes in their perceptions with unwarranted confidence. Even more disconcerting, research has found that disagreements about risk

² Paul Slovic, “Risk Perception and Risk Analysis in a Hyperpartisan and Virtuously Violent World,” *Risk Analysis* 40, no. S1 (November 2020): 2233, DOI: 10.1111/risa.13606.

³ Paul Slovic, “Perception of Risk,” *Science* 236, no. 4799 (April 17, 1987): 281.

do not disappear when evidence is presented. New evidence is considered reliable only when it is consistent with one's initial beliefs and contrary evidence is dismissed.⁴

The basic premise of risk perception is that humans often perceive risk incorrectly.⁵ Bringing an examination of risk into Libby's historical narrative helps to explain why Libby residents continued to rely on an economically volatile industry, and why, when they realized they could no longer control the hazards in their environment and economy, they responded with anger and fear. Libby residents perceived the risks from extractive resources were low and for decades they had effectively negotiated those risks as the community boomed. In the last years of the century, however, the risks to Libby residents could no longer be negotiated or ignored and they had to deal with the legacies of their decisions.

Understanding how Libby residents perceived and navigated their physical and economic risks offers insight into which risks they deemed acceptable, which ones were not, and how their perceptions and responses to those risks changed over time. Similar to other western communities for much of the twentieth century, Libby residents generally accepted the volatile economy and dangerous working conditions found in logging and mining because they perceived the rewards as being much greater than the negative aspects. Residents took pride in their abilities to work difficult and dangerous jobs and their sacrifices mattered because Libby thrived.

⁴ Slovic, "Perception of Risk," 281.

⁵ A recent summary of risk perception research noted that the diversity of research on risk and risk perception is vast and studies a variety of aspects of risk perception. I am not attempting to creating a risk research study of Libby at this time, but rather using risk as a method for exploring the decisions made in a resource economy in the twentieth century.

Historians such as Nancy Cott have argued that domestic relations shifted in the twentieth century as marriage developed an economic dynamic where husbands provided and wives and children were dependent.⁶ Stephanie Coontz reminds us that these perfect “traditional” families never existed, but the powerful allure of the male breadwinner and the nurturing stay-at-home mother permeated American culture in the post-World War II years.⁷ Even as the trope was fictional, traditional views about marriage and gender prevailed in highly masculine working-class mining and logging communities.⁸ With its work in the mines and the forests, Lincoln County had always been a masculine place – the ratio of men to women in 1940 was 126 to 100 (the national ratio at the time was 101 to 100).⁹ Of course, women worked in logging and mining: Janet Tomcho’s 2022

⁶ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

⁸ Adam Tomczik describes logging as a “masculine universe,” one where lumberjacks constructed and defended their masculine identities through recreation and work in “‘He-Men could Talk to He-Men in He-Man Language’: Lumberjack Work Culture in Maine and Minnesota, 1840-1940,” *The Historian* 70, no. 4 (2008): 697-715. Brian Leech writes that Butte miners saw themselves as “paragons of masculinity” due to the extreme physical nature of their work and the dangers inherent in hard rock mining. Brian Leech, *The City that Ate Itself: Butte, Montana and Its Expanding Berkeley Pit* (Chicago: University of Nevada Press, 2018), 30. And in his examination of corporate anti-unionism in the turn of the twentieth century, Stephen H. Norwood discusses how mining communities held “highly traditional views about gender identity and relations continued to prevail in the mining communities. Defending a woman’s virtue and the one in which she was anchored remained a central defining attribute of manhood.” Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 115.

⁹ In 1910, the ratio of men to women in Libby was 180 to 100. Harold F. Kaufman and Lois C. Kaufman, *Toward the Stabilization and Enrichment of a Forest Community*, (Missoula: University of Montana, 1946), 6.

obituary noted that she worked for the local sawmill until it closed.¹⁰ Their numbers, however, were small. A 1946 report on Lincoln County's logging industry reported that the only women employed in the timber industry worked in offices because "Lumbering, a man's job, many be characterized as arduous and hazardous."¹¹ Herbert Neils, whose family founded the local sawmill, commented that women did not go into the logging business.¹² Logging remained a predominantly masculine environment as one report found that women only made up three percent of the logging industry workforce in 1997.¹³ For Libby residents, traditional gender roles had a long history where men worked dangerous jobs to take care of their wives and children at home.

For the middle decades of the century Libby workers were among the highest paid in the state and the town's population exploded. When risks outweighed benefits, workers negotiated to improve their situations, whether that meant higher wages, increased safety requirements, or industry-led commitments to the community at large. As the community prospered economically, residents could generally ignore the dangers inherent in their industries. They were aware of the western town boom and bust model, but for decades the community's prosperity overshadowed the hazards of their resource economy.

I argue that the community's economic successes reinforced residents' perceptions that they could control the risks to their bodies and livelihoods. Yet this

¹⁰ "Janet Tomcho Obituary," *Western News*, September 30, 2022.

¹¹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 37.

¹² Herbert Neils, Oral History by Brian Boyer, Brian Pershing, and Justin Ray, May 13, 1997, 5, Montana Heritage Project, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

¹³ Eric F. Sygnatur, "Logging is Perilous Work," *Compensation and Working Conditions* (Winter 1998): 3.

perception of control left them radically unprepared to address the economic and public health disasters they faced at the end of the century. Fissures developed in the community as residents faced the end of their primary industries and the community debated its legacy of industry and the best route forward. Like Denton and Jordan, as Libby faced twenty-first century challenges for which they were not prepared, the frustration felt by residents increased, and they joined the rising tide of anger around the state and the region in the closing decades of the twentieth century. However, as I explore in my final chapter, unlike Denton and Jordan, Libby's catastrophically detrimental legacy of asbestos poisoning from their vermiculite mine necessitated the redirection, at least temporarily, of Libby's rising anger into an unlikely reliance on the federal government borne of absolute desperation.

Risk: Libby's Identity and Heritage

For decades, Logger Days was one of Libby's biggest weekends. In 1960 a group of Jaycees members mortgaged their homes for the money to start Loggers Days as "a way to show appreciation for loggers and to educate people about the hard work loggers do."¹⁴ While Logger Days was billed as a fun family event, organizers reminded the public of the skilled and challenging work of loggers. Contestants in the festival's competitions would wield crosscut saws, axes, and chainsaws. A *Western News* editorial took quite a stern tone in discussing Logger Days, saying it was a "tradition with its yearly repetition of events that reflect the woodsman's life and the adventure of the

¹⁴ The Jaycees (United States Junior Chamber) is a leadership-training, service, and civic-minded organization that was founded in 1920 for men and women between the ages of 18 and 40. "Libby Jaycees Celebrate Logging Traditions," *Western News*, July 12, 1991.

lumberjack's career" and "attracted the foremost practitioners of the logger's skills, and the demonstration of strength, dexterity and precision have provided many thrills for the spectators."¹⁵ The paper noted that Logger Days was a rare opportunity as no other town in Montana, and few other communities in the region, had dedicated a celebration to logging and the lumberjack. The editorial finished its praises of the local industry by saying, "Only in Libby does the man who toils in the woods to have the logs that keep the country supplied with building materials and paper receive the recognition he deserves for a difficult and dangerous task. Without the logger, there would be no Libby, so it is fitting that this community devotes its big midsummer spectacular to honoring the man who is the backbone of our economy."¹⁶ To Libby residents, the importance of logging to their community and the nation at large was clear.

The festival represented the glory days of logging in the Kootenai National Forest where Libby is located and, even with the inclusion of fun games and relays, the hazards from logging were ever present to the competitors and many in the crowd. A review of severe logging injuries in 1987, for example, found that loggers were injured by falling or rolling logs and trees, entanglement or sudden impact from equipment, and of course, from chain saws.¹⁷ The study explains that logging accidents often have disabling injuries, including brain and spinal cord injuries, amputations, and "chest and extremity

¹⁵ "Logger Days is Libby's Big Week," *Western News*, July 10, 1975.

¹⁶ "Libby's Big Week."

¹⁷ Robert G. Holman, Albert Olszewski, and Ronald V. Maier, "The Epidemiology of Logging Injuries in the Northwest," *Journal of Trauma* 27, no. 9 (September 1987): 1044.

injuries were also common.”¹⁸ Many other studies on the rate of injuries and fatalities have decreed logging the most dangerous occupation in the twentieth century. Even after modernization in the industry, one report in 1997 still found that logging averaged more than one death per 1000 workers.¹⁹ Bodily risk was not the only hazard loggers faced – working in an economically volatile industry made them aware of the risk to their livelihoods as well.

These types of hazards are often discussed in risk literature, which is vast and encompasses a variety of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences, ecological sciences, and health sciences. Researchers assess risk in situations to identify and analyze hazards and best determine controls for said risk.²⁰ There are many aspects of risk studies, including risk perception, communication, and theory.²¹ Political ecology, in

¹⁸ Holman, Olszewski, and Maier, “Epidemiology of Logging,” 1047. The fact that the article is found in the *Journal of Trauma* is an indication of the severity of the kinds of injuries associated with logging.

¹⁹ Sygnatur, “Perilous Work,” 3.

²⁰ National Research Council, *Risk Assessment in the Federal Government: Managing the Process*, (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1983), 2. Risk assessment, as a discipline, is often based on mortality rates using mathematical theories of probability and scientific methodology. As a framework for how to assess risks to the environment and public health, the National Resource Council published *Risk Assessment in the Federal Government*, also known as the “Red Book” in 1983 to address “the issue of increased risk of cancer resulting from exposure to chemicals in the environment, an issue that has aroused great public concern in recent years. For an overview of the long history of risk assessment and risk analysis, see Vincent T. Covello and Jeryl Mumpower, “Risk Analysis and Risk Management: An Historical Perspective,” *Risk Analysis* 5, no. 2 (June 1985):103 – 120.

²¹ The study of risk perception reveals how people perceive risk and respond to it. An overview of research on risk perception can be found by Michael Siegrist and Josephy Árvai, “Risk Perception: Reflections on 40 Year of Research,” *Risk Analysis* 40, no. S1 (2020): 2191 – 2206, DOI: 10.1111/risa.13599. Risk Communication research examines the best practices of explaining risk to the public and why the public often understands risk in ways at odds with risk assessments. For a review on the field of risk

particular, has produced substantial research on risks, hazards, and vulnerabilities to examine communities' uneven access to resources and exposure to risk.²² Historians, however, have not engaged in any great depth with the study of risk and how it shapes individual and community perceptions of and responses to the hazards they face.²³

The Risky Business of Logging

The impacts of the timber industry — the rapidly growing housing market in the mid-twentieth century, the use of synthetic chemicals and petroleum in wood products, and the effects of new building materials on environmental and human health — have been well studied by environmental and labor historians.²⁴ Research on logging camps,

Communication see Dominic Balog-Way, Katherine McComas, and John Besley, “The Evolving Field of Risk Communication,” *Risk Analysis* 40, no. S1 (November 2020): 2242, DOI: 10.1111/risa.13615. Cultural theory is a framework for understanding how groups in society interpret danger and build trust or distrust in institutions regulating risk. For a literature review of the cultural theory of risk, see Jamie McEvoy, Susan J. Gilbertz, Matthew B. Anderson, Kerri Jean Ormerod, and Nicholas T. Bergmann, “Cultural theory of Risk as Heuristic for Understanding Perceptions of Oil and Gas Development in Eastern Montana, USA,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 4, no. 4 (2017): 852-859.

²² Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004). Robbins adeptly outlines the foundational ideas and tools in political ecology and deliberately refrains from calling political ecology a theory or methodology, but rather a “community of practices.” These practices analyze the interactions between economics, politics, and nature, particularly in the developing world, which attracts scholars from anthropology, forestry, environmental sociology, environmental history, and geography.

²³ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Andrews explores how nature and work in Colorado coal mines created a shared workscape for miners as they unionized against the repressive coal companies. While not expressly addressing risk, Thomas asserts that the mine workspace produced a culture that led to militancy and violence in its quest for workers' rights.

²⁴ The growth of the built world of post-World War II America, particularly in suburban homes, and their effect on the environment, have been studied by Adam Rome in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American*

particularly in the early twentieth century, often focused on the labor disputes between the International Workers of the World (IWW) and other labor organizations and the lumber companies in the Pacific Northwest.²⁵ Environmental histories of logging discuss the environmental movement's impact on the timber industry, particularly the unintended

Environmentalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The lumber industry after World War II rapidly replaced traditional building materials with hybrid wood materials that contained petroleum and chemical products. Historians have studied the effects of these materials, including plywood and other wood products, on human health. See Janet Ore, "Mobile Home Syndrome: Engineered Woods and the Making of a New Domestic Ecology in the Post-World War II Era," *Technology and Culture* 52, no. 2 (April 2011): 260-286. Michelle Murphy studied the connection between building materials and human health, particularly women office workers in *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). The long-term effects of synthetic chemicals on the human body have been discussed by Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and Ellen Griffith Spears, *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). Recent occupational research on the long-term effects of exposure in sawmills has mainly been conducted in Canada and European Union or African countries. While the studies have not focused on US logging, sawmill workers, in general, are exposed to a variety of hazards including "wood dust (a well-known carcinogen), microorganisms, endotoxins, resin acids...and vapors containing terpenes, which may cause skin irritation, allergy, and respiratory symptoms including asthma," and nasal cancers and possibly lung cancer. Anne Straumfors, Raymond Olsen, Hanne Line Date, Anani Afanou, Dave McClean, Marie Corbin, Andrea 't Mannelje, Bente Ulvestad, Berit Bakke, Helle Laier Johnson, Jeroen Douwes, and Wijnand Eduard, "Exposure to Wood Dust, Microbial Comments, and Terpenes in the Norwegian Sawmill Industry," *Annals of Work Exposures and Health* 62, no. 6 (2018): 674 – 688, doi:10.1093/annweh.wxy041.

²⁵ See Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1967); John McClelland, Jr., *Wobbly War: The Centralia Story* (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1978); and Erik Loomis, *Empire of Timber: Labor Unions and the Pacific Northwest Forests* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Books on the unions and mining in the early twentieth century include Andrews, *Killing for Coal: Gunther Peck, Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Janet Finn, *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture, and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

and complicated dynamic between humans and the environment.²⁶ These histories focus on the forest environment and on the logging industry leading Eric Loomis to assert that the historiography of forest history “largely leaves the workers out of the discussion.”²⁷ I offer Libby as a case study to see how residents evaluated the risks and hazards of living in a timber community and how those perceptions shaped their responses to the decline of the industry.

The physical risks in the timber industry have always been high and government reports on worker safety in the twentieth century repeatedly ranked logging near the top of the list for hazardous occupations. A report on injuries and deaths from 1969 to 1974 found that workers who produced lumber and wood products had an injury rate thirty-eight percent higher than all other types of workers combined.²⁸ Forestry in western states was even more hazardous due to its often steep and unstable terrain and the remoteness of the region.²⁹ These factors contributed to the disproportionately high rate of injuries for loggers in the West compared to loggers throughout the country.³⁰ A Bureau of Labor Statistics survey in 1982 found that workers were most often injured by being struck or

²⁶ Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

²⁷ Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 7.

²⁸ Todd M. Frazier and Robert J. Mullan, “Occupational Injuries and Deaths Among Loggers, United States,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control, August 1, 1983, ,

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001718.htm>.

²⁹ Elise Lagerstrom, Sheryl Magzamen, and John Rosencrance, “A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Logging Injuries in Montana and Idaho,” *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 60, no. 12 (2017): 1084.

³⁰ Frazier and Mullan, “Occupational Injuries and Deaths.”

crushed by wood, by slipping, tripping, or falling, and from contact with chainsaws.³¹ In fact, the survey noted, “At every step in the logging process, from felling the tree to transporting it to the mill, workers are subject to a variety of hazards from the environment, type of work, and equipment used.”³²

At one point in the 1990s commercial fishing surpassed logging as the most dangerous occupation, but by 1997, logging moved back into the dubious top spot with over 128 deaths per 100,000 workers reported.³³ The unpredictable and dangerous nature of logging was put into stark relief in the 1997 report when the author noted that loggers comprised one-half of one percent of the total workforce in America, yet they accounted for nearly two percent of all fatalities.³⁴ Even in the twenty-first century, with increased mechanization and improved technology, logging and its associated activities led all other industries in injuries and death: the national fatality rate for all industries in 2014 was 3.3 workers per 100,000 workers, but for forestry workers, it was 92 workers per 100,000.³⁵ For injuries, the rate was 5.1 per 100, which exceeded all other industries combined at 3.2 per 100.³⁶ While most studies focused on logging, some examined the hazards related to wood processing and sawmills. Injury rates of employees in Maine wood product

³¹ “Bulletin 2203: Injuries in the Logging Industry,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor (June 1983), 1.

³² “Bulletin 2203,” 1.

³³ Sygnatur, “Perilous Work,” 3.

³⁴ Sygnatur, “Perilous Work,” 8.

³⁵ Lagerstrom, Magzamen, and Rosencrance, “Logging Injuries,” 1077. Starting in the 1990s, *The Western News* noted the prevalence of helicopter logging in the area and corresponding helicopter accidents.

³⁶ Lagerstrom, Magzamen, and Rosencrance, “Logging Injuries,” 1077.

manufacturing were almost twice the average of state-wide injuries in all industries.³⁷

Overall, the risks from working in logging and related industries have been, and continue to be, quite high compared to other occupations.

While timber has been a dangerous industry, it is also a volatile one. The story of logging communities is the story of the rise and fall of western boomtowns.³⁸ These communities existed to supply the natural resource needs of the nation. They were peripheral in that they were often geographically remote and far from markets and

³⁷ Christina A. Holcroft and Laura Punnett, “Work Environment Risk Factors for Injuries in Wood Processing,” *Journal of Safety Research* 40 (2009): 247. This report only addressed acute injuries from wood production and not chronic injuries from inhaling sawdust or exposure to wood preservatives found in treated wood products. Friesen, et al. discussed the challenges of establishing exposure-disease casualty from wood dust in sawmills and developed models to predict historical exposure for sawmills to assess wood-related health effects. M.C. Friesen, H.W. Davies, K. Teschke, S. Marion, and P.A. Demers, “Predicting Historical Dust and Wood Dust Exposure in Sawmills: Model Development and Validation,” *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 2, no. 12 (2005): 650-658, DOI: 10.1080/15459620500391676.

³⁸ Historians have studied the effects of boom-and-bust economies, especially with the decline of industry in the late twentieth century and the rise of amenity economies. To understand how communities with declining industry have marginalized and relegated workers to low paying jobs see Hal K. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). Michael Childers centers the dynamic between tourism and skiing in the intermountain West in his book on the environmental consequences of the growth of Colorado’s ski resort industry. Michael W. Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg: Ski Resorts and the Environmental Movement* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012). See also David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long, *Seen and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001). Mining boomtowns have been studied more extensively than logging boomtowns, but all resource economies share a similar rise and fall. For more on mining boomtowns see Thomas Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggle in Hard Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Gillian Klucas *Leadville: The Struggle to Revive and American Town* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004); Bradley D. Snow, *Living with Lead: An Environmental History of Idaho’s Coeur d’Alenes* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); and Leech, *The City that Ate Itself*.

controlled by outside capital.³⁹ Resource communities have historically been plagued by seasonal layoffs and fluctuations in global markets that locals have little ability to control. The foundational historical study on logging camps is Williams Robbins' *Hard Times in Paradise: Coos Bay, Oregon, 1850-1986*. Robbins describes the timber industry, directed by global lumber markets, as a form of economic colonization where the resources were depleted to the benefit of eastern financiers. Robbins notes that while logging camps were portrayed as "a composite of patriotism, apple pie, and duty to family and motherhood," this domestic description left out the constant possibility of injury or death as well as the periods of unemployment due to seasonal layoffs or economic busts.⁴⁰ Libby shares the history and many of the challenges of Coos Bay and other logging communities.

Libby And Industry

The area around Libby was mined and timbered for much of the twentieth century. Agriculture, logging, and mining all left their scars on the landscape and the

³⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). In Wallerstein's world-system analysis semi peripheral and peripheral countries supply core countries with resources and labor. Capital is located in the core, which controls markets, sets prices, and benefits from this unequal exchange of goods and labor. While Wallerstein uses a global lens, his theory can be seen at work in resource Communities in the American West. *The Western News* editor, Charles D. Rowe, warned in 1938 that outside lumber companies, mainly from Idaho, could deplete the local supply of logs "to the detriment of the business life and property of Lincoln County." Rowe argued that if residents did not fight this outward distribution of the area's logs, Libby would become a ghost town. Rowe succinctly encapsulated world-systems analysis forty years before Wallerstein developed his theory in the 1970s: "Distant sawmills will spend but little money here. Most of the manufacturing wages will be spent where the mills are located. Why should Lincoln County's resources be sued to maintain a distant industry to the destruction of local industry." "Distant Sawmills Reach Into This Area (Half A Century)," *Western News*, January 20, 1988.

⁴⁰ William G. Robbins, *Hard Times in Paradise: Coos Bay, Oregon, 1850-1986* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 54.

bodies of workers in Lincoln County. Many of Libby's residents had worked in these demanding occupations since the early days of white settlement in the region. Mining brought settlers to the area soon after Montana's gold rush began in 1864, but logging soon became the identifying feature of working life as the vast forest reserve seemed limitless – ninety-seven percent of the land in Lincoln County is covered in forest.⁴¹

Catholic missionaries built the earliest sawmills in the state in the Bitterroot Valley, but the industrial use of sawmills developed in conjunction with the discovery of gold.⁴²

While early residents in the mining communities of Alder Gulch and Nevada City constructed early, small-scale mills, the state-wide need for lumber soon outgrew their modest capabilities.⁴³ Lumber was needed to build camps and eventually the necessities of a western boomtown: saloons, boarding houses, stores, schools, and churches.⁴⁴

Lumber stabilized mine shafts and fueled smelting in mining centers like Butte and Anaconda. Sawmill construction boomed to supply the need that was so great the Anaconda Copper Mining Company bought Northern Pacific's grant in Montana and started a lumber business.⁴⁵ In addition, sawmills followed the railroads built across the

⁴¹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 5.

⁴² Clarence C. Strong and Judy Schutza, "The Birth of Montana's Lumber Industry," *The Pacific Northwest Forum* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 11.

⁴³ Strong and Schutza, "Montana's Lumber Industry," 11.

⁴⁴ Russell R. Elliott, *Nevada's Twentieth-Century Mining Boom: Tonopah, Goldfield, Ely* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1966), 44.

⁴⁵ Benjamin G. Rader, "The Montana Lumber Strike of 1917," *Pacific Historical Review*, 36, no. 2 (May 1967): 189.

state: one mile of new track needed 2,500 railroad ties, and telegraph poles and snow fences followed the tracks.⁴⁶

Montana's transportation and economic connections to national and global markets required vast amounts of timber resulting in a logging boom, especially in the heavily forested northwest section of the state. Many of the mills in northwestern Montana were funded by lumbermen from midwestern, particularly Great Lake, states.⁴⁷ Logging started in the Kootenai region in 1899 after the early gold strikes petered out.⁴⁸ The railroad reached Libby in 1892, but the economy did not see a boost from timber production until the Kootenai National Forest was created in 1906.⁴⁹

As the timber industry bloomed, many arrived looking for jobs. An article in the local newspaper describing the opportunities in Libby said, "we talk glibly of our mining and our lumbering and incidentally of our mining... When favored by nature in addition with great stores of mineral and great bodies of mercantile timber, it is indeed a fortunate combination for any section and will build a city, wherever the hand of man turns these gifts of nature to use and profit."⁵⁰ The towns in Lincoln County harvested their vast resources, particularly through logging, mining, and agriculture. Logging soon became the predominant industry of the region and the first arena in which Libby workers would assert control over their safety and working conditions in the early years of the county.

⁴⁶ Darris Flanagan, *Skid Trails: Glory Days of Montana Logging* (Stevensville: Stoneysdale Press Publishing Company, 2003), 14.

⁴⁷ Strong and Schutza, "Montana's Lumber Industry," 18.

⁴⁸ Richard R. Aarstad, "Montana's Other Strike: The 1917 IWW Timber Strike in the Kootenai Valley" (master's thesis, University of Montana, 2000), 8.

⁴⁹ Aarstad, "Montana's Other Strike," 12.

⁵⁰ "What is There to Make a City Here at Libby?" *Libby Herald*, November 16, 1911.

1917 IWW Strike

Loggers have always accepted some level of risk in their dangerous jobs, but the long hours, poor pay, and unsanitary living conditions in 1917 proved to be too much in Lincoln County. The subsequent International Workers of the World (IWW) strike proved that workers would not passively assume the risks of these dangerous jobs. When they deemed conditions too hazardous, they fought to see improvements in their working conditions.

The lumberjack embodied mythological characteristics. As Benjamin Rader described them, “Fiercely independent, unconsciously intrepid, gigantic in physique, in the woods and close to nature, he enjoyed an ideal way of life that nurtured superior men and superior virtues. Careless, happy-go-lucky, he rolled his blankets and walked from camp to camp as the spirit moved him.”⁵¹ These traits could be found in the giant folk hero lumberjack, Paul Bunyan. Tales of his prodigious appetite, ability to survive extreme weather, and performance of superhuman feats were told in lumber camps across the nation. Life may have been easy for Paul and Babe, his blue ox, but the stereotype of a happy and healthy lumberjack was challenged by the reality of low pay and poor working conditions in the forests. One Libby logger, Darris Flanagan, described the environmental and bodily hazards of logging in his history of the region. When describing early loggers, he reinforced their connection to the mythical Paul Bunyan: “The Copenhagen snoose chewing, well-muscled men, who swore all day as long as they logged, were lumberjacks, but some called them timber beasts. They lived a rugged,

⁵¹ Rader, “Strike of 1917,” 192.

isolated life in a distant lumber camp and worked and played hard. They tended to be hardy, unmarried, footloose, and migratory young men, who labored six days a week, always under dangerous conditions.”⁵² Even the clothes worn by the logger represented his constant exposure to hazards – heavy wool to protect from insects and designed to tear to prevent tripping from pant legs snagged in heavy brush.⁵³ It is not surprising that loggers, who worked some of the most dangerous and underpaid jobs in the early twentieth century, joined the IWW, a labor movement that promised to fight for worker solidarity and the dignity of all laborers.

During the Gilded Age, industrialists accumulated great wealth and the economic and social disparities between owners and workers spread. These schisms became particularly acute in the West where, historian Clemens Work describes that “industrial concentration and accumulation of awesome wealth occurred rapidly,” especially in the mining and logging industries.⁵⁴ Workers, frustrated that corporate owners received the fruits of their labor, flocked to the Socialist Party, which, among many of its goals, advocated fighting against capitalist oppression and collective ownership of many industries, increasing workers’ pay, and improving working conditions.⁵⁵ While the Socialist Party tended to be moderate and reformist, the IWW represented a more militant stance towards corporate America. In fact, the IWW differed from other unions at the

⁵² Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 37.

⁵³ Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 37.

⁵⁴ Clemens P. Work, *Darkest Before Dawn: Sedition and Free Speech in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 15.

⁵⁵ “The Socialist Party Platform of 1912,” *sageamericanhistory.net*, updated August 14, 2013, <http://sageamericanhistory.net/progressive/docs/SocialistPlat1912.htm>.

time with its decision to reject political action. Instead of making a difference at the ballot box, IWW members focused on “direct action,” including strikes and sabotage.⁵⁶

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Lincoln County residents did not espouse particularly radical political leanings; they tended to support the Democratic party along with most other voters in the state. Political leanings aside, the county was named for Abraham Lincoln in 1909 after the Montana legislature made his birthday a legal holiday.⁵⁷ Such allegiance to a Republican candidate was not repeated by Montanans for decades. In reviewing the political landscape for the upcoming 1904 presidential election, Harper’s Weekly noted that “Montana has never given its electoral votes to a Republican, except in 1892, and then by a plurality of only 1270.”⁵⁸

The Socialist Party of Montana records at the Montana Historical Society note that the Party gained prominence in the state from large numbers of workers in the mines and forests of the state. In 1899, there were twelve members of the Socialist Party, and by 1911, the state-wide number had grown to 1900.⁵⁹ Socialists applied for charters to create local branches of the Party. The Libby local branch members submitted their charter in

⁵⁶ Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 60. The 1914 IWW convention called for workers to slow down their production and use sabotage to stymie industry, however, there is little evidence that sabotage occurred in timber camps.

⁵⁷ Melody Condrón, ed., *Lincoln County, Montana: Celebrating 100 Years* (Libby, MT: Lincoln County Public Libraries, 2009), 5.

⁵⁸ “Comment,” *Harper’s Weekly*, volume 48, no. 2484 (July 30, 1904): 1161.

⁵⁹ “Socialist Party of Montana Records, 1899-1950,” Montana Historical Society Microfilm Collection 425, Vertical File, Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena, MT.

October 1910.⁶⁰ The fourteen founding working-class members included a school superintendent, a carpenter, a lawyer, a cook, and a few laborers and miners.⁶¹ At first glance, the lack of loggers on the charter might seem surprising, although the chairperson followed up later with the party headquarters in Butte and noted, “Most of the comrades [sic] are out in the timber so it makes it bad to fix up [and collect dues from them].”⁶² Twenty miles to the west, the Troy local branch also struggled to find members during the summer as “everybody around here was busy haying and then the forest fire broke out...nobody is thinking of politics at present.”⁶³

Other communities in Lincoln County found enough interested Socialists to join the party even during the summer logging months. Fortine, which lay along the Great Northern Railroad that shipped out the region’s timber, signed its charter in November 1910.⁶⁴ Signatories included a merchant, forest ranger, drayman, rancher, manufacturer, and homesteader.⁶⁵ The appeal of the Party crossed occupational lines, but found its strongest adherents in timber and mining jobs. The attraction of socialism to working laborers was clear: the Party platform for Montana “declared it our fixed and ultimate

⁶⁰ “Application for Charter for a Local of the Socialist Party of America,” October 1910, Folder 38, Montana Socialist Party Local Libby, Montana Historical Society General Correspondence, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁶¹ “Application for Charter,” Montana Socialist Party Local Libby, Folder 39.

⁶² Forrest D. Head, Letter to L.J. Duncan, February 20, 1911, Montana Socialist Party Local Libby, Folder 39.

⁶³ Ed A. Tiesing, Letter to L.J. Duncan, September 9, 1910, Montana Socialist Party Local Troy, Folder 62.

⁶⁴ “Application for Charter for a Local of the Socialist Party of America,” November 4, 1910, Montana Socialist Party Local Fortine, Folder 21.

⁶⁵ “Application for Charter,” November 4, 1910, Montana Socialist Party Local Fortine, Folder 21.

purpose to bring about the complete overthrow of the present capitalist system of society with its plutocratic class rule.”⁶⁶ With this purpose, a series of labor battles occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century in which workers fought with owners, as well as the government, over their living and working conditions.

National and state Socialist candidates garnered votes in Lincoln County elections. In the 1912 presidential election, Woodrow Wilson won both Lincoln County and the state by a fair margin. Progressive candidate Theodore Roosevelt came in second for the state, but Lincoln County residents instead favored Socialist Eugene Debs. County voters also showed support for local left-leaning candidates: the only Socialist elected to the state legislature that year was Charles Connor from Lincoln County.⁶⁷ Nationally, 1912 was the peak of political success for the party and almost 1,000 socialists were elected to local offices around the nation in 1911.⁶⁸ Socialists in the mining city of Butte, about 300 miles southeast of Libby, saw the most success in the state.⁶⁹ In 1911, most of

⁶⁶ “State Platform, Socialist Party of Montana,” April 1916, 1, Vertical File, “Socialism,” Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁶⁷ Legislative Election Results 1912, Archived Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed February 29, 2020, https://sosmt.gov/Portals/142/Elections/archives/1910s/1912_Legislative_Assembly.pdf?dt=1523477333219.

⁶⁸ Joseph R. Conlin, “The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party,” *Science and Society* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 22.

⁶⁹ For more on the rise and fall of Socialism in Butte, see Jerry W. Calvert, *The Gibraltar: Socialism and Labor in Butte, Montana, 1895-1920* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1988) and David R. Berman, *Radicalism in the Mountain West, 1890-1920: Socialist, Populists, Minders, and Wobblies* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2007). Socialism could be found outside of Butte’s capital and labor. See Verlaine Stoner McDonald, *The Red Corner: The Rise and Fall of Communism in Northeastern Montana* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2010).

the newly elected city administrators there were proudly socialist.⁷⁰ It was in Lincoln County, however, that Connor gained the honorific as first socialist elected to state office.

Given the IWW's focus on "solidarity, worker equality, and class warfare," loggers, frustrated with their low pay and horrible working and living conditions, found the IWW platform attractive.⁷¹ Erik Loomis described the plight of loggers: "Loggers would deal with substandard housing, adulterated and rotting food, communicable diseases, exposure to heat and cold, and general lack of sanitation."⁷² Mill workers generally avoided the itinerant and isolated living conditions of loggers, but all timber workers were exposed to severe injuries and death "in a dangerous and highly mechanized working environment."⁷³ In response to these conditions IWW Lumber Workers' Industrial Union No. 500 in Spokane started a systematic campaign to organize the lumber workers in the Northwest. IWW members, called Wobblies, advocated for "a wage increase, the eight-hour day, and improved working conditions," along with "better food service, meals served in porcelain dishes, a maximum of twelve people in each bunkhouse, spring beds, shower baths, free hospital care, and adequate lighting for the bunkhouses."⁷⁴

Lincoln County loggers were familiar with the IWW that had carried out strikes in western Montana in 1907, 1908, and 1909 with limited success.⁷⁵ The election results of

⁷⁰ Conlin, "The I.W.W.," 32.

⁷¹ Rader, "Strike of 1917," 195.

⁷² Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 23.

⁷³ Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 28.

⁷⁴ Rader, "Strike of 1917," 189.

⁷⁵ James Rowan, *The IWW in the Lumber Industry* (Seattle: Lumber Workers Industrial Union No. 500, 1969), 21. Some of the logging camps outside of Missoula saw the most

1916 revealed just how attractive the Socialist platform was to Lincoln County residents: while the Democrats swept the election across the state, almost thirteen percent of Lincoln County residents voted for the Socialist candidates for the US House of Representatives.⁷⁶ Only nearby Mineral County had a higher percentage of Socialist voters at nearly 16%. The radical mining counties filled with immigrants — Deer Lodge and Silver Bow — showed lower percentages, almost two percent and almost nine percent respectively.⁷⁷ These counties would be filled with IWW members within a year.

The IWW rallied workers around the premise of One Big Union that organized all workers in a single union rather than separating them by craft or tools used.⁷⁸ One IWW organizer explained the importance of an inclusive union: “[Lumber workers] had come to realize that; if their condition was ever to be improved, they themselves must take action; and that the One Big Union offered the only effective weapon to break the tyrannical rules of the Lumber Trust.”⁷⁹ This “Lumber Trust” employed many workers - about 500,000 in 1906 or the peak of the logging industry.⁸⁰ One member of the “Trust” was the Eureka Lumber Company, operating in north Lincoln County, and was the

success in their strikes with a nine-hour day. In 1913, the lumber companies tried to reinstate a ten-hour workday, and Missoula workers went on strike and rebuffed the companies’ plans.

⁷⁶ Legislative Election Results 1912.

⁷⁷ Legislative Election Results 1912.

⁷⁸ Rowan, *The IWW*, 17. With the idea of One Big Union, the IWW was specifically rejecting the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that had been founded by socialists but, according to the IWW, worked too closely with employers and perpetuated the present capitalist system.

⁷⁹ Rowan, *The IWW*, 26.

⁸⁰ Tomczik, ““He-Men could Talk to He-Men in He-Man Language””, 697.

largest timber company in the state with 300 employees in 1915.⁸¹ Although the main strike took place in Eureka, Wobblies also organized at the Libby Lumber Company and workers there joined in the strike.

In the early months of 1917, the Spokane Lumber Company sent a letter to the leadership of the Eureka Lumber Company regarding a rumor that the IWW planned to “make an example of the Eureka Lum. Co. this spring and summer” by striking.⁸² The writer noted that the IWW was a “menace” and suggested that Eureka hire anti-IWW men as “one never knows where it will end but a few extra men on a payroll who could influence a change of plan might finally result in a breakup of the organization and the elimination of the evil.”⁸³ In response to the warning, the Eureka Lumber Company hired the Thiel Detective Service Company to keep them apprised of the situation with the IWW. The detective agency installed an “operative,” John Black, as a spy within the organization and he filed regular reports to C.W. Weil, president of the Eureka Lumber Company, throughout the next year.

In March 1917, the Lumber Workers Industrial Union 500 from Spokane called for a general strike in Idaho, Montana, and eastern Washington during the log drive when logs were moved downriver from the forests to sawmills. Demands included “sanitary sleeping quarters” with “good wholesome food,” eight-hour workdays, free board, and

⁸¹ Donald E. Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth: The Story of the Kootenai River and Libby Dam* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing, 1979), 111.

⁸² Spokane Lumber Company to [illegible], 17, February 1917, C.A. Weil Correspondence, Eureka Lumber Company Records, UPMC 153 (82:2-4), IWW 1917-1918 folder, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁸³ Spokane Lumber Company to [illegible], 17, February 1917, Montana Historical Society.

the company paying hospital fees for the men.⁸⁴ James Rowan, who helped to organize the lumber workers for the IWW described the toll on workers' bodies, saying "Few men who have worked as sawyers for any length of time, are possessed of a sound pair of hands, and many have lost one or more of their fingers. Often it is the whole hand." Work in a mill was no safer as Rowan explained, "A single misstep or slip would mean death or mutilation in the whirling, unguarded machinery accidents are frequent." Rowan connected these accidents to the long, ten-hour work day that could "cause a man to lose his quickness, alertness, and accurate coordination of hand and eye." And finally, he turned to the logging camps, which he called "relics — more like cattle pens than the habitations of civilized men in the twentieth century."⁸⁵ For striking workers, safety, adequate pay, and living conditions were reasons to take on powerful lumber companies.

Wobblies could be found across Lincoln County. In Fortine's logging camps, the IWW reported that seventy percent of the men working were members of the IWW and "were going to make it hot for the Eureka Lumber Company this spring."⁸⁶ One saloon owner supported IWW "agitators" by supplying them food and beds even when they could not afford it because "he has no use for the Eureka Lumber Company and is not a bit backward in letting it be known."⁸⁷ The Lincoln County sheriff in Libby probably did not give Weil the response he hoped regarding the upcoming strike. When Weil contacted

⁸⁴ Report from Thiel Detective Service Company, "IWW Convention, Spokane, Washington, March 4-5-6, 1917," n.d., 2, C.A. Weil Correspondence, Eureka Lumber Company Records UPMC 153 (82:2-4), IWW 1917-1918 folder, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT..

⁸⁵ Rowan, *The IWW*, 9.

⁸⁶ Report from Thiel Detective Service Company, n.d., Montana Historical Society.

⁸⁷ Report from Thiel Detective Service Company, n.d., Montana Historical Society.

Sheriff W.L. Brown about the strikers, Brown reminded Eureka Lumber Company's president that the IWW had been operating in Montana and Idaho, "and while their reputation as a labor organization is bad, it seems that they have the same right to organize or strike that any other organization has, as long as they do so in a quiet and peaceable manner."⁸⁸ After receiving this disappointing reply, Weil quickly reached out to Governor Sam V. Stewart asking for help.

In a telegram to Governor Stewart, the Company made sure to portray the IWW in the worst light saying, "Our town is overrun with the I.W.W. element...and fear unless this movement is checked promptly, there will soon be a ring of terror in this locality, and anarchy, arson and bloodshed will follow."⁸⁹ The Company noted that Eureka residents had called for a meeting to organize "an industrial protective association" in response.⁹⁰ At the meeting fifty locals pledged their cooperation and support to the Company and agreed to use their influence to keep the IWW out of town.⁹¹ P.L. Howe, another owner of the Eureka Lumber company, wrote his business partner Weil a letter encouraging him to hire "a half-blood Indian" who Howe had met in Minnesota to quell the IWW recruitment and keep the log drive moving, "Now, if you need just such a chap as this, who would be able to deal with anywhere from six to ten ordinary I.W.W.s and would

⁸⁸ W.L. Brown to C.A. Weil, 13 March 1917, C.A. Weil Correspondence, Eureka Lumber Company Records UPMC 153 (82:2-4) IWW 1917-1918 folder, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁸⁹ Telegram, Eureka Lumber Company to Gov. S.V. Stewart, 12 March 1917, C.A. Weil Correspondence, Lumber Company Records UPMC 153 (82:2-4) IWW 1917-1918 folder, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁹⁰ Telegram, Eureka Lumber Company to Gov. S.V. Stewart, 12 March 1917, Montana Historical Society.

⁹¹ [Illegible] to P.L. Howe, 14 March 1917, 1, Montana Historical Society.

have them piled around him until somebody would have to help him over the debris when the little scrimmage is over, I will try and get him to you. I think he would really enjoy a couple of months on the drive at Eureka this summer.”⁹² The Eureka Lumber Company stood ready to respond to the strikes with violence, if necessary.

Neither side backed down and in mid-April, less than two weeks after America’s entrance into World War I, Eureka loggers started to strike. IWW fever spread quickly in the area and into neighboring Flathead County. Loggers and sawmill workers continued to walk off their jobs throughout the Pacific Northwest as they recognized how essential lumber was to the war effort.⁹³ The IWW strikes stirred up concerns from industry and government, especially after 168 miners lost their lives in the Butte Speculator Mine disaster on June 8, 1917. This accident, still the most deadly accident in underground hard rock mining in American history, led to a large strike in Butte fueled by frustration miners felt toward the corporate companies that controlled their lives and cared little for their safety.⁹⁴ In the summer of 1917 workers, many of whom were in the IWW, challenged the war effort through two massive strikes in the western states: Up to 40,000

⁹² P.L Howe to C.A. Weil, March 16, 1917, Montana Historical Society.

⁹³ Work, *Darkest Before Dawn*, 72.

⁹⁴ Michael Punke, *Fire and Brimstone: The North Butte Mining Disaster of 1917* (New York: Hachette Books, 2006), 197. Punke argues that the IWW did not direct the strike in Butte after the Speculator disaster, but instead, the strike was led by the Butte Metal Mine Workers Union. There were, however, connections between the IWW and the miner’s union as many of the strike’s leaders had been card carrying members of the IWW and Anaconda and the press enthusiastically linked any IWW actions in Butte with the striking miners.

loggers left their jobs and less than ten percent of the work force remained in the Butte mines.⁹⁵

Once the strike started Weil sent a telegram to his partner Howe commenting on the situation. Weil gave a fairly mild description of the situation saying that strikers had engaged in “Picketing and petty annoyances...but no disturbance.”⁹⁶ The same day Weil notified Montana’s Senators Thomas J. Walsh and Henry L. Myers of the strike describing a more dire situation: “these I.W.W. agitators, many of whom are foreigners, and are boldly waving the red flag from their tents, and have been driven out of Idaho and Washington, are intimidating and threatening the lives of our men, and preventing them from performing the work necessary to get logs to our mill.”⁹⁷ Weil’s dramatic description of the situation to the Senators supported his request that troops be sent to “compel the men to either go to work or desist in their demonstration and intimidation tactics against our workmen.”⁹⁸

Weil may have invoked images of IWW anarchy in his push for support from the government, but the Wobblies felt strongly that theirs was a battle against tyranny. A letter between IWW members described the strike thusly: “The shut down is burning forth a savage groth [sic] from the beasts of capatilism [sic] but we are confident we have them at by [sic] in their dens they are beginning to respect our power which is gaining

⁹⁵ Work, *Darkest Before Dawn*, 73.

⁹⁶ C.A. Weil to PL Howe, Telegraph, 19 April 1917, Montana Historical Society.

⁹⁷ C.A. Weil to T.J. Walsh and H.L Myers, Telegraph, 19 April 1917, Montana Historical Society.

⁹⁸ C.A. Weil to T.J. Walsh and H.L Myers, 19 April 1917, Montana Historical Society.

recrutes dailey [sic].”⁹⁹ Rumors circulated that the IWW might employ sabotage in their fight. George Patterson, an employee of the company, submitted a report detailing the early days of the strike when suspicious fires started at various logging camps and 200,000 feet of timber were burned.¹⁰⁰ Patterson also believed that IWW members destroyed equipment and spiked logs with nails costing the company money, slowing the log drive, and endangering the lives of workers at sawmills.¹⁰¹ The strikebreaking activities of logging companies were just as provocative – gunmen patrolled riverbanks, spies and stool pigeons infiltrated the workers, many strikers were arrested and jailed, and lies of riots and vandalism were spread in industry-friendly papers.¹⁰²

Tensions between industry and labor peaked when Weil’s desperate missives found support from Governor Stewart who immediately dispatched troops from Fort Harrison in Helena.¹⁰³ Stewart believed that the strike would quickly end with the arrival of the military and enthusiastically reiterated his support of the Eureka Lumber Company: “Believe me, whatever I have done in the premises I have done cheerfully, and am glad of the opportunity to serve you in any capacity.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Turner to Sheridan, n.d., Montana Historical Society.

¹⁰⁰ George Patterson Statement, n.d., Montana Historical Society.

¹⁰¹ George Patterson Statement, n.d., Montana Historical Society.

¹⁰² Rowan, *The IWW*, 31.

¹⁰³ S.V. Stewart to C.A. Weil, Telegraph, 20 April 1917, Montana Historical Society.

¹⁰⁴ S.V. Stewart to C.A. Weil, 28 April 1917, Montana Historical Society. This industry friendly attitude from many of Montana’s elected officials continued through the twentieth century. Soon after the discovery of asbestos in Libby, which will be covered in the next chapter, Governor Judy Martz declared that the title “‘lap dog’ of industry...fits her just fine.” Martz said she worked with industry of all sizes due to its importance on the economy, stating “We will be firm, we will be aggressive and collectively we will send a message loud and clear, far and wide, that Montana is open for business. Bob Anez, “Martz Embraces Industry ‘Lap Dog’ Label,” *Missoulian*, December 7, 2000.

Response to IWW Strike

As striking workers advocated for better working conditions and pay, others in the region viewed the strikes as unpatriotic and anti-American, especially as the country entered World War I. Many Montana newspapers took the side of industry. An editorial in the *Western News*, Libby's newspaper, compared the IWW to a wolf in sheep's clothing and described the wolf's insatiable and cruel tactics to destroy industry.¹⁰⁵ The piece concluded with a warning that if national laws were not crafted to protect industry, the people of Montana would need to revolt against the disguised wolf themselves. The IWW noted lopsided reporting as the strike continued to threaten lumber production that summer: "Day by day the press became more violent, abusive, and mendacious. Mob violence against the strikers was openly advocated, and martial law was insistently demanded."¹⁰⁶

The *Helena Independent Record* attacked the IWW repeatedly throughout the strike, at one point claiming that the IWW used despicable tactics to harass loggers in Libby: "Lye and pepper were put in the men's shoes, croton oil in their food, kerosene poured over their beds in the bunk houses and several cans of 'Wobbly itch' sprinkled in their clothes, it was shown, to make them quit their jobs."¹⁰⁷ These alleged attempts to slow the work in Lincoln County paled in comparison to the craven actions reported in other states: IWW organizers "attempted to poison the waterworks of Denver, had poisoned fruit packed in California and last season destroyed 23 threshing outfits in

¹⁰⁵ "The Woolly Sheep," *Independent Record* (Helena, MT), August 1, 1917.

¹⁰⁶ Rowan, *The IWW*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ "'Itch' Put in Men's Clothes, Lye in Shoes to Force Lumber Strikes in Montana," *Independent Record*, June 16, 1918.

Washington.”¹⁰⁸ Even more insidious, the *Independent* reported, Wobblies would poison horses, commit arson, and even coat envelope flaps with cyanide.¹⁰⁹ According to the paper, “it is apparent that the campaign of sabotage was to be prosecuted without regard to who was killed, in the belief that wholesale murder would intimidate the government into dropping out of the war or granting whatever demands were made by the I.W.W.”¹¹⁰ Obviously, at least to the editor of the Helena newspaper, the tactics employed by the IWW should have been abhorrent to all upstanding citizens. In fact, the newspaper proudly reported that it had called out the IWWs “dastardly work in Montana.”¹¹¹ Since anti-IWW editorials appeared almost daily in Montana newspapers, it appears that many others shared distaste for the work of the IWW.¹¹²

As the lumber strike spread beyond Libby, Eureka, and the rest of Lincoln County to the Pacific Coast, industry, as well as federal and state governments, moved to quell the IWW.¹¹³ On July 11, 1917, almost 150 members of the Oregon National Guard arrived in Libby to maintain the peace.¹¹⁴ The soldiers’ stay was brief and by late summer they were shipped back to Oregon and the mills soon started running.¹¹⁵ While the logging strike ended relatively quickly, fears of worker solidarity and class warfare

¹⁰⁸ “Emboldened Wobblies Plan New Campaign,” *Independent Record*, February 5, 1918.

¹⁰⁹ “Emboldened Wobblies.”

¹¹⁰ “Emboldened Wobblies.”

¹¹¹ “Seditious Conspiracy,” *Independent Record* (Helena, MT), 12.

¹¹² Work, *Darkest Before Dawn*, 80.

¹¹³ Rader, “Strike of 1917,” 189.

¹¹⁴ Aarstad, “Montana’s Other Strike,” 110.

¹¹⁵ Aarstad, “Montana’s Other Strike,” 121.

simmered the rest of the year and manifested in Governor Stewart's sedition law in early 1918.¹¹⁶

The cost to the war effort and industry could not be ignored. Governor Stewart harnessed this fervor in his quest to crush the power of the IWW and called a special session of the legislature in early 1918 to craft a bill to stop treasonous words and acts. In Stewart's words, the bill was intended to punish "those guilty of seditious, treasonable and disloyal acts and utterances within the state of Montana" and "to curb the pernicious activities of individuals and organizations guilty of sabotage, criminal syndicalism and industrial and political anarchy."¹¹⁷ In just over a week, the Montana Legislature drafted and passed House Bill No. 1 and Senate Bill No. 2 to create Montana's Sedition Law of 1918: "An Act Defining the Crime of Sedition, and to Prescribe Punishment Thereof, and Declaring This Act to be an Emergency Law Necessary for the Preservation of Public Peace and Safety."¹¹⁸ Citizens found guilty of criticizing the government during war time

¹¹⁶ Butte miners' involvement with the IWW lasted much longer than in Libby and revealed the depth of labor unrest there. After the Speculator Mine disaster resulted in the deaths of 168 miners on June 8, 1917, most of the miners in Butte went on strike. While the IWW was not the sole advocate for the strike in Butte, the radical union was portrayed by the press, government, and industry as the primarily lawless agitator. Federal troops arrived in Butte to safeguard the mines that supplied copper for the war effort. The troops arrived in August 1917 and stayed until January 1921. See Punke, *Fire and Brimstone* for an overview of the turbulent 1917 strike and the role of the IWW. Dave Walter examined the hyper patriotism of Governor Stewart's Council of Defense that violated Montanans civil liberties in the name of exposing un-American residents in 1917 and 1918. Dave Walter, "PastTimes: Patriots Gone Berserk: The Montana Council of Defense, 1917-1918," *Montana Magazine* (September/October 2001): 78-85.

¹¹⁷ Montana State Legislature, *House Journal*, 15th Congress, Extraordinary Session, 1918, 2.

¹¹⁸ State of Montana, "Laws Passed by the Extraordinary Session of the Fifteenth Legislative Assembly," (Helena: State Publishing, Co., n.d.).

or of trying to disrupt the war effort could be fined up to \$20,000 and imprisoned for up to twenty years. Both sides of the Montana legislature passed the bill unanimously.¹¹⁹

Libby and Eureka workers risked more than just their jobs in their support of the IWW. Patriotic citizens believed that anything less than zealous support of the war was unacceptable, including challenging industrial might or speaking German. IWW organizers were attacked and killed in the state, most notably Frank Little who was lynched in Butte on August 1, 1917, during the strikes in Lincoln County and Butte.¹²⁰ The loggers in Lincoln County drew the ire of the Lumber Trust and elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels, but were successful in slowing the timber work. Although they never fully stopped the log drive, their efforts left twelve million board

¹¹⁹ Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 24. The support of the legislature did not guarantee the longevity of Eureka Lumber Company. The volatility of the timber industry became clear after World War I when the mill burned down, was rebuilt, and then closed permanently in 1924. Not only were 400 jobs lost when the mill shut down, but the town went dark for more than a year because the mill furnished the town's electricity as well.

¹²⁰ Frank Little's death revealed the dangers facing IWW organizers. Little arrived in Butte in mid-July 1917 to organize a copper miner's union and lead a strike against the all-powerful Anaconda Mining Company. Less than two weeks later he was abducted from his boarding house under cover of darkness, tied to the rear bumper of a car, dragged through town, and hung from a railroad trestle. No one was apprehended or charged for the incident. An estimated 10,000 workers lined the route of his funeral procession, and he became a union hero, but was vilified by industry and many in the press. The *Helena Independent Record* expressed no compassion for Little's death, saying just two months after his murder that Jeanette Rankin "wailed considerable about the hanging of Frank Little," and then the paper asserted "that if Frank Little was alive today he would be under indictment and charged by the government of the United States with seditious conspiracy. And if Frank Little was here today and should go to trial on such a charge, we again guess the clerk would read after the slip was handed in by the foreman of the jury, "G-u-i-l-t-y." "Seditious Conspiracy," *Independent Record* (Helena, MT), September 30, 1917.

feet of timber rotting on riverbanks.¹²¹ While the strikers focused mainly on wages and living conditions in the camps, they also fought for shorter workdays in the camps and the mills, arguing that more hours in hard labor meant workers made mistakes — sometimes deadly ones. Loggers balanced the dangers from supporting the IWW with the poor pay and dangerous conditions in which they labored and risked the anger of industry and government to improve their lives.

Less than three months after Governor Stewart signed his bill, Congress debated and passed a federal sedition law that had almost identical wording to the Montana version. The Federal Sedition Act of 1918 was signed by President Woodrow Wilson and enacted on May 16, 1918. The focused efforts from industry, the press, and state, local, and federal governments to destroy the IWW led to a decline in the Wobblies' power after 1917 both in Montana and around the nation. Although the IWW lost the strike in 1917, the federal government did address many of the loggers' demands to improve safety and living conditions such as an eight-hour workday and more sanitary conditions in camps.¹²² Lincoln County workers would also have no qualms about striking in the future to advocate for their union demands. After all, some of the demands of the striking laborers had been met.¹²³

¹²¹ Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 58. Loomis also notes that the strike had the unintended consequence of saving lives - the peak of the strike was in June and, compared to July, that month had almost 2000 fewer timber workplace accidents.

¹²² Loomis, *Empire of Timber*, 54.

¹²³ Conditions did not change immediately after the 1917 strike. In spring 1919 the IWW noted in the "Lumber Worker's Bulletin" that the Eureka Lumber Company camp had unsanitary living conditions and was "the rottenest camp along the [Great Northern Railroad]." The IWW held another strike against the Eureka Lumber Company, which lasted the summer and strikers were, again, accused of sabotage. "Lumber Workers'

Libby's Logger Identity Develops

In the 1920 election, perhaps in response to Governor Stewart's treatment of the strikers, residents of the county and the state voted for the Republican candidates for President, US Representative, and Governor.¹²⁴ But Libby voters soon returned to the left and in the 1924 election voted again for the a third party candidate, Robert M. La Follette, who united a coalition of Progressives, Socialists, and the Farmer-Labor Party with a promise to take on industry. Lincoln County was not alone in its support of the Independent party candidate: twenty counties in total gave La Follette almost forty percent of the total vote in Montana.¹²⁵ La Follette's platform championed the working class in their struggle against business monopolies, which explains his popularity in mining, logging, and railroad communities in the state.¹²⁶ Of course, having Montana's own Senator, Burton K. Wheeler, on the ticket for vice-president probably helped as well. Even with the strong showing, La Follette lost to Coolidge statewide. Lincoln County, however, continued to

Bulletin," no. 1, March 30, 1919, Montana Historical Society, Eureka Lumber Company Records UPMC 153 (82:2-4), Flyers, Clippings, Brochures, Montana Historical Society, Eureka Lumber Company Records UPMC 153 (82:2-4), May - Dec, 1917 folder. Although the IWW noted that the conditions did not immediately improve in Eureka, Darris Flanagan, a historian of logging in Libby, claimed that the J. Neils Lumber Company was responsive to strikers' concerns and cleaned up their logging camps. For J. Neils the extra expense was worth having a satisfied crew. Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 53.

¹²⁴ "Official Vote of the State of Montana at the General Election Held November 2nd, 1920," n.d., Archived Election Results Statewide Election Results 1920, Montana Secretary of State, accessed February 29, 2020.

<https://archive.org/details/officialmontanag1920montrich/page/n1/mode/2up>.

¹²⁵ "Official Vote of the State of Montana," "Montana General Election Returns 1924," November 14, 1924, Archived Election Results Statewide Election Results 1924, Montana Secretary of State, accessed June 11, 2021.

<https://archive.org/details/officialmontanag1926montrich/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater>.

¹²⁶ James H. Shidler, "The La Follette Progressive Party Campaign of 1924," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 33, no. 4 (June 1950): 445.

support the Democratic Party for decades, although the unions kept a low profile: the first Labor Day celebration ever observed in Libby happened years later in 1934 and was held by the Lumber and Timber Union.¹²⁷

As Libby moved through the twentieth century, logging remained a defining feature of the community. The town may have survived the Wobblies, but a common boom and bust cycle familiar to many resource communities developed. The 1920s saw a timber boom and four large mills operated in the county in 1923 in Eureka, Warland, Libby, and Troy.¹²⁸ Just a few years later, however, the Great Depression proved challenging for the industry. By 1937 the Libby Mill, owned by the J. Neils Lumber Company (J. Neils), was the only one still in operation, running just two days a week.¹²⁹ Even with reduced employees and hours, J. Neils saw a bright future for logging in Lincoln County and bought 10,000 acres of timberland from another lumber company. The *Western News* optimistically commented on the sale and the continued tradition of logging in the region, saying, “Each tract of timber acquired by the company adds that much to the permanence of the lumber industry here, and therefore is of much interest to the communities that depend so largely on that industry.”¹³⁰ In 1940, timber sales increased in the intermountain West and a Missoula forester noted that the profits helped everyone in the area: “Wages paid in cutting and marketing the timber amounted to

¹²⁷ Multiple sources noted that Labor Day celebrations did not happen in Libby until 1935, including Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 115. The 1935 *Western News* did report on large crowds attending Labor Day in Libby sponsored by the Carpenters and Joiners Union. “Big Crowd Celebrates Labor Day (Half A Century),” September 4, 1935.

¹²⁸ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 38.

¹²⁹ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 115.

¹³⁰ “Half A Century: Neils Buys 10,000 Acres Timberland,” *Western News*, June 3, 1937.

many times the amount paid for it and benefited families, communities and business generally.”¹³¹ J. Neils became the largest logging operation in the state; in August 1941 the company had 639 men listed on its payroll.¹³² Soon after the war, a spruce bark beetle infestation in Lincoln County necessitated the forced sale of millions of board feet of timber and supplied work for six sawmills in and near Libby – the Libby Mill and five smaller ones.¹³³

Even with a strong logging economy in the post-war years, experts warned of the risks in logging. The US Forest Service and the University of Montana in Missoula published a study of Libby as an example of “the general problem of rural and community decay in Montana.”¹³⁴ The authors, Harold and Lois Kaufman, justified the relevance of such a study as the timber industry had always been an unstable one - logging towns “have been either boom towns or ghost towns.”¹³⁵ Not only was Libby’s industry volatile, Montana overall was a state known for booms and busts in forestry, mining, and agriculture.¹³⁶ As far as supply, the near future looked bright as Lincoln County had between one-eighth and one-sixth of all the timber in Montana, which gave it

¹³¹ “Records Show Increased Timber Demand - May 9, 1940,” *Western News*, May 9, 1990.

¹³² “Timber Harvest Brings Wealth to County (Half A Century),” *Western News*, October 2, 1991. Other employers included three Troy operators who employed about 100 men.

¹³³ The harvest of beetle-infested timber was many times the capacity of the Libby mill and brought in outside timber purchasers from other areas in Montana and Idaho. Roads to timber areas that had been on a twenty-five-year plan were built to handle the surplus of timber. Paul Neils, *Julius Neils and the J. Neils Lumber Company*. (Seattle: Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1971), 26. Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 35.

¹³⁴ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, iii.

¹³⁵ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 1.

¹³⁶ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 1.

the largest amount of commercial timber in the state.¹³⁷ In order for Libby to survive economically the one-hundred-page report on Libby's logging industry recommended "at least one reasonably sized mill is essential as a mainstay of industry in Lincoln County."¹³⁸ The mill referenced was Libby Mill owned by J. Neils, which provided almost half of the employment in the area and currently had 500 to 600 workers on payroll.¹³⁹

The report warned that natural resource industries provided unstable economies and recommended that the local economy be diversified as much as possible.¹⁴⁰ Most of the other economic suggestions given by the authors, however, revolved around the area's natural resources – mining could harvest the twelve minerals found in the area, although vermiculite was the only one with a substantial ore body; limited agriculture was currently being done, although the soil and climate set limits on production; and the area had possible employment related to its extensive unused water sources, huckleberries, and fur-bearing animals.¹⁴¹ Tourism and recreation were also suggested as ways to improve the local economy as "The area has great natural beauties and wildlife abounds in its forests, streams, lakes, and mountains...Nature has certainly played its part toward making Lincoln County an ideal vacation land."¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 32.

¹³⁸ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, iv.

¹³⁹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 12. The report noted that large, and most stable, employer in the area was the vermiculite mine, at that point owned by Zonolite. The mine employed fifty and the report authors had little expectation in other mining operations rising to challenge Zonolite's position as top mining employer.

¹⁴⁰ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 14.

¹⁴¹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 15.

¹⁴² Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 17.

Even with these other resource options, the report concluded that improvement and expansion of the timber industry was the best option to stabilize the economy. Although the supply of timber could be seen as limitless, “all forest conscious people now recognize that the supply can too easily be exhausted.”¹⁴³ The report found that as a predominantly one-industry community, the greater Libby and Troy area was at a disadvantage.¹⁴⁴ However, as already noted, the other natural resources in the area could not compete against the timber industry. The best solution, therefore, was to encourage multiple small mills in the area and reduce the monopoly that J. Neils had over national forest timber.¹⁴⁵ Whether one or multiple mills existed, the importance of the timber industry in Libby was noted by the Kaufmans, who asked why Libby did not have a forest festival to “magnify the significance of the forest and portray the relationship of

¹⁴³ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 37.

¹⁴⁴ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Walter H. Meyer, “Comments on ‘Toward the Stabilization and Enrichment of a Forest Community’ by Harold and Lois Kaufman,” December 15, 1946, University of Montana Special Collections, Montana Study Research Collection, 1943-1954, MSS 233, Speeches and Writings Box 7, Folder 6, pp 9, 4, 11. One report reviewer roundly criticized the Kaufmans’ plan stating, “Desirable as it may appear to have as many sawmills as possible scattered through the woods, producing lumber, so as to give everyone wishing to go into this business a chance to work for himself, community stability and progress will not be achieved this way.”⁹ The critic noted that the Kootenai National Forest was very challenging to log and only the Libby Mill had the finances, willingness, and experience to efficiently log there.⁴ The critic, therefore, disagreed with the Kaufman’s premise that diversification needed to occur by encouraging more small mills in the area and argued that J. Neils needed noncompetitive access to the forest to best utilize the timber and maximize payroll. Otherwise, “If productivity is not assured the community is robbed of a stable income and this would be followed by decadence and ultimate decline.”

forest and people.”¹⁴⁶ This prescient question would be addressed fifteen years later when *Logger Days* started in Libby.

While the Kaufmans’ report suggested reducing some of the control of J. Neils Lumber Company in the Libby area, the company thrived in the post war years. The story of the J. Neils Lumber Company is the story of Libby in the midcentury. Julius Neils had moved from the Midwest in 1911 to purchase timber land and establish a sawmill away from the depleting resources of the Great Lakes region.¹⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, the company struggled during the Great Depression, but, after some labor issues during World War II, the company grew as rough and tumble lumber camps started to disappear and many loggers either worked at a sawmill, came home for the weekends, or drove out daily from their homes to work.¹⁴⁸

J. Neils was a bit of an anomaly for lumber companies. For starters, the company’s early progressive and conservationist logging ideology set them apart — sustained yield, which essentially meant cutting no more timber than what could be replaced through growth and reforestation, was not common practice in the early decades of the twentieth century. Most timber companies employed clear cutting to harvest as much timber as possible in the shortest period of time. Paul Neils, one of Julius’s seven sons, long operated as general manager and described why companies like his father’s had moved west in the early part of the century: “American lumbermen had not established the practice of growing timber as a crop. The universal practice was to clear-

¹⁴⁶ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Neils, *Julius Neils*, 26.

¹⁴⁸ Flangan, *Skid Trails*, 54.

cut, broadcast-burn the slash, and let nature take its course on the devastated lands...To stay in the lumber business, it was necessary to look westward.”¹⁴⁹

Once settled in Montana, J. Neils was an early institutor of sustained yield logging to perpetuate forests. W.E. Dexter, longtime manager at J. Neils Lumber Company, remembered that Neils was not only an early advocate of sustainability but that “They’re the only ones, I think, that have gone into it to the extent that they have, and they’ve gone into it heavy. And are making money, too.”¹⁵⁰ Herbert Neils remembered that his grandfather’s company pushed for sustainability before anyone else did, including the Forest Service. According to Herbert, J. Neils subscribed to the practice because he cared about healthy forests. He also admitted that sustainability also financially benefited the company: “[When] we owned [the forest], we ran it to our own advantage so it would last forever.”¹⁵¹ The company began the study in 1936 and put it in practice in 1939 in Libby. According to Paul, “no other company in the Northwest had at that time undertaken this forward step to protect its forests.”¹⁵²

George Neils, another son of Julius, co-managed the Libby Mill and reiterated Paul’s claims that sustainable yield was a smart and fiscally sound process. The company was not interested in sustainability merely for the benefit of the forests, as George noted: “Of course, at times certain economic factors enter into the picture which upset your silvicultural [forestry] program. Which you can’t get away from either. After all, it has to

¹⁴⁹ Neils, *Julius Neils*, 25.

¹⁵⁰ W.E. Dexter, Oral History by John Larson, August and October 1953, Forest History Foundation, Inc., 10.

¹⁵¹ Herbert Neils Oral History, May 13, 1997, 13.

¹⁵² Neils, *Julius Neils*, 87.

pay. If it doesn't pay, forestry is no good."¹⁵³ But George believed that the company, the workers, and the town would all benefit from employing sustainable forestry techniques, saying, "This type of cutting cannot be adopted to all species of timber nor to all situations. In principle, however, the adoption of this sort of a program will unquestionably extend the life of the operations at Libby, Montana...where our mills are located."¹⁵⁴ Other loggers in Libby continued to praise the foresight of the company in incorporating sustainability into its practices. One logger who grew up in the area credited the Neils family for providing "the economic and cultural heartbeat for the area, one that survived the depression era and thrived through the late 1940s to the 1960s."¹⁵⁵

The Kaufmans asked foresters if Libby was unique for having one large logging operation with little competition. The response was a measured "yes" as few logging communities in the West truly had competitive conditions, but Libby did stand out with its limited field of choice in timber companies.¹⁵⁶ While not expressly a company town, life in the Libby-Troy area centered around Libby Mill, which was the largest employer in the community and employed between one-third and two-fifths of all workers in the area.¹⁵⁷ Residents often remembered the company and the family fondly.

Palmer Knudson said that J. Neils treated their employees well and contributed to the betterment of the community, commenting that the company helped fund the local

¹⁵³ George Neils Oral History by John Larson, August 19, 1953, 3, Forest History Foundation, Inc., Efland, NC.

¹⁵⁴ George Neils Oral History, August 19, 1953, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Bruce Vincent, Nicole J. Widmar, and Jessica Eise, *Against the Odds: A Path Forward for Rural America* (self-published, 2017), 25.

¹⁵⁶ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 7, 95.

¹⁵⁷ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 7, 95.

hospital and paid for the lights at the baseball fields: “Neils furnished the electrician and all the equipment to get the lighting up. Lots of things like that. Of course, I won’t say that [the newer lumber companies are] not doing things now, but it isn’t on the same scale. [J. Neils] did much more in those days.”¹⁵⁸ The Kaufmans’ report found that J. Neils was a community-minded business and the Neils lived and invested in the community, “rather than having capital leave the area as is the case with absentee owners.”¹⁵⁹ The Neils also made generous contributions to the town through community service and financial support of community enterprises and made “a tremendous contribution” to the community through wages and taxes.¹⁶⁰

When Paul, Walter, and George Neils, who all worked for the company in Libby, died in a two-year period, the *Western News* took note. The paper was surprised there was no memorial in Libby to the brothers who were “the most prominent of Montana lumbermen for almost half a century.”¹⁶¹ Advocating for a modest memorial - perhaps a street, park, or school could be named after the family - the editor said newcomers to Libby should learn the central role the family played in Lincoln County and that “Neils family members were always good citizens of Libby as well as industry and business leaders.”¹⁶² Although Libby had never been solely a one company town, J. Neils had clearly left a lasting imprint on the community.

¹⁵⁸ Palmer Knudson, Oral History by Victor Bjornberg, March 27, 1980, 17, Lincoln County Oral History Project, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

¹⁵⁹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 54.

¹⁶⁰ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 54.

¹⁶¹ “Neils Name Deserves Memorial,” editorial, *Western News*, October 27, 1977.

¹⁶² “Neils Name Deserves Memorial.”

As grandson of Julius Neils, it might not have been surprising that Herbert Neils waxed nostalgic about his family's company comparing distant owners to "local people like us, [who] see the problems, knowing all of our employees by the first names, some of them were third generation already with our family. We had great loyalty here. People really revered our family. We treated them right. If they had any problems, it was settled right here."¹⁶³ Bob and Inez Herrig supported his claim saying that instead of the Neils being a "company family [who] sat on the hill and looked down their noses at the rest of the people...they entered into the life of the town. The men belonged to the Chamber...And the women belonged to the Women's Club. They were active in the church. And our town is much better because of their influence all over the years."¹⁶⁴

J. Neils worked to balance profit and the community. In 1937, the company created a new program designed to eliminate accidents at the sawmill. While improved safety measures would benefit production, the sawmill manager noted that the company valued both profits and employees: "An efficient plant means a safe plant. It is bad, bungling business to maim or kill anyone...Great as the monetary loss to the company is, the loss and suffering resulting to workmen is beyond measure."¹⁶⁵ A year's review of the safety plan regarded the program a success. Before J. Neils instituted the program, "3,311-man days were lost because of accidents. During 1937, under the new program,

¹⁶³ Herbert Neils Oral History, May 13, 1997, 13.

¹⁶⁴ Bob and Inez Herrig, Oral History by Victor Bjornberg and Jennifer Jeffries Thompson, April 24, 1980, 26, Lincoln County Oral History Project, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

¹⁶⁵ "J. Neils Starts Sawmill Safety Program (Half A Century)," *Western News*, February 25, 1987.

the number of lost man days was reduced to 646. In other words, there was a reduction in lost man days of 2,665, or a reduction of 80 percent in days lost because of accidents.”¹⁶⁶ In 1942, J. Neils’ safety record continued to be seen as an industry ideal — the company saw a ninety percent reduction in accidents and “undoubtedly set a record in the industry throughout the northwest.”¹⁶⁷ The Kaufmans’ report also noted that while lumbering was hazardous, the Libby Mill’s accident rate for severe injuries in 1944 and 1945 was one-third of the national average in the timber industry and the frequency rate of injuries was three-fifths of the national average.¹⁶⁸

Even with reduced injury rates and donations to community groups, not everyone had glowing reviews of the Libby Mill. A survey of residents in 1946 found critics of J. Neils who stated that the company “would do anything for you but raise your pay,” that “favoritism played a role in who got the best jobs,” that “the company is too powerful to be bucked,” and that although the company did not control politicians, “they do exert pressure [in Helena] at times.”¹⁶⁹ The mill clearly held the monopoly on jobs in town and residents both appreciated their position in the community and criticized it. As the Kaufmans’ summarized, “When one industry has as dominant a position in a community as the Libby Mill, it is relatively easy for a paternalistic dependent relationship to develop. In such a situation the industrial organization is looked to for leadership in most

¹⁶⁶ “Safety Plan Cuts Number of Accidents (Half A Century), *Western News*, January 6, 1988.

¹⁶⁷ “J. Neils Has Enviably Safety Record (Half a Century), *Western News*, February 5, 1992.

¹⁶⁸ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 54.

¹⁶⁹ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 57.

activities and is given both praise and blame whether it has had any responsibility in the matter or not.”¹⁷⁰

At its peak in the 1950s, J. Neils employed over 1,800 people and certainly met the definition of a dominant industry.¹⁷¹ In fact, the four leading industries in the area at that time — forestry-related, farming, railroading, and mining — contributed to ninety-six percent of the income in the area.¹⁷² Forest industries made up three-quarters of that amount and the other three smaller industries shared the remaining one-quarter.¹⁷³ The prominence of logging in Libby showed in other ways as well. From the high school’s early days, the team mascot had been a Terrier, known for its tenacity and determination. In 1953, the student body held a vote to determine if the small dog should remain the mascot and overwhelmingly students voted for a new representative - the Libby Logger.¹⁷⁴ With the adoption of this new school symbol, students reinforced Libby’s identity as a logging town.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 59.

¹⁷¹ “Stimson Hands Out 963 Job Apps, So Far,” *Western News*, October 1, 1993.

¹⁷² Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 6.

¹⁷³ Kaufman and Kaufman, *Forest Community*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Jeff Gruber, *Our Hometown: A Pictorial History of Libby, Montana, Volume 1: Community* (Self Published, 2021), 203.

¹⁷⁵ Andy Viano, “A Victory for Libby,” *Daily Inter Lake*, October 1, 2016, <https://dailyinterlake.com/news/2016/oct/01/featured-a-victory-for-libby-6/>. The connection between the high school and logging remains strong. Visiting high school football teams in Libby are still greeted with the sounds of roaring chainsaws, with the chains removed, when they enter Logger Stadium. Traditionally, the Libby freshmen lined the field and revved the saws whenever the Loggers made a big play. More recently, the eighth graders operate the chainsaws on the sidelines since the freshmen are often suited up for the games as the student population has decreased.

With the successful operations of the lumber company, a merger was completed with the St. Regis Paper Company, which kept the mill under the J. Neils name and retained the local managers.¹⁷⁶ The next decade saw continued growth: a stud mill was built in 1958 and a plywood plant built in 1960.¹⁷⁷ The lumber industry diversified in Libby to use every part of the tree: “Pulp, paper products, treated posts and poles, compressed sawdust logs, plywood, and doors are just some of the products...manufactured in the region.”¹⁷⁸ While the timber industry seemed bright in Libby during these years, one commentator noted that the merger continued a tradition of outside capital dominating the industry – St. Regis was ranked among the top 150 industrial corporations in the US in 1976.¹⁷⁹ Residents seemed to feel that the merger left the loggers at a bit of a disadvantage once management decisions were made by the office in New York City rather than locally.¹⁸⁰ Bob and Inez Herrig commented that they were sad when J. Neils sold out to St. Regis because with absentee ownership, “you lose the personal feeling.”¹⁸¹ Another longtime resident said that the new company had never really invested in Libby — “St. Regis bought us and forgot us.”¹⁸² Consistent with the model of outside capital, St. Regis would continue its distant management for more than twenty years.

¹⁷⁶ Kim Briggeman, “Cruel Story of Libby’s Lost Logging Heritage, *Missoulian*, May 9, 2009.

¹⁷⁷ Neils, *Julius Neils*, 87.

¹⁷⁸ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 116.

¹⁷⁹ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 116.

¹⁸⁰ Herbert Neils Oral History, May 13, 1997, 13; Bob and Inez Herrig Oral History, April 24, 1980, 26.

¹⁸¹ Bob and Inez Herrig Oral History, April 24, 1980, 26.

¹⁸² Briggeman, “Cruel Story.”

In the post J. Neils era, logging continued to be dangerous as Darris Flanagan noted: even upon the advent of chainsaws in the 1950s the work did not become much easier or safer.¹⁸³ In fact, the speed of power saws caused more harm to loggers' bodies when the saw teeth came in contact with the human body. Loggers feared kickbacks when the saw blade bounced back from a chunk of solid wood: "the man may end up on his back, while his still running chain saw lands on his face or belly."¹⁸⁴ Cutting down trees, or felling logs, proved to be dangerous, no matter the type of saw used. Once the trees fell, transporting the logs was no easy feat either. Even as technology advanced, logging remained one of the most dangerous occupations.¹⁸⁵

Libby Dam Era

For a brief time mid-century, another occupation topped logging as the region's most hazardous job. The construction of Libby Dam exacerbated the boom-and-bust economy found in Lincoln County and dam workers were exposed to new hazards as they worked to build the 422-foot-tall structure. The project had immediate and long-term consequences for Libby. Built seventeen miles north of town on the Kootenai River, the dam was created for flood control and energy production. Its proximity to the Canadian border meant that the US and Canadian governments negotiated and renegotiated for years in the development of the dam - discussions between the governments started in 1951 and the nine-year construction lasted until 1973 (President Gerald Ford came to

¹⁸³ Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 123.

¹⁸⁴ Flanagan, *Skid Trails*, 155.

¹⁸⁵ The *Western News* reported on the increasing use of helicopter logging in the 1990s and the resultant accidents and crashes.

Libby two year later for the dam dedication in 1975). Libby Dam was a large project – the structure would be made of enough concrete to build a two-lane highway from New York City to Salt Lake City and upon completion created a ninety-mile lake, forty-eight miles of which are in Montana and forty-two miles in Canada.¹⁸⁶ The final design included eight generators to produce power and required the relocation of 118 miles of roads and sixty miles of railway tracks.¹⁸⁷ Construction started in August 1966 and the Libby Chamber of Commerce perhaps revealed its hopes for the dam’s legacy in Libby by naming the project Operation BOLD (Blast Off Libby Dam).¹⁸⁸

The dam’s construction brought workers, their family members, and others to Libby. Lincoln County’s population grew by 44 percent between 1960 and 1970. While natural population growth expected a gain of 1,500 residents during that time period, an additional 4,000 new residents were attributed to the dam’s construction.¹⁸⁹ Workers on the dam would number between a few hundred in the winter months, up to a peak of 2,118 in July of 1970.¹⁹⁰ This population boom made Lincoln County the fastest growing area in the state between 1960 and 1970 and county residents benefited from the high paying jobs – dam construction gave Lincoln County workers the highest average wage in the state from 1969-1974, although before the dam construction started, Lincoln County residents were ranked fifth in average wages.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 145.

¹⁸⁷ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 146.

¹⁸⁸ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 147.

¹⁸⁹ Sharon Howe, “Project Leaves Lasting Mark on Community,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Verdon, “Watching Libby Dam Grow: 1970,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975.

¹⁹¹ Howe, “Project Leaves Lasting Mark on Community.”

Not all the changes to Libby and Lincoln County were seen as wholly positive – the population growth meant that many social services were operating at capacity and still could not meet the needs of residents. For example, because many dam workers brought their families with them to Libby, the schools in the area quickly grew past capacity. In the decade before dam construction started, Libby schools saw a modest growth of around eighty-five students per year.¹⁹² In the 1966-1967 school year, enrollment increased by 350 students and the following year it grew by 520 students and in 1968-1969, another 259 additional students enrolled.¹⁹³ In 1975, Libby High School hosted an outdoor graduation ceremony in order to host the largest class in the school's history to date.¹⁹⁴ In Libby, the Army Corps of Engineers built thirty-six new classrooms and paid one-third of the costs for a new junior high.¹⁹⁵

The schools were not the only public institution overloaded by newcomers. Seasonal dam work meant construction workers and their families had to survive winter layoffs. While the peak employment at the dam during the summer numbered around two thousand, during the winter months, there were often only a few hundred workers employed in construction. Seasonal unemployment had always been high in the logging community, but the construction project exacerbated the trend – the welfare budget in Lincoln County nearly doubled between 1965 and 1974.¹⁹⁶ Food stamp usage peaked in January 1971 after the record high employment season in 1970 — with little work at the

¹⁹² Gruber, *Our Hometown*, 196.

¹⁹³ Howe, "Project Leaves Lasting Mark."

¹⁹⁴ "Largest Class to Graduate," *Western News*, May 22, 1975.

¹⁹⁵ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 150.

¹⁹⁶ Howe, "Project Leaves Lasting Mark."

dam in mid-winter, 2,153 people received the food stamps.¹⁹⁷ The influx of workers and their families placed heavy demands on other services as well including law enforcement, licensing, traffic control, assessments, and sanitation.¹⁹⁸

Similar to other industries in the area, dam construction was a physically dangerous occupation. In advance of the dam's dedication ceremonies, *The Western News* published a special issue on Libby Dam that cost thirty-five cents (regular weekly issues of the paper were fifteen cents). This thirty-seven-page edition detailed the dam's history from 1965 to 1975 in weekly snippets, along with photos and other stories about the dam's far-reaching effects on the area. One page, titled "Tragedy Takes Toll," remembered the eleven lives lost in the building process (other workers who died in traffic accidents while traveling to dam related jobs were not identified, nor were the "countless others [who] suffered minor and major injuries"). These accidents listed occurred between August 1967 and October 1973, which meant that work fatalities at the dam averaged almost two per year. The accidents were often quite violent and gruesome - workers were electrocuted, struck by machinery, materials fell on them, and a number died from falls off of ladders and scaffolding.¹⁹⁹ Two men died in one particularly horrific accident when a driver of a loaded dump truck, weighting more than 150,000 pounds, lost control of the vehicle on a twelve percent grade, ran over the top of a pickup, and crashed at the bottom of a steep twenty-foot embankment.²⁰⁰ The injuries and deaths

¹⁹⁷ Howe, "Project Leaves Lasting Mark."

¹⁹⁸ Spitzer, *Waters of Wealth*, 148.

¹⁹⁹ Verdon, "Watching Libby Dam Grow."

²⁰⁰ "\$1.8 Million Sought for Libby Dam Death," *Western News* (Libby, Mont), August 7, 1975. The widow of the dump truck driver, Frank Skranak, sued the truck maker,

at Libby Dam could have been much higher considering a scary event on January 31, 1971 when tons of rock slid down the nearby mountainside into the dam. Luckily no workers were present as there might have been numerous injuries and fatalities if the rockslide occurred during the peak of summer construction season. Many of the deceased workers were originally from Libby or had moved to Libby in the years preceding the dam's construction and left behind wives and children. While the wages from the construction work were high, in these few years, the danger from dam work was substantially higher than what area loggers faced.

In classic boomtown fashion, a bust came quickly after the dam's construction finished. Lincoln County, which had grown by almost fifty percent in the previous years, was now the state's largest population loser.²⁰¹ As workers left town, the school system averaged a decrease of around 100 students a year. Debates about the dam's positive or negative impact on the area could be seen in a newspaper editorial that noted that the dam's purposes -- flood control, recreation, and energy generation - outweighed its shortcomings, which included "the loss of 90 miles of free flowing river that was one of the country's most scenic streams, the displacement of scores of families who lost their homes to the rising water of the reservoir, eroding of tax base for local government, and damage to fish and game resources." These losses were balanced against the dam's

International Harvester, for almost \$2 million, claiming that the vehicle was unsafe and failed to protect the driver. The story on the lawsuit appeared on the front page of the paper next to the headline that President Ford had consented to officiate the dedication.

²⁰¹ Howe, "Project Leaves Lasting Mark."

“immense contribution to solving our region’s energy crisis alone [which] justifies Libby Dam. Its other benefits in relation and flood control are bonuses.”²⁰²

On the same page of the paper, Eureka’s perception of the dam’s impact was less glowing: “many of the same problems affecting those area left their mark on Eureka.”²⁰³ The town had benefited from the influx of workers - the Army Corps financed a six-room addition to the elementary school and added four classrooms at the high school.²⁰⁴ Frustrations abounded, however, as roads and railroad tracks near Eureka were sacrificed for the reservoir and Eureka were “plagued” with driving temporary forest roads until the new highway was built in 1974. Rerouting of the railroad removed the local depot -- “one of the points of tax base, pride and employment from a small town.”²⁰⁵ With the depot gone, passenger train service no longer came to Eureka and any commercial products made locally had to be transported twenty miles away to connect to service. According to the paper, any benefits from the population boom were negated by the fact that “Housing was hard to find in town. Greater demand was made on policy, streets, and other services.”²⁰⁶ In summary, “Eureka received little in return except for more jobs, a temporary boost in the economy, and some federal aid for schools.”²⁰⁷ For Eureka’s residents, higher wages and recreational opportunities to be found on the lake did not make up for the inconveniences from the dam construction.

²⁰² “Montana’s Biggest Generator,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975, 4.

²⁰³ Mike Cuffe, “Libby Dam Left Mark on Eureka,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975.

²⁰⁴ Howe, “Project Leaves Lasting Mark.”

²⁰⁵ Mike Cuffe, “Libby Dam.”

²⁰⁶ Mike Cuffe, “Libby Dam.”

²⁰⁷ Mike Cuffe, “Libby Dam.”

In the debate over which communities were most inconvenienced by the dam, residents of Rexford probably had the best claim — their townsite was flooded after dam construction. The town was relocated above the new lake and included a school, post office, forest station, and new water, power, and sewage facilities.²⁰⁸ Although the relocation was cited in several sources, there appears to be little contemporary commentary from residents on how they balanced the benefits of relocation against the loss of their original town. They, did, however, submit a name for the new lake: Kooconusa, which combined Kootenai, Canada, and USA. When Senator Mike Mansfield commented that a better name might be found, the residents perhaps did express some exasperation when they replied ““since we must give up our homes, for this progress, we shall enjoy the realization of a name of our own for this project.””²⁰⁹

Logging’s Long Slow Decline

As construction at the dam finished, workers left town or looked for other jobs. Even with the immediate losses of jobs after the dam was built the strength of the timber industry supported the county. In early 1976, the paper noted that St. Regis Paper Company had been Lincoln County’s biggest taxpayer followed by Burlington Northern Railway, Pacific Power and Light Company and W.R. Grace rounded out the top

²⁰⁸ Mike Cuffe, “Kootenai Boom Towns Slumber Under Lake,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975. While Rexford was moved to a new location, the historic townsites of other communities were lost under the lake’s waters. Rexford probably persisted because most of the other former logging communities had lost almost all their residents by mid-century, including Gateway, Hayden, Rondo, Valcour, Ural, and Warland.

²⁰⁹ “Lake’s Name Was Rexfordite’s Idea,” *Western News*, August 21, 1975.

businesses in town.²¹⁰ For the rest of the 1970s and early 1980s, logging production had its ups and downs but continued to employ most residents. Tied to the national housing market, residents did not have much control over the housing market, but St. Regis officials believed that timber prices were on the climb.²¹¹ Libby was on par with national unemployment rates.²¹² As logging dominated the job market, the newspaper continued to report on regular accidents related to the timber industry. Between 1975 and 1986, deaths and serious injuries related to logging averaged about one per year.²¹³ Without giving specifics, St. Regis officials commented in 1975 that the safety performance in Libby had been “less than satisfactory.”²¹⁴

Men who had grown up logging in the area, however, often took a nonchalant attitude toward the risk. When asked if it was dangerous to run logs down the Kootenai

²¹⁰ “St. Regis Retains Top Ranking as Taxpayer,” *Western News*, January 22, 1976. For the first time since Libby Dam’s construction started, no dam construction companies were included on the top ten list of industries in Lincoln County.

²¹¹ “Production Slow in 1975, But Graduate Increase Noted,” *Western News*, January 29, 1976.

²¹² Clarence McConnell, “Local Joblessness Is Near National Rate,” *Western News*, December 8, 1977.

²¹³ “Funeral Held Monday for Man Hit by Log,” *Western News*, January 8, 1976; “Kalispell Man Dies in Logging Accident,” *Western News*, August 19, 1976; “Woods Mishap Kills Logger,” *Western News*, March 2, 1978; “St. Regis Worker Killed with Brick Wall Collapse,” October 7, 1982; and “Logger Badly Hurt,” *Western News*, February 6, 1985.

²¹⁴ “Production Slow in 1975, But Gradual Increase Noted,” *Western News*, January 28, 1976. By 1977, the St. Regis Safety Awareness Committee was pleased with the notice reduction in accidents for the previous three months and started awarding St. Regis windbreaker jackets to 112 eligible workers who had worked ten or more years for the company without a reportable accident. While no specific information was given on the safety program, one contributing factor was given - “the razzing from his teammates if he jeopardizes his team’s chances of not winning a monthly \$2 bill handout, or worse yet, his team’s chances of a quarterly bonus or a yearly award.” “St. Regis Hands Out Safety Windbreakers,” *Western News*, September 8, 1977.

river, Don Weydemeyer responded, “Well, in a way. No more so than a lot of other things probably.”²¹⁵ Marvin Green disagreed about the risk on the log drives saying, “They did the best they could. It wasn’t easy, because I tell you, this is dangerous water down here...It was nothing to play with because if you get in the water why you go clear through the canyon, and it would be unlikely that you might survive, that water is mean. Suck you right down, roll you and tumble you. Well I wouldn’t say that you’d have much of a chance period, if you had any at all.”²¹⁶ When he talked about his own injury at the sawmill, however, Green was more pragmatic. He started at the sawmill as soon as he graduated from high school and moved up to setter and had the job of moving logs into position for a desired cut, which was, according to Green, a tough job, even for an “old hand.”²¹⁷ When a stick broke and cut his finger, the doctor “pulled my hand up between his legs, and grabbed a larger pair of surgical scissors and started whacking it off.”²¹⁸ Even forty years later, Green was still angry at the doctor for his decision, but commented that since the doctor had already cut off two-thirds of the finger, he told him to go ahead and finish the job.

Logging truck accidents were common as well, putting both truck drivers and other drivers on the road at risk.²¹⁹ Les Skramstad lasted only a few days driving a

²¹⁵ Don and Winton Weydemeyer, Oral History by Victor Bjornberg and Sparky Hileman, “Lincoln County Oral History Project,” Spring 1980, Montana Historical Society, 5.

²¹⁶ Marvin Green, Oral History by Victor Bjornberg, “Lincoln County Oral History Project,” Summer 1980, Montana Historical Society, 28.

²¹⁷ Marvin Green, Oral History, 18.

²¹⁸ Marvin Green, Oral History, 18.

²¹⁹ “Friday Collision Results in Serious Injuries,” *Western News*, June 19, 1975; “Loaded Lumber Truck Spills Load on Elk Hill,” *Western News*, July 24, 1975; “Sheriff’s Office

logging truck in Libby. He did not mind the job, but the logging truck he drove was a “wreck” and when driving down a steep mountain road, he “pretty near killed myself. It was just a stroke of luck that I didn’t.”²²⁰ For Skramstad, that part of the logging job was too dangerous, so he went to the sawmill and asked for a job.

Of course, logging was not the sole cause of injuries and death in Libby. Like any community, Libby had its share of hazards, including incidents of violence, such as homicide, which occurred around town. Driving in the area seemed particularly fraught. For years, the *Western News* dedicated a section of the front page to documenting the car accidents that occurred in and around the rural mountain town. Weather, speed, reckless driving, and mountain driving all contributed to accidents.²²¹ Recreating in the outdoors also proved dangerous. The Kootenai River and surrounding mountains claimed local and tourist victims as well.²²²

As the 1980s approached, the logging industry was doing well in Libby. St. Regis’ fourth quarter and full year earnings in 1978 achieved record levels.²²³ As the new

Checks Logging Accident, Thefts,” *Western News*, August 5, 1976; “Log Trucks Involved in Several Accidents,” *Western News*, December 9, 1976; “Quien Funeral Held Monday,” *Western News*, January 6, 1977; “Loaded Logging Truck Smashes Camper,” *Western News*, August 11, 1977; “No Serious Injury As Logging Truck Rolls,” *Western News*, September 21, 1978.

²²⁰ Les Skramstad, Oral History by Jodi Foley, “The Libby Oral History Project,” May 23, 2002, Montana Historical Society, 4.

²²¹ Many traffic accident fatalities during this time noted that the victims were not wearing seatbelt. Montana passed a mandatory seatbelt use law on October 1, 1987.

²²² Headlines such as “Fisherman Drowns After Hitting Head” and “Libby District Handles Two Backwoods Injuries” were common during this time. “Fisherman Drowns After Hitting Head,” *Western News*, March 11, 1976, and “Libby District Handles Two Backwoods Injuries,” *Western News*, September 2, 1976.

²²³ “Record Sales, Earnings Noted by St. Regis in 1978,” *Western News*, February 1, 1979.

decade approached, county officials discussed Libby's population numbers. Even though the boom from dam construction had calmed, officials still felt confident that Libby's population had still grown steadily and continued to be one of the growth areas in the state.²²⁴ Census data in 1980, however, proved Libby officials wrong - since the last census in 1970, Libby's population had dropped by sixteen percent. Previous census data since 1900 had seen constant population growth in Libby, but the decline of logging pushed many residents out of town.

The population decline did not mean that more jobs were available in the community. In early 1982, St. Regis' production seesawed wildly and would continue to do so.²²⁵ The resulting mill closures pushed the unemployment rate in Libby to 37.6 percent in March.²²⁶ In April, 757 Lincoln County residents were employed and 2,033 had submitted unemployment claims.²²⁷ In a good news-bad news situation, while the unemployment rates hit twenty-five to thirty percent in May, the state prioritized Libby's for a \$1.5 million grant to address economic issues in the community.²²⁸ In July, the unemployment rate had dropped to twenty percent, but state reports showed that while

²²⁴ "Libby Area Population Continues to Grow," *Western News*, April 12, 1979.

²²⁵ In early January, St. Regis operations were back in "full swing" after the mill had curtailed productions for more than two weeks. The mill shut down again January 22 for eight weeks, temporarily laying off 650 workers. Less than half of the workers had returned by late March. By mid-May the mill had closed for an unspecified period and logging crews had been delayed from working. "St. Regis Operations Back in 'Full Swing,' Says Miller," *Western News*, January 6, 1982; Jill Eichhorn, "Regis Calls Back 165 Employees," *Western News*, April 2, 1982; "Sawmill to Close Operation Friday," *Western News*, May 12, 1982.

²²⁶ "Libby's Jobless Rate Drops," *Western News*, June 3, 1982.

²²⁷ "Libby's Jobless Rate."

²²⁸ "Unemployment Rate Gives Libby High State Grant Priority," *Western News*, May 5, 1982.

Libby was near the top of the list for unemployment as thirteen out of fifty-six Montana counties had unemployment greater than ten percent. The state overall checked in at 8.5 percent.²²⁹ In response to the crisis in Lincoln County, one candidate for U.S. Senate held a Jobs Task Force meeting in Libby in October. Larry Williams offered many suggestions for diversifying employment opportunities and helping residents get back to work. Avoiding federal support and regulations was key, Republican Williams said, to Libby's economic recovery and offered product ideas such as chocolate chokecherry candies, smoked whitefish, and selling green Montana rocks for decorative landscaping.²³⁰ Whether or not any of these ideas were taken up by Libby residents to improve their financial situation was not clear.

Former Libby high school teacher and local historian, Jeff Gruber, argued many timber companies in the 1970s had moved away from the sustained yield philosophy pioneered by J. Neils Lumber Company and instead focused on quick liquidation of timber resources.²³¹ The decline of the timber market in the early 1980s damaged St. Regis financially and Champion International acquired the company in the fall of 1984. Soon after the merger Champion officials announced their concerns about the region's logging industry in future years. For starters, Champion, like many other large logging companies, had been overlogging their privately owned timber lands since 1980.²³²

²²⁹ "County Jobless Rate is Falling, But Area Continues to Lead State," *Western News*, July 14, 1982.

²³⁰ Lynette Nickel, "Williams and Task Force Offer Job Ideas," *Western News*, October 7, 1982.

²³¹ Briggeman, "Cruel Story."

²³² "90s Could Be tough for Logging Industry," *Western News*, January 16, 1985.

Resident Diane Keck shared a common opinion in town: “I guess that Champion, who did most of the logging — stye really wiped the woods out.”²³³ Champion estimated that the present pace and scope, logging would only last for the next eight years. The second concern focused on the upcoming master plan for Kootenai National Forest submitted by the USFS. The plan could greatly impact the future of Champion’s logging as private lands were virtually exhausted.²³⁴ If the Forest Service reduced allowable logging amounts on public land, Champion production would be greatly diminished.

In addition, the logging industry itself was entering the period of contraction because the national supply of suitably sized saw logs was nonexistent.²³⁵ This concatenation of events meant that the future of logging in Libby looked grim. Even with the knowledge of these possible future events, Gruber argued, Champion immediately instituted an aggressive goal for production that quickly depleted the available trees in the area but gave the company record production at the mill of 187 million feet of lumber and plywood in 1987.²³⁶

Tourist Economy

As news about the decline of logging and Libby’s high unemployment levels filled pages in the *Western News*, three semi-related events occurred which apparently touched a nerve with some citizens and led to heated town meetings and letters to the editor. All three focused on ways to improve the economy of Libby. The first, and least

²³³ Diane Keck, “Diane Keck Interview,” interview by Fred Quivik on April 26, 2002, in *Libby, Montana* (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society, 2002), 32.

²³⁴ “90s Could Be tough for Logging Industry,” *Western News*, January 16, 1985.

²³⁵ “90s Could Be Tough.”

²³⁶ Briggeman, “Cruel Story.”

controversial, event was the introduction of a new festival to be held celebrating Libby's ethnic heritage. In the same edition as story announcing that Champion shut down wood product plants on the west coast to reduce its \$1 billion debt burden after merging with St. Regis, and with no assurances from local Champion officials that the Libby mill would stay open, Nordicfest was introduced to the public. In comparison to Logger Days, which was started by a small group of Jaycees to commemorate Libby's biggest industry, Nordicfest was a project to raise funds for community groups by using the increasing popularity of ethnic festivals across the nation.²³⁷ Libby's Chamber of Commerce, along with other groups in town, led the charge for a new way to bring in people and money to Libby.²³⁸ The development of a Scandinavian festival made sense to organizers due to the area's early Norwegian population.²³⁹

As Libby looked forward to its first Nordicfest, the *Western News* staff wrote of Libby's early settlers. Many of the community leaders in Libby settled in the area from Norway. According to the paper, these settlers helped found Libby: "[Norwegians] pushed the railroad across Montana, worked in the sawmills, and taught the schools. They established homes and businesses, built churches and libraries, and raised their children in the little town that grew, with their help, from a rough mining camp to a solid community."²⁴⁰ The first Nordicfest in September 1985 was deemed a success with a plan

²³⁷ June McMahon, "Attempt to Clear Up Misunderstanding," *Western News*, September 3, 1986.

²³⁸ "Libby to Host NordicFest in September," *Western News*, March 6, 1985.

²³⁹ "Libby to Host."

²⁴⁰ June Hileman, "Looking Back...Over the Years Many Early Settlers Were Scandinavian," *Western News*, September 18, 1985.

to extend the event to three full days the next year.²⁴¹ The impact as a tourist event was also noted since visitors came from places as far away as Texas, Iowa, and British Columbia.²⁴² One organizer commented that Nordicfest helped locals to find pride in and excitement about Libby, “it was a very different feeling from the ‘down’ feelings we seem to have had a lot of in recent months.”²⁴³ The festival gave residents a reason to be proud of their community in a time of upheaval.

Nordicfest appeared to be popular with Libby residents; at least no one took to the newspaper to complain following the event.²⁴⁴ At the end of the year, however, the paper reported on a contest held by the Libby City Council for a short slogan to be placed on the large billboard at the south entrance to the city. The billboard space had been donated by Champion and had formerly been the sign for the St. Regis Lumber Company. Both the slogan and the reuse of the St. Regis sign garnered comments from the community. More than one hundred slogans were submitted for the contests, highlighting the natural scenery around Libby, the logging industry, the friendly people, the Nordic history, and

²⁴¹ June McMahan, “Libby’s First Nordicfest Reported to be Success,” *Western News*, September 25, 1985. The second year of NordicFest expanded its options and brought the promised three full days of events including food booths, a craft show, horseshoes competitions, a soccer tournament, quilt and antique show, performances, and lessons by folk dance troops from around the region, music, a lutefisk dinner, showings of Scandinavian travel films, designation of the King and Queen of Nordicfest, and a parade with Norwegian Fjord horses through downtown. “Nordicfest Schedule of Events,” *Western News*, September 1986, Nordicfest Section. “Guesstimates” by organizers put attendance around 5000 and visitors traveled to Libby from coast to coast. “Nordicfest Attracts. Thousands,” *Western News*, September 24, 1986.

²⁴² McMahan, “Libby’s First Nordicfest.”

²⁴³ McMahan, “Libby’s First Nordicfest.”

²⁴⁴ Like Logger Days, Nordicfest was a victim of the COVID-19 pandemic: changed back to a two-day festival, Nordicfest lasted thirty-four years and was last celebrated in September 2019.

twenty-eight entries from a fifth-grade class.²⁴⁵ The winning slogan was decided by the City Council and not reported in the paper; however, a few letters refer to “The Pride of the Kootenai” as the new motto for Libby²⁴⁶

While residents were debating new slogans, an editorial in the paper noted that, in an effort to rebrand the town to attract tourists and new businesses, the Libby Chamber of Commerce suggested incorporating a Scandinavian theme into the town’s business district.²⁴⁷ Business owners were encouraged to build and erect false Nordic-looking store fronts and to repaint buildings in the theme. The redevelopment of Libby as a Norwegian mountain community was not directly related to Nordicfest. The Chamber developed the idea for a town facelift after visiting Kimberley, B.C., which leaned into the Bavarian village theme in the early 1970s and had seen a resulting boom in tourism there.²⁴⁸ Libby soon received national attention for its push to redevelop as a Nordic village in an effort to recoup from declining wood products economy.²⁴⁹ A *New York Times* reporter, who

²⁴⁵ “City Billboard Slogan Contest Draws More than 100 Entries,” *Western News*, December 25, 1985.

²⁴⁶ In 2007 Libby adopted “City of Eagles” as its slogan to recognize the distinctive metal eagle sculptures found around town made by the local high school art teacher.

²⁴⁷ “Editorial - Chamber Commended,” *Western News*, November 13, 1985.

²⁴⁸ “An Analysis: Libby, Montana — A Town in Transition,” *Western News*, June 25, 1986.

²⁴⁹ The late twentieth century saw a number of economically declining, resource-based communities reinvented themselves as theme towns, often based on a real or invented connection to an ethnic identity, in hopes of benefiting from a tourism. See Steven Schnell, “Creating Narratives of Place and Identity in ‘Little Sweden, USA,’” *Geographical Review* 93, no. 1 (2003): 1-29; Susan Sessions Rugh, “Branding Utah: Industrial Tourism in the Postwar American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2006): 445-472; Joe Weber, “Three American Wests,” *The Professional Geographer* 71, no. 2 (2019): 239-252; and Stephen Frenkel and Judy Walton, “Bavarian Leavenworth and the Symbolic Economy of a Theme town,” *Geographical Review* 90, no. 4 (2006): 559-584. Numerous communities chose to rebrand themselves as tourist

had a cabin in the area, wrote of the efforts of Libby's Chamber of Commerce to rebrand the town, which some residents saw as rejecting their logging town identity in favor of a scenic Nordic village. More national attention on Libby's renovation came when a CBS film crew shot footage of the twenty-five businesses that had agreed to adopt the new theme on their buildings.²⁵⁰ The Chamber presented this renovation plan as fairly well received in the community, particularly by business owners and the next week's paper noted that the renovation had become a "juggernaut" with more than forty businesses who had "jumped on the Nordic facade bandwagon." Support seemed universal as attendees of the Chamber of Commerce banquet chanted, "Nordic, Nordic, Nordic."²⁵¹

Residents immediately started sending letters to the newspaper with their views on this proposal. Some residents argued that the theme was wrong - Libby was not a Scandinavian town, but a Western one.²⁵² Nordicfest had been a successful event, but the Norwegian theme did not need to represent Libby throughout the whole year. After all, borrowing another town's theme did not celebrate the uniqueness of Libby.²⁵³ Another

destinations after their loss of industry in the late 1970s and 1980s. Brad Snow discusses how Kellogg, Idaho adopted a Bavarian ski town theme after the closing of the Bunker Hill lead smelter in Snow, *Living with Lead*, 171-180.

²⁵⁰ "CBS Shoots Footage for Story on Renovation," *Western News*, January 22, 1986.

²⁵¹ "Forty Business Commit to Renovate," *Western News*, January 29, 1986.

²⁵² Cindy Sikes, "Wants Western Theme," *Western News*, November 13, 1985; "On the Mark," *Western News*, November 20, 1985; Shirley Wasco, "Capitalize on Western Theme," *Western News*, November 27, 1985; Sue Janssen, "Ignoring Wishes" *Western News*, February 12, 1986.

²⁵³ The most unique theme offered by a resident was a Chinese theme to commemorate the early Chinese miners in town. While the letter was sent with good intentions, the suggestions included outfitting downtown businesses in Chinese pagoda style, employing out of work loggers to pull tourists in rickshaws around town, a reenactment of China's nineteenth century Tong Wars with actors receiving "Kung-Foo" training, local musicians playing Chinese music, and local crafts people making and selling chop sticks.

writer agreed with the mischaracterization of Libby as a Scandinavian town, arguing that residents really wanted a western or logging theme and it was insulting of local merchants to try and rewrite Libby's history in such a way.²⁵⁴ A writer from nearby Troy commented that Libby "should have used a mining, logging, farming, western theme, anything but Nordic. You are being disloyal to the women and women who lived and died mining the ores, felling the trees and growing food and meat."²⁵⁵

Tempers further inflamed when a rumor started that Kootenai Knute, a caricature of a logger, would be appear on signs around town including the billboard with the town slogan. The Nordicfest board denied the rumor and defended Knute as "venerable, worldly-wide and fun loving...someone who has been around a long time and who loves Libby, its logging, its surroundings and its people. He was particularly intended to pay tribute to Libby's logging past...He might have fun BEING a logger but he certainly doesn't make fun of it."²⁵⁶ Edna Boles was furious when she heard about the possibility of Knute being used as the city symbol: "As far as the tourists are concerned, it will be a big joke. We are proud of our loggers; they are hard working, respectable people which make up the community and should not be made fun of."²⁵⁷ Helen Halsey commented that "Libby is a lumber mill and mining town," and asked why some would want to install a Scandinavian theme on the town: "Are they ashamed of [Libby]? Are they afraid

It is probably just as well that this theme was not selected. Stan Bruce, "Adopt a Chinese Theme," *Western News*, December 4, 1985.

²⁵⁴ Sue Janssen, "Letting off Steam," *Western News*, February 12, 1986.

²⁵⁵ C. Harvey, "Opposed to Nordic," *Western News*, February 19, 1986.

²⁵⁶ McMahon, "Attempt to Clear Up Misunderstanding."

²⁵⁷ Edna Bolles, "Proud of Loggers," *Western News*, August 6, 1986.

of the ups and downs of our economics?”²⁵⁸ Halsey argued that while some towns had luck with rebranding themselves with an ethnic theme, Libby should just stick with having Nordicfest every year, “but for heaven’s sake, don’t try to make us all Norwegians — WE JUST AIN’T.”²⁵⁹

The strong reactions against the downtown facelift may have seemed a bit overwrought considering that no public monies went to the project — business owners funded renovations on their own by buying lumber and paint at cost from local merchants.²⁶⁰ Writers in support of the renovation commented that the theme would attract tourists and improve the local economy, would clean up town, and “The change will be a visual delight for visitor and resident alike.”²⁶¹ Hilda Harlen commented that adding the Nordic theme to the town would help the local economy and would not distract from other attractions such as the lumber mill, logging, and Libby Dam.²⁶² Still others pleaded for cooperation and consensus in town, noting that the actual theme was less important than the effort to bring more tourists to Libby.²⁶³ Florence Larson wrote that she disliked the new slogan and was lukewarm on the renovation, but wanted to remind readers that without the generous financial and civic support of J. Neils, St. Regis, and Champion International, “there would be no Libby.”²⁶⁴

²⁵⁸ Helen Halsey, “Lumber, Mining Town,” *Western News*, August 20, 1986.

²⁵⁹ Halsey, “Lumber, Mining Town.”

²⁶⁰ “An Analysis: Libby, Montana — A Town in Transition,” *Western News*, June 25, 1986.

²⁶¹ Jean Sonju, Carol Stratemeyer, and Shirley Casey, “Letters: Support Redevelopment,” *Western News*, February 19, 1986.

²⁶² Hilda Harlen, “All for Nordic,” *Western News*, December 11, 1985.

²⁶³ Georgine V. Power, “Cooperation, Please,” *Western News*, December 11, 1965.

²⁶⁴ Florence Larson, “‘Pride’...is Commonplace,” *Western News*, February 12, 1986.

Perhaps the downtown renovation might have received emotional comments from residents at any time.²⁶⁵ The Chamber's goal to reinvent the community as a Norwegian village, however, appeared to many letter writers as an erasure of the logging heritage in town. And a review of the headlines in 1985 reveal why residents might have felt so strongly about how their town was portrayed. On January 1, 1986, the newspaper summed up the previous year. Reading the summary of a time when logging was struggling reveals how volatile the logging industry was, how stressful the time had been on the community, and why some residents might have been angered by talk of reinventing the town. In February, 250 Champion International employees returned to work for a five-day week after six months on a reduced four-day week.

The Lincoln County Economic Development Committee began organizing in March to address ways to improve the local economy. In April Champion cut more than a third of its contract logging workforce and in July a new planer was installed and the mill, eliminating fifty jobs. Champion laid off forty employees when the quad band mill was closed November.²⁶⁶ The last few years in Libby had been challenging and difficult for many. As logging jobs declined and the town struggled to diversify its jobs and its

²⁶⁵ June McMahon, "Nordicfest Born of Economic Necessity Celebrates 10th Anniversary," *Western News*, September 7, 1994, Nordicfest insert. A story on the tenth-year anniversary of Nordicfest noted that the Nordic downtown renovation did not just spark any letter writers. The story also noted that some of the early Nordic decorations and signs had been vandalized.

²⁶⁶ "1985: The Year's News in Review," *Western News*, January 1, 1986.

identity, some residents may have felt a strong commitment the Libby's logging identity and angry at the idea of adopting a new one to boost tourism dollars.²⁶⁷

The End of Libby's Logging

Unbeknownst to residents at the time, Libby's timber industry had started a long, slow decline — Libby would never return to the heydays of midcentury. In July 1986, Champion eliminated its logging crews nationwide with almost 100 jobs lost in Libby. Production at the Libby sawmill did not slow with this decision as independent "gyppo" loggers were hired to replace the company's loggers.²⁶⁸ In just a few years, however, the company would sell its Montana timber holdings to Plum Creek Timber Company, a company that so intensively clearcut western Washington that a Republican Congressman once proclaimed them "the Darth Vader of the timber industry."²⁶⁹ The sale saddened Herb Neils, whose family had once employed most of the town, and called it "The saddest day of my life when that happened. It changed my life, changed this whole community."²⁷⁰ The *Western News* noted Champion's large economic impact on Libby and Lincoln County stating, "Directly or indirectly it accounts for huge chunk of the

²⁶⁷ June McMahan, "Libby's Nordic Redevelopment is Right on Track," *Western News*, March 9, 1988. *The Western News* reported on the Nordic development project about two and a half years after the project started. According to the paper, the rate of business adopting the new look had slowed after the first year, but some businesses were still interested. No one interviewed could say if the new look had increased business, but all reported that the town looked cleaner and more attractive.

²⁶⁸ "Champion to Eliminate Logging Unit Next Week," *Western News*, July 2, 1986.

²⁶⁹ Dennis Farney, "Unkindest Cut: Timber Firm Stirs Ire Felling Forests Faster Than They Regenerate," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 1990.

²⁷⁰ Herbert Neils Oral History, May 13, 1997, 12.

county's total jobs, retail sales, and services."²⁷¹ The success of the community was intrinsically tied to the health of the local logging company.

As part of the agreement finalized in October 1993, Stimson Lumber Company bought the Libby mill complex and more than halved the employment force from 636 workers to 267.²⁷² As Champion left and Stimson arrived, a *Western News* editorial noted the previous tenures of Libby's former main logging companies: J. Neils was part of Libby for more than four decades; St. Regis stayed almost thirty years; and Champion made it for just eight years.²⁷³ The paper claimed that the decline of logging in Libby started back when J. Neils sold to St. Regis and outside capital made decisions that affected Libby residents: "Other fateful steps were to be taken, but the first domino had fallen. Libby was never again to be the center of management's attention."²⁷⁴ With the current state of the lumber business, Stimson's future in Libby was unclear. While Lincoln County unemployment would never reach the dire levels seen in early 1982 when the jobless rate was almost forty percent, Libby would also never see the employment levels of the midcentury decades when the timber industry and dam construction work employed thousands of workers.²⁷⁵ Lincoln County would continue to have some of the highest unemployment in the state for years. Libby Mill, the mainstay

²⁷¹ "A White Knight?" *Western News*, July 23, 1993.

²⁷² "Fast Startup Credited to Mill Workers," *Western News*, November 17, 1993.

²⁷³ "Goodbye Champion, Hello Stimson," *Western News*, October 29, 1993.

²⁷⁴ "The Continuing Process of Change," *Western News*, June 1, 1994.

²⁷⁵ Roger Morris, "County Unemployment Skyrockets in November," *Western News*, January 7, 1994. The unemployment rate in November 1993 skyrocketed with the addition of laid off Champion millworkers. With more than sixteen percent of the workforce unemployed, Lincoln County yet again had the highest jobless rate in the state.

of Libby employment for almost seventy years, never reopened after Stimson bought it from Champion and in May 1995, the sawmill and stud mill were dismantled, and the equipment was auctioned off.²⁷⁶

Logging did not end with the closing of Libby Mill and it continued to be a dangerous occupation.²⁷⁷ Just months later the mill erupted in flames, burned to the ground, and was “a heap of tangled steel that still smoldered Monday afternoon.”²⁷⁸ The mill presided over Libby’s heyday when the risks to the community seemed manageable and the fire happened as residents were dealing with the decline of their logging industry. In just a few years residents were dealt another blow as they learned that they had been exposed to asbestos for decades from the local vermiculite mine. The risks from living in a community based on natural resource extraction were no longer balanced out by financial rewards and residents would enter the twenty-first century as a cautionary tale for other resource communities.

²⁷⁶ Joe Chopyak, “Mill Era Ends with Auction Start,” *Western News*, May 27, 1994.

²⁷⁷ “Idaho Man Injured by Log Falling From Truck,” *Western News*, July 2, 1986; “Idaho Man Killed by Snag,” *Western News*, July 16, 1986; “Spokane Man Dies After Logging Mishap,” *Western News*, December 31, 1986; “Three Libby Teens Hurt in Logger Truck Accident,” *Western News*, May 3, 1989; “Accident Injures Logger,” *Western News*, September 5, 1990; “Injured Logger in Critical Condition,” *Western News*, January 3, 1992; “Logger Killed in Accident,” *Western News*, November 19, 1993; “Logging Helicopter Pilot Survives Crash,” *Western News*, June 1, 1994; “Truck Driver Killed,” *Western News*, July 27, 1994; and “Logger Killed by Falling Tree,” *Western News*, November 23, 1994.

²⁷⁸ Joe Chopyak, “Stimson to Open Plant Within the Month,” *Western News*, August 17, 1995.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EPA COMES TO TOWN

Libby residents were angry in the last years of the twentieth century. The timber and mining industries that had sustained their economy and placed them among some of the highest paid workers in the state for much of the last century, were in decline. In the best-case scenario, the mines and sawmills that still operated had laid off much of their work force. In the increasingly prevalent worst case, the companies that had employed most of the town had closed, leaving the community with high unemployment and a declining tax base. Those living in this remote Montana town were not alone in their anger. Throughout the West, resource communities, which had supplied the raw materials—ore, timber, and agricultural products—to build the cities and industries of mid-century America were now struggling. Residents were frustrated and looked for others to blame for their circumstances. As I discuss earlier in this dissertation, rural western residents often targeted the same entities with their derision: the federal government, environmentalists, East Coast urbanites, and special interest groups. Many Libby residents shared these sentiments and joined the growing anger found throughout communities in Montana and the West.

While other communities across the American West shared this twentieth century boom and bust story, Libby had an invisible secret, one that placed a tremendous burden on the residents and made their town dubiously unique. The nearby vermiculite mine, which had employed hundreds of residents over much of the past century, contained asbestos that blanketed the town and caused lung disease and lung cancer in many

residents including those who had never worked in the mine. I argue that health issues in this former mining community overrode political objections to governmental oversight and encouraged Libby to create a conflicting identity, one both dependent upon and resisting the federal government. Like other communities in Montana, Libby residents felt increasingly frustrated and angry in the last decades of the twentieth century. Loggers and miners had worked dangerous jobs with the belief that any personal risk was outweighed by the good-paying jobs that would support their families. As extractive industry economies failed in the late decades of the twentieth century, Libby residents joined other resource communities in their rising anger at the government.

Mining historians have discussed how the physical demands and risks of mining constructed a form of virulent masculinity that reinforced the idea of the working-class male breadwinner.¹ Miners were exposed to risky workscapes that included machinery malfunctions, vehicle accidents, and a multitude of other accidents. I argue that residents found these risks acceptable, as long as workers could still protect and provide for their wives and children. When the scope of asbestos contamination finally became clear, miners realized that they had not protected their families from the dangers of their jobs.

¹ Matthew Basso explains how the homosocial nature of mining solidified its reputation as masculine work in mid-century Butte in *Meet Joe Copper: Masculinity and Race on Montana's World War II Home Front* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Brian Leech agrees that the ability to earn a wage to take care of their families was part of a masculine identity for miners, who saw themselves as “paragons of masculinity” due to mining’s extreme physicality. Leech notes that hard rock (underground) miners were considered “true men” due to their dangerous work and employees who worked in aboveground mines were referred to as “softies” because their jobs were not as dangerous. But, Leech allows, “both groups could still prove their worth by breadwinning for their families.” Brian Leech, *The City that Ate Itself: Butte, Montana and Its Expanding Berkeley Pit* (Chicago: University of Nevada Press, 2018), 30.

In fact, the miners had carried the asbestos home on their clothes to infect their loved ones. The anti-government anger, which Libby residents shared with others across the state, could have kept building as it did in other communities. Instead, residents realized that they faced a massive health crisis and needed federal monies to remedy the situation and pushed Montana officials to bring the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to Libby.

To support my argument, I will first review the development of the vermiculite mine in Libby from the early days of white settlement in the area through its acquisition by WR Grace and Company and its long-standing reputation in the community. Next, I turn my attention to Libby in the 1990s — a town whose economy was struggling with the loss of its major industries and that shared anti-government and anti-environmentalist attitudes developing in many rural communities throughout the West. The anger expressed in these sentiments corresponded with a political shift in Lincoln County — an overwhelmingly Democratic union town shifted to a strong Republican base with a conspiratorial fear of the federal government in one election cycle.

Then news broke nationally that Libby residents had been exposed to asbestos from the vermiculite mine and I explore the community's conflicting responses. Residents debated the inconclusive early reports of asbestos contamination. Some believed that the federal government's presence in Libby would harm the economy further, while others argued that more federal assistance was needed to address the pollution. And still others, who had adopted the far-right extremist rhetoric found throughout the state, planned a large anti-government rally as a form of civil

disobedience. As these opposing attitudes coalesced in Libby, the EPA announced the vast scope of the asbestos contamination, declaring Libby “the worst case of industrial poisoning of a whole community in American history.”² I end this chapter with the EPA Superfund program arriving in Libby as the community focused on cleanup and remediation and faced new challenges in the twenty-first century.

Libby’s contamination and remediation story has been the focus of much scholarship but has had little historical analysis. Books on Libby and its asbestos contamination have been written mainly by investigative reporters who revealed Grace’s culpability in knowingly exposing generations of residents to asbestos-contaminated dust.³ Andrea Peacock wrote two books on the asbestos in Libby, *Wasting Libby*, and *Libby, Montana*.⁴ Andrew Schneider and David McCumber, the duo who broke the news of Libby’s asbestos in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, further discussed their reporting and the widespread contamination in *An Air that Kills*.⁵ Michael Bowker expanded his study

² US Department of Labor, “Asbestos Awareness Lesson Plan: Libby Montana,” accessed April 2, 2019, 1. https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/2018-12/fy11_sh-22297-11_Asbestos-LibbyMontana.pdf.

³ Libby’s contamination was not the first time that an expose was written about WR Grace and Company’s toxic legacy. Jonathan Harr explored the attempts of Massachusetts families to hold Grace accountable for chemical waste that contaminated their water supply and was linked to several cases of childhood leukemia. The title of Harr’s 1995 book, *A Civil Action*, was adapted by journalists Andrew Schneider and David McCumber when they revealed Grace’s connection to asbestos in Libby in their 1999 news stories titled “An Uncivil Action.”

⁴ Andrea Peacock, *Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 2003) and *Wasting Libby: The True Story of How the W.R. Grace Corporation Left a Montana Town to Die (and Got Away with it)*, (Petrolia, CA: CounterPunch, 2010).

⁵ Andrew Schneider and David McCumber, *An Air That Kills: How the Asbestos Poisoning of Libby, Montana, Uncovered a National Scandal* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Son, 2004).

of Libby to include a broad indictment of the asbestos industry and its long success at avoiding federal regulation.⁶ Scientists, social scientists, and risk assessment and communication scholars have written extensively on the hazards of asbestos and the questionable effectiveness of Superfund remediation and science education efforts in Libby.

For historians, the study of Libby and its asbestos contamination brings several themes into conversation: the decline of industry in the rural American West and a concurrent rise of far-right extremism; industry and its detrimental effect on public health, occupational health, and environmental health; and the role of the federal government in addressing polluted postindustrial landscapes. My earlier chapters discussed the rise of anti-government extremism in the American West in the declining decades of the twentieth century. While most books on far-right extremism focus on a national narrative, anti-federalist sentiments have had a long history in the American West.⁷ Scholarship on occupational health often includes asbestos and other extractive

⁶ Michael Bowker, *Fatal Deception: The Untold Story of Asbestos: Why it is Still Legal and Killing Us* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003).

⁷ For scholarship on the rise of extremism in the late twentieth century, see Katherine Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (2018), Morris Dees and James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (1996), and William Chaloupka, "The County Supremacy and Militia Movements: Federalism as an Issue on the Radical Right" (1996). Historians have examined rural and western radicalism as well: Catherine Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (1996); Kenneth Stern, *A Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (1996); William Graf, *Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellions* (1990), R. McGregor Cawley, *Federal Lands, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics* (1993). Historians are starting to examine twenty-first century extremism in the West: Evelyn A. Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a new Frontier, 1970-2000* (2006); Betsy Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West* (2020);

industries' long histories of exposing workers' bodies to hazardous materials.⁸ WR Grace

is not the first company to expose their workers to toxic waste, however, the asbestos

James R. Skillen, *This Land is My Land: Rebellion in the West* (2020). While not a historian, Katherine J. Cramer examined the adoption of anti-government attitudes by rural residents in Wisconsin in recent years in *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016).

⁸ Public Health historians David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz have studied a variety of hazardous materials and their effects on industrial workers and others: Markowitz and Rosner, *Dying for Work: Workers' Safety and Health in Twentieth Century America* (1987), *Deadly Dust: Silicosis and the Politics of Occupational Disease in Twentieth Century America* (1991), and *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (2002). Christopher Sellers has examined the changing attitude toward occupational health and industrial hygiene in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health* (1997) and Christopher Sellers and Joseph Melling, *Dangers Trade Histories of Industrial Hazard Across a Globalizing World* (2011). In *Asbestos and Fire: Technological Trade-Offs and the Body of Risk* (2005), Rachel Maines studied the ubiquity of asbestos in our everyday lives and how the government and asbestos industry advocated its use while denying its dangers. To explore how another industry, lead, has poisoned citizens and, at the same time, effectively marketed their unhealthy products to the unknowing public, see Christian Warren and his study of the lead industry, *Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning* (2001) and Gerald Markowitz, *Lead Wars: The Politics of Science and the Fate of America's Children* (2013). Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway examined how industry has exploited the inherent uncertainty in science to fight legislation in other areas in *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth of Issues From Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (2010). The disparate exposure to industrial hazards and pollution based on race and class have been studied by Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution* (1995); David Pellow, *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* (2002); and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalists of the Poor* (2011). I looked to these three foundational texts on environmental justice for explanations of how workers' bodies can be sacrificed by industry. The health effects of exposure to nuclear waste and the federal government's sacrifice of Americans to support the growth of the military and industry have been a recent addition to the study of bodies and contamination. See Valerie L. Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West* (1998); Judy Pasternak, *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed* (2010); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (2013); Sarah Fox, *Downwind: A People's History of the Nuclear West* (2014); and Traci Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (2015).

contamination and illnesses spread far beyond the mine and milling operations in Montana — the EPA has encouraged anyone who lived, worked, or recreated in Libby before 1991 to be screened for asbestos-related diseases.

Other works have shown that citizens affected by Libby asbestos might have lived thousands of miles away and never set foot in the town.⁹ Superfund sites have more often been the focus of scientists and social scientists, but historians have examined their impacts on industry, environmentalism, and activism.¹⁰ While Superfund is often the only option for residents to address hazardous contamination, it is often not welcomed with open arms in industrial communities.¹¹ Scholars have expanded the focus of remediation beyond the legacies of mining and older industries to include new chemicals that pervade

⁹ Ann Freeman Cook and Helena Hoas, “The Landscape of Asbestos: Libby and Beyond,” *Journal of Risk Research* 12, no. 1 (2009): 105-113, DOI: 10.1080/13669870802488974; Brett L. Walker, “Environments of Terror: 9/11, World Trade Center Dust, and the Global Nature of New York’s Toxic Bodies,” *Environmental History* 20, no. 4 (2015): 779-795; and David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, *Are We Ready? Public Health Since 9/11* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁰ As the impetus for Superfund legislation, it is not surprising that Love Canal has been a focus of study. See Craig E. Colton and Peter N. Skinner, *The Road to Love Canal: Managing Industrial Waste Before the EPA* (Austin: University of Texas, 1996) and Richard S. Newman, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016).

¹¹ Butte, Montana is the largest EPA Superfund site in the nation since 1983. Brian Leech argues that Butte residents have changed their opinion of the EPA over time in chapter 8, “Reclamation,” in *The City that Ate Itself: Butte, Montana and Its Expanding Berkeley Pit*. The Superfund site in Kellogg, Idaho, has also been a Superfund site since 1983 due to extensive silver mining and smelting. According to Brad Snow, residents there have not developed a fondness for the EPA. See chapter 7, “A Brave New World,” in Brad Snow, *Living with Lead: An Environmental History of Idaho’s Coeur D’Alenes, 1885-2011* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2017).

our bodies and environments, even as scientists deliberate on the long-term effects from such exposures.¹²

Libby is not the only Superfund site listed on the EPA's website in 2022.¹³ And it is not the only resource community that has struggled with the need for federal assistance to address the legacies of industry. This chapter, however, places Libby, its asbestos contamination, and the EPA against the background of rising extremist sentiment in the American West in the 1990s. At the end of the century, many western rural communities had frustrated residents, declining economies, and environmental and public health legacies from failing mining, logging, and other industries. In the face of a public health emergency, Libby became a place where residents had to balance their need for federal support with their political ideology; cooler heads prevailed, bringing Superfund to Libby.

¹² Ellen Griffith Spears looks at the unequal distribution of synthetic chemicals and toxic waste in the bodies of white and black residents in a southern community in *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (2014). Phil Brown and Edwin J. Mikkelsen examine another Superfund site caused by WR Grace's contamination of a Massachusetts town with organic chemicals in *No Safe Place: Toxic Waste, Leukemia, and Community Action* (1990). In *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (2010), Steven Lerner explains how poor and non-white bodies often live in "sacrifice zones" where they have a greater risk of being exposed to toxic chemicals. Dianne Rahm looks at the role of the EPA and Superfund in *Toxic Waste and Environmental Policy in the 21st Century United States* (2002).

¹³ The EPA does not list Superfund sites by contaminants but does have examples of some of the asbestos-related sites including sites with improper disposal of asbestos, sites with naturally occurring asbestos, and sites with vermiculite, of which Libby is the only one listed. "Asbestos at Superfund Sites: Cleanup Examples," United States Environmental Protection Agency, updated February 14, 2022, <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/asbestos-superfund-sites-cleanup-examples>.

Libby's Early Vermiculite Mining

Libby's early mining mirrored the rest of Montana and much of the West. Following the 1864 discovery of gold at Alder Gulch, Montana's gold rush began, and, for a short time, the state was second only to California for gold production.¹⁴ Libby's gold mining started soon after, and although the area never rivaled other communities in Montana with ore production, the legacies of hard rock mining remain: nearly 300 abandoned or inactive mill and mine sites punctuate the 2.2 million acres of Kootenai National Forest surrounding Libby.¹⁵ Placer mining on Libby Creek established Libbysville, about twenty miles south of Libby's current location, which quickly became the main producer of placer gold in the area.¹⁶ The mining camp boomed in 1867 to nearly 600 residents, but by 1868, Libby's first bust occurred and the population dropped precipitously.¹⁷ With its early reliance on resource industries, the boom and bust cycle continued in Libby, as well as Lincoln County, throughout the twentieth century.

After the initial gold rush, technological and economic changes made other metals and minerals viable resources and sparked new mining industries. In 1881, for example, gold prospectors found vermiculite, a unique non-metallic mineral, but did not recognize

¹⁴ Malone, Michael, *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864–1906* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 6.

¹⁵ Hargrave, Phyllis A., Alan R. English, Mike D. Kerschen, Geno W. Liva, Jeffrey D. Lonn, James P. Madison, John J. Metesh, and Robert Wintergerst, "Abandoned-Inactive Mines of the Kootenai National Forest-Administered Land," Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, December 1999, http://mbmg.mtech.edu/pdf-open-files/mbmg395_Kootenai.pdf.

¹⁶ Hargrave, et al., "Abandoned-Inactive Mines," 16

¹⁷ "Joint Final Environmental Impact Statement: Montanore Project, Volume 2," US Department of Agriculture, December 2015, 495, http://deq.mt.gov/Portals/112/Land/Hardrock/Documents/Montanore/Final_EIS/Vol2_Mt_nOreFEIS.pdf.

its potential value.¹⁸ One prospective miner, E.N. Alley, looked for minerals to aid in the World War I war effort and discovered an unnamed, unclassified mineral in a short, dark tunnel. According to local lore, his candle, which had been lighting his exploration, came in contact with some of the mica-like mineral and its immediate expansion into a new light and porous material attracted his attention.¹⁹

In 1919, Alley, part-time miner and owner of the Libby Hotel, bought mining claims on nearby Rainy Creek, six miles from Libby and named the mineral Zonolite.²⁰ The *Flathead Monitor* portrayed Alley as a savvy businessman and prophet for the mineral when it wrote glowingly about the early days of Alley's mine and mill saying,

It is seldom that the original discoverer of anything that furnishes a far-reaching economic saving in industrial lines remains in the developing organization long enough to enjoy the ripened fruits after the rough, discouraging, toilsome trail leading to success has finally been negotiated, and success was not attained without sacrifice as shown in the unfolding of the story of Zonolite's discovery and process.²¹

Alley saw the potential for vermiculite and sold his hotel and other properties and mortgaged his house to finance the operation.²² He then spent a few years trying to determine its industrial and commercial applications. His early uses included "insulator,

¹⁸ "W.R. Grace File Review Summary: Chronological Order of Events (CVID #3726)," Montana Department of Environmental Quality, accessed March 8, 2019, <http://deq.mt.gov/DEQAdmin/dir/libby/wrgracetimeline3113099>.

¹⁹ "E.N. Alley Gave Leadership to new Zonolite Industry," *Western News*, December 22, 1977. While vermiculite occurs in flat thin sheets similar to mica, it can easily be distinguished from the mica family, according to one mining report, due to its "peculiar property of expanding and deepening out into worm-like forms when heated to red heat." Eugene S. Perry, "Talc, Graphite, Vermiculite and Asbestos in Montana," *Memoir 27: State of Montana* (Butte: Montana School of Mines, 1948), 23.

²⁰ Zonolite was the brand name for Alley's vermiculite. Libby residents and newspapers often use Zonolite and vermiculite interchangeably.

²¹ "E.N. Alley."

²² "E.N. Alley."

decorative material for plastered walls, as a fireproof roofing substance, in paint, wallpaper, wall board, pipe and boiler coverings, and as a fire-proof insulating packing in hollow wall spaces.²³ Mining started in 1919 and the first shipment was sent out in 1925.

In its early days, the mine produced up to one hundred tons per day that were processed locally and shipped across the nation.²⁴ Alley remained president of the company until he died in 1935. By that time, Libby's vermiculite was found in products sold around the world.²⁵ A 1937 *Western News* article noted that while the mineral had been "virtually unknown commercially a few years ago," the previous year's sales exceeded seventeen tons with production increasing.²⁶ The next year one local resident proudly announced Zonolite had been used as a spray on decorative building material on most of the buildings at the San Francisco World's Fair.²⁷ Alley's company merged with others to become the Universal Zonolite Insulation Company in 1939, and after production greatly increased during World War II, the company was renamed the Zonolite Company. During the war, Zonolite boosted production at the urging of the government, which used the material in construction for the US Navy. The value to the armed forces was clear: vermiculite was added to cement that created a fireproof cover

²³ "E.N. Alley."

²⁴ "W. R. Grace File Review Summary."

²⁵ "E.N. Alley."

²⁶ "Libby's Vermiculite Industry Growing (Half A Century)," *Western News*, July 8, 1987.

²⁷ "Zonolite Used in Fair Buildings (Half A Century)," *Western News*, March 2, 1938.

for roofs.²⁸ After WWII, the mining and milling operations entered decades of peak production.

WR Grace Comes to Town

While vermiculite never equaled the economic impact or employment opportunities of the area's logging industry, the mine and mill contributed to Libby's growing prosperity, especially after WR Grace & Company (WR Grace) acquired the Zonolite operations in 1963 and continued to mine, mill, and distribute vermiculite for almost thirty years. Vermiculite's popularity comes from its processed form: when heated, it expands (or pops) up to fifteen times its original thickness and fills with air pockets. At its peak production in the 1970s, Libby was the site of the largest vermiculite mining and milling operation in the world, producing 200,000 tons of vermiculite a year for much of its operation and employing between two hundred and three hundred people year round.²⁹ WR Grace also saw financial success during this time: focused mainly in natural resource activities the company experienced unprecedented profits throughout the 1970s and in the first quarter of 1979 had the highest earnings in the company's 125-year history.³⁰

For much of its history, the WR Grace mine and milling operations in Libby (Grace Libby) held a relatively low profile; the town's timber companies received more press in local newspapers. WR Grace had a distant relationship with the community,

²⁸ "New Zonolite Plant Increases Output (Half A Century), *Western News*, November 18, 1992.

²⁹ "W.R. Grace Era Ends in Libby," *Western News*, April 29, 1994.

³⁰ "W.R. Grace Announces Earnings," *Western News*, May 2, 1979.

mostly appearing in quarterly updates on corporate finances in the *Western News*. Grace Libby did make it into the newspapers at times. In June 1975 Grace Libby announced eight new appointments at the vermiculite mine and mill operations, all of whom had impressive credentials.³¹

The company, however, did not always receive positive publicity. In April 1977, the risks for working at Grace seemed on par with local logging jobs as Grace had a “calamitous” week with three “unusual accidents.”³² An explosives truck caught fire and was destroyed and the brakes went out on a service truck and it rolled into the Kootenai River. In both accidents, no one was injured, but then an electrician caught his foot in a cable and was almost pulled through a small opening as he hung upside down for over an hour. While he survived, he lost half of two toes on his left foot.³³ This accident was one of twelve “lost-time” accidents for 1977, which were sixty-four percent less than the previous year.³⁴ The company celebrated the decrease in serious accidents at the end of the year with an award from the National Safety Council.³⁵ Grace was proud of its safety program that included monthly letters with safety information, guest editorials from supervisors, and safety riddles and puzzles.³⁶ A quarterly publication on family and child

³¹ “Eight Get New Jobs with Grace,” *Western News*, June 19, 1975.

³² “Grace Co. Suffered a Calamitous Week,” *Western News*, April 21, 1977.

³³ “Grace Co. Suffered a Calamitous Week.”

³⁴ “Grace Earns Safety Award,” *Western News*, December 22, 1977.

³⁵ “Safety Award.”

³⁶ “Safety Award.”

safety was sent to the homes of employees.³⁷ When safety levels were met, supervisors and employees were treated to box lunches.³⁸

Even with safety puzzles and lunches, mining and its related activities were dangerous for Grace workers. Former Grace employee Les Skramstad remembered his friend Gordon Torgeson who was driving a truck one winter day and took his tire chains off for easier driving. Ten minutes later, Skramstad heard that Torgeson had almost driven off a twenty-foot ledge. While the truck had not gone over, Skramstad described what he saw: “And here lie Gordy. When he came over this edge, he jumped out and the trunk ran over him right there. Squashed him flat as that paper right there...Pretty soon here come the ambulance, and they picked him up and nobody is saying nothing. Of course, what good would it do, I guess.”³⁹ Skramstad finished the story saying the workers all got back into their trucks and continued driving because, “We had a job to do.” Skramstad found the mine driving so dangerous that he jumped at the opportunity to work at the vermiculite processing plant in town the day after the accident.

By 1977, the open pit mine at Vermiculite Mountain covered about 460 acres and was terraced with holes drilled into the terraces so that ore could be blasted loose.⁴⁰ Over 510,000 tons of ore were mined each month, but only four percent of that became product

³⁷ “Safety Award.”

³⁸ “Safety Award.”

³⁹ Les Skramstad, interview by Jodie Foley, May 23, 2002, 14, Libby, Montana, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁴⁰ “240,000 Tons Year’s Ore Production by Grace Co.,” *Western News*, December 8, 1977. The local newspapers refer to the mountain that housed the vermiculite mine as Vermiculite Mountain and Zonolite Mountain, interchangeably.

as it was heavily processed.⁴¹ The ore was scooped into large eighty-five-ton trucks and hauled to a football field-sized storage bin.⁴² From there, the ore arrived at the mill via a conveyor system where vermiculite was separated from “unwanted materials” by sifting through three screening processes. The mineral was immersed in a chemical solution where it floated to the top, was removed, and then dried on a bed dryer. It was then sifted again into five different sizes for shipment and sent out on railroad cars across the nation.⁴³ The open pit mining continued through the year with about 1,000 tons of salable concentrate produced daily.⁴⁴

In a 1979 visitors guide, the *Western News* described vermiculite as “micaceous minerals that are hydrous silicates derived generally from the alternation of mica that do not burn, are not harmed by water, and whose granules expand greatly at high temperatures to give a lightweight highly water-absorbent material that is used in seedbeds as a mulch, in plaster, mortar, and concrete as a substitute for sand, and as an insulating material in walls, floors, and ceilings.”⁴⁵ WR Grace expanded the industrial and commercial applications for vermiculite as the minerals’ non-flammable and non-corrosive properties made it popular for hundreds of products.⁴⁶ The mine offered year-

⁴¹ “Vermiculite: Quite a Mouthful,” *Western News*, May 25, 1979.

⁴² “240,000 Tons.”

⁴³ “240,000 Tons.”

⁴⁴ “Quite a Mouthful.”

⁴⁵ “Quite a Mouthful.”

⁴⁶ Grace contributed to the boom in skyscraper construction in the 1970s and 1980s by developing a spray-on fireproof insulation that could be used on steel beams. This breakthrough in construction technology connected Libby with large cities around the nation. As environmental historian Brett Walker discusses, asbestos insulation moved from the beams of the World Trade Center buildings into the lungs of first responders after 9/11. Walker, “Environments of Terror,” 788.

long employment and, at least on the surface, seemed to be a less dangerous job than logging or working at the lumber mill.

Due to its stable employment and relatively safe working conditions, the mine was a popular place to work. Rita Windom noted a few perks of working for the mining operation: “I think that their pay scale was excellent. Their benefits were excellent. They compensated their workers very well and I think the guys liked the schedules. They liked the predictability of their jobs.... They weren’t out in the woods doing chain saws and laborious back-intensive labor. They were on the heavy equipment and fellows liked that.”⁴⁷ David Benefield agreed that the employment prospects at Grace were good:

“They played a very large role in Libby, through employing 300 people up there and also paying a pretty decent wage. Their employees were union...They negotiated fair contracts with them; they had benefits. If you worked there long enough, you was going to get a pension, and you had health and welfare benefits, so they treated their employees good.”⁴⁸

Whether they worked at the mine or not, many residents saw the company as one that took care of its employees. Tony Berget, whose father worked at the mine, effusively described Grace as “a Cadillac of jobs. To work for W. R. Grace was the ultimate; that was the best job in town. That was better than working at the [saw]mill, better than working at Libby dam. They paid better benefits; it just seemed like they were a better

⁴⁷ Rita Windom, interview by Fred Quivik, April 25, 2002, 26, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁴⁸ David Benefield, interview by Fred Quivik, April 24 and 26, 2002, 48, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

deal.”⁴⁹ Gayla Benefield agreed that many coveted jobs at Grace. Her father had struggled with finding consistent work to support the family in Lincoln County — he had worked as a rancher, at the lumber mill, and driving a school bus and a fuel truck — and was finally hired at the mine. For Benefield, the job seemed providential as he started at the mine on her eleventh birthday after “he’d been out of work most of the summer.”⁵⁰

Residents also appreciated Grace’s commitment to the local community and commented on its financial support of many groups and clubs in town. David Benefield remembered that they assisted many projects: “Little League, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts. They even helped--put up money or start funds for the high school as far as their band uniforms. They would furnish men and materials for fixing the [running] track. So they were involved pretty heavily, and so yeah, their reputation in Libby was great.”⁵¹ David’s wife Gayla agreed that Grace had deep pockets in its patronage of the town: “It was unlike anything you’ve ever seen. The amount of money they put into this community, you’d think they were mining gold up there.”⁵²

While her husband praised Grace’s actions, Gayla attributed corporate self-interest to their donations: “If there was any agency organization that needed a handout, W. R. Grace was there with a check. It was an excessive p.r. [campaign], which most major corporations come to find out--do that when they come into a community.”⁵³ Grace

⁴⁹ Tony Berget, interview by Jodie Foley, May 22, 2002, 25, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁵⁰ Gayla Benefield, interview by Jodie Foley on May 24, 2002, 3, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT.

⁵¹ David Benefield interview, April 24 and 26, 2002, 54.

⁵² Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 48.

⁵³ Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 47.

was not shy about representing its contributions to the community in the local newspapers. Their ads would reference the worldwide uses of vermiculite and state that Grace “Contribut[ed] to the economy of the Libby area \$4,000,000 annually in payroll to its 130 plus year around employees” and Grace “Support[ed] community projects and programs aimed toward ever-improving the quality of life in the Libby area.”⁵⁴ Whether or not Grace’s philanthropy was altruistic, residents often acknowledged its support of the town. While not as visible as the timber companies in town — J. Neils, St. Regis, and Champion International — Grace Libby was known as a company invested in its community.

Grace contributed to Libby in other ways. Grace subsidized town improvements by donating vermiculite to build a new Little League baseball field and as a base for the high school track.⁵⁵ Citizens used vermiculite to repair public areas, such as boat ramps, parks, and schoolyards.⁵⁶ The company also gave free leftover vermiculite to town residents as ground cover and soil conditioner in their gardens. Libby vermiculite had several commercial uses that made it attractive to locals. Besides being used as loose fill insulation in many homes, Don Peterson described that “People would go down and load some up, even unpopped you’d find a lot of it, and they’d throw it in all their gardens. It retained moisture. [It was] A fantastic product.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ “Grace Ad,” *Western News*, Fall and Winter Visitor’s Guide, September 17, 1986.

⁵⁵ Mark Matthews, “Libby’s Dark Secret,” *High Country News*, March 13, 2000.

⁵⁶ Lincoln County Asbestos Resource Program. “Asbestos: Vermiculite and Libby.” Accessed April 15, 2019. <http://lcarp.org/index.php/education/vermiculite-libby>.

⁵⁷ Don Petersen, interview by Fred Quivik, April 23 and 24, 2002, Libby Oral History Project, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT, 40.

Gayla Benefield remembered that every spring her dad would bring home bags of vermiculite to spread on the yard as mulch. David Benefield noted that the drying qualities of vermiculite had a practical use when it rained: “At the time, we used a lot of that because if you had a rainstorm and you had three or four baseball games to get through at night, you could take that Zonolite over there and throw it on the field, and it would just soak up the water. I mean, all you had to do is throw it on there.”⁵⁸ Bob Beagle and Inez Herrig both commented that the high school track was made from vermiculite tailings. And many residents remembered that the tailing piles were irresistible to local children. Diane Keck reminisced about “huge, mountainous piles of Zonolite” that were “really fun to play [in]. We had ropes and, you know, you’d spin on ropes and jump and play hide-and-go seek.”⁵⁹ Diane was not alone; Don Peterson talked about the “great big pile of Zonolite” that every kid in town would “tumble and roll in.”⁶⁰ Gardens, school yards, the Little League field, the high school track: vermiculite could be found covering much of Libby and its residents.

Grace Leaves Town

WR Grace’s closure of the mine seemed sudden to many residents, although stories in the paper hinted at the company’s difficulties. In 1989, the *Western News* noted that an EPA prohibition on asbestos use would have an impact on Libby production, but

⁵⁸ David Benefield interview, April 24 and 26, 2002, 54.

⁵⁹ Diane Keck, interview by Fred Quivik on, April 26, 2002, Libby Oral History Project, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT, 2.

⁶⁰ Don Petersen interview, April 23 and 24, 2002, 18.

the manager of operations stated that the impact would probably be fairly minimal.⁶¹ The story went on to quote the Grace representative that “tremolite (an asbestos-like fiber) is a naturally occurring mineral in the ore body that contains vermiculite and, although the company separated the two, there’s still a minuscule amount of tremolite in the vermiculite.” He concluded, ““The material we ship out of here is very clean, but still had traces of them (tremolite fibers) ...we can’t get every fiber.’ About one-tenth of one percent of the finished material has tremolite in it.”⁶² While the manager downplayed the danger from asbestos, he did comment that Grace would start a “gradual, seven-year phase out of asbestos in products including roofing material, pipe wrap, sheet products, brake pads and linings, auto replacement parts, cement water distribution pipes, roof shingles and variety of other items.”⁶³The manager’s blasé attitude toward asbestos, along with the paper’s description of tremolite as “asbestos-like,” may have reassured some residents but behind the scenes Grace was contemplating its departure from Libby.

Compared to the long and visible decline of logging in Libby, the Grace mine shutdown seemed abrupt and with little fanfare. WR Grace announced its decision to close the Libby operation in May 1990 but the situation was not addressed in the local newspapers until September when the Lincoln County Commission and MT Dept of Commerce met with WR Grace representatives to discuss alternatives to the closure.⁶⁴ Grace reps stated that the markets for their products were not financially viable: ““Grace

⁶¹ “Zonolite Shouldn’t Be Hurt by Recent EPA Asbestos Ban,” *Western News*, July 12, 1989.

⁶² “Zonolite Shouldn’t Be Hurt.”

⁶³ “Zonolite Shouldn’t Be Hurt.”

⁶⁴ “Montana Delegation Meets with W.R. Grace,” *Western News*, September 5, 1990.

doesn't feel low volume justifies the operation of a mine the scale of the Libby site.”⁶⁵

The asbestos prohibition was not referenced at the meeting and the closure was explained as “strictly market driven.”⁶⁶ One Lincoln County commissioner noted that the WR Grace officials expressed sympathy for Libby residents but that the company had made the decision after long and careful consideration.⁶⁷

State representatives tried to find markets for the vermiculite and a buyer for the mine and mill, but were ultimately unsuccessful.⁶⁸ Employees threw a wake for the company, which had been open and productive for sixty-seven years.⁶⁹ Operations were shuttered at the end of the month when the remaining forty-four permanent employees were terminated (although the company rehired thirty-one of them a few days later to dismantle and reclaim the mine and mill facilities).⁷⁰ Grace representatives had de-emphasized the role of asbestos in shuttering the vermiculite operations in Libby. The end came swiftly to the mine and mill considering that in 1971 the *Western News* had asserted that the Grace vermiculite mine had the largest deposit of vermiculite in the world and “was reported to have reserves to last several hundred years.”⁷¹ In fact, the mine operated for just under seventy-five years.

⁶⁵ “Montana Delegation.”

⁶⁶ “Montana Delegation.”

⁶⁷ “Montana Delegation.”

⁶⁸ “Efforts to Save Mine May Be Too Late,” *Western News*, September 19, 1990.

⁶⁹ “Demolition of Mine Scheduled to Begin,” *Western News*, September 26, 1990.

⁷⁰ “Montana Delegation.”

⁷¹ “Looking Back 20 Years: Vermiculite Reserves Will Last Hundreds of Years,” *Western News*, May 8, 1991.

Rising Anger in Libby

With the fluctuations of the timber industry and the closure of the vermiculite mine, Libby residents struggled in the next decade. The loss of Grace's jobs in the fall of 1990 and Champion's decision to lay off 650 employees sent unemployment in the county soaring to twenty-six percent in March 1991.⁷² Over 200 employees and their spouses heard advice about surviving employment layoffs from clergy, a psychiatrist, insurance agent, and bank officials at seminars held in town.⁷³ After Champion, Stimson Lumber Company bought the mill and hired back less than half the workers.⁷⁴

The economy continued to decline over the next few years. The Asarco silver and copper mine in nearby Troy closed in early 1993 due in part to low metal prices.⁷⁵ In addition to the lost jobs, Lincoln County officials warned that the county stood to lose nearly \$500,000 in direct tax revenue annually from the closure of a mine that had operated for almost twelve years.⁷⁶ The newspaper soon reported that community businesses felt the ripple effects from so many jobs lost in timber and mining in the area.⁷⁷

Conditions in Libby were grim. Libby, for the most part, was a logging town and logging had been on the decline. The loss of the stable Grace mine added to the residents'

⁷² "Unemployment Is Still High," *Western News*, June 12, 1991.

⁷³ "Communication, Spending Time Alone Helps Coping with Layoff," *Western News*, March 13, 1991.

⁷⁴ "Stimson Hands out 963 Job Apps, So Far," *Western News*, October 1, 1993.

⁷⁵ Greg Van Tighem, "Closing Leaves 300 Miners Unemployed," *Western News*, February 17, 1993.

⁷⁶ Greg Van Tighem, "Mine Closing Creates Woes for Entire Area," *Western News*, February 17, 1993.

⁷⁷ Roger Morris and Chuck Blair, "Businesses Feel Mine Closing Impact," *Western News*, February 24, 1993.

stress. One reporter in the *Western News* compared Libby residents to victims of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake saying that when natural disasters hit, everyone was affected equally and the government assisted with the cleanup. In contrast, resource communities hit with economic disaster often did not receive help from the government and were left to suffer. In addition, even when economic disaster was imminent, residents were often not prepared as “people have a tendency to ignore dangers.”⁷⁸ While the economic downturn in Libby was not completely unexpected, it sparked anger and frustration among Libby residents who quickly found targets to blame — environmentalists and the government.

Bears and Owls

Environmentalists quickly became a target of Libby residents’ ire because of two key environmental protection strategies: grizzly bear augmentation and the designation of the spotted owl as a protected endangered species. Both strategies made many residents angry. Grizzly bears were listed as a threatened species in 1975 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Augmentation became a strategy to restore existing grizzly populations to a level that would not require ESA protection.⁷⁹ The augmentation plan proposed transferring several grizzly bears into the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem in the Kootenai National Forest.⁸⁰ Many residents quickly announced their opposition to grizzly

⁷⁸ Keeley Webster, “Job Crisis Similar to Earthquake,” *Western News*, March 27, 1991.

⁷⁹ Christopher Servheen, Wayne Kasworm, and Alan Christensen, “Approaches to Augmenting Grizzly Bear Populations in the Cabinet Mountains of Montana,” *Bears: Their Biology and Management* 7 (1987): 363.

⁸⁰ Gordon Gregory, “Baucus Maneuver Would Revive Grizzly Recovery,” *Missoulian*, November 12, 1985. The Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem was considered one of only six areas in the continental United States that had suitable bear habitat for grizzlies.

augmentation.⁸¹ Some letter writers felt that grizzly decisions were being made by environmentalists and government officials far from Montana who would not be affected by augmentation. Ted Hargrove took a sarcastic tone and recommended eastern urban centers such as New York City be considered for augmentation to address the “shocking inequity in the national distribution of grizzly bears.” According to Hargrove, “The bears will fill an important gap in the food chain. Nevermind that they might inconvenience the dominant predators already in control of the park: since when do local residents know what’s best for their area?” Hargrove finished his letter with an exhortation for residents to write their congressmen about his plan saying, “Until this gross injustice is corrected and the bears are well established back on the Atlantic Seaboard, ,” he wrote, “we just don’t deserve any more augmentation of them around here, sad to say.”⁸²

Grizzly augmentation happened around the time that wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park. Augmentation differed from reintroduction as the former increased an existing population and the latter established animals in geographic areas they had inhabited historically but not currently. Many in central and eastern Montana had extremely negative views of wolf reintroduction, as I discussed in Chapter 2. Increasing the grizzly population in northwestern Montana was unpopular but bears generally did not inspire the same vitriol in Libby as wolves did in Jordan. Perhaps this was because grey wolves were not reintroduced in Glacier National Park but rather

⁸¹ “Survey Shows Area Residents Oppose Wilderness Expansion, Bear Augmentation, Closing Roads,” *Western News*, August 12, 1987.

⁸² Ted Hargrove, “Urban Grizzlies?!!!” *Western News*, April 3, 1992.

moved into the Park across the Canadian border in 1986 and Lincoln County had hosted a wolf pack since 1990, which averaged about twenty-five sightings a year.⁸³

By the time wolves were brought to Yellowstone, an estimated forty-five wolves in five packs already occupied northwestern Montana.⁸⁴ One local did complain about “radical environmentalists” who had “forced” grizzly bears into the area, making it unsafe for residents and visitors.⁸⁵ She seemed to be referencing wolf introduction when she stated “With their bureaucratic muscle [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] will eventually bring about another Yellowstone holocaust, only with grizzly bears. We don’t have snakes or alligators either. They’ll likely transplant them next.”⁸⁶ Most letter writers focused less on any danger from grizzlies to humans and instead saw them as an effective tool to be used by radical environmentalists to delay and deny industry in the area.

In response to complaints about grizzly bear augmentation, wildlife biologists from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFS) and state agencies met in Libby to dispel concerns that the presence of grizzly bears was decreasing logging activity in the Kootenai National Forest.⁸⁷ According to officials, the KNF was not managed around one animal and bears did not stop mining or logging in the area.⁸⁸ As a threatened species under the ESA, grizzlies were a factor in decision making, but they were not the only

⁸³ Joe Chopyak, “Wolf Making Remarkable Recovery,” *Western News*, January 12, 1994.

⁸⁴ Carolyn A. Sime, V. Asher, L. Bradley, K. Laudon, M. Ross, J. Trapp, M. Atkinson, and J. Steuber, *Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management 2007 Annual Report* (Helena, MT: Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, 2007), 106.

⁸⁵ Shirley Casey, “Grizzly Bears are Coming,” *Western News*, July 11, 1990.

⁸⁶ Casey, “Grizzly Bears.”

⁸⁷ “Wildlife Officials Say Grizzly Bear is Not Affecting Logging,” *Western News*, November 13, 1991.

⁸⁸ “Wildlife Officials.”

consideration.⁸⁹ At another meeting in Libby, government officials repeatedly pushed back against the charges that grizzly bear augmentation prevented logging and mining and blamed other contributing factors such as lawsuits over logging in the Yaak and the overlogging done on private lands by lumber companies.⁹⁰

Anger at environmentalists grew in Lincoln County as it did throughout most of the West in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Libby loggers, along with many in the timber industry around the state, understood the possible repercussions for the industry when the US Fish and Wildlife Service listed the northern spotted owl under the ESA and old-growth logging virtually ceased in the Pacific Northwest. The restrictions on logging created much debate and acrimony, particularly in communities that lost jobs in the timber industry. A *Great Falls Tribune* editorial voiced the frustration that many shared. While the paper acknowledged protecting endangered wildlife was important, when balanced against logging jobs, the cost of protecting the bird was too high: “A study commissioned by labor unions put the loss at 43,000 jobs [in the Northwest].

⁸⁹ “Wildlife Officials.”

⁹⁰ Greg Van Tighem, “Blaming Grizzly Bear Misleading: Servheen,” *Western News*, September 9, 1992. Grizzly bear augmentation did affect the Noranda Montanore mine in the Cabinet Mountains outside of Libby. While augmentation did not prevent the mine from operating, most of the mine was in the bear recovery zone. The USFS required several migrative measure specific to grizzly bear management, including Noranda funding an additional USFS wildlife law enforcement position and information-education specialist for the project area. Noranda also had to purchase or obtain conservation easements on more than 11 square kilometers of replacement habitat in the KNF. Wayne F. Kasworm, Timothy J. Thier, and Christopher Servheen, “Grizzly Bear Recovery Efforts in the Cabinet/Yaak Ecosystem,” *Ursus (International Association for Bear Research and Management)* 10 (1998): 152.

In fact, union leaders charge that the federal government cares more about spotted owls than timber workers, a surprising charge since spotted owls aren't known to vote...we agree that the cost is too high.⁹¹ After the US Interior Department Fish and Wildlife Service announced the spotted owl was a threatened species under ESA, the *Western News* conducted an on-the-street survey to ask residents what effect they thought this decision might have on the timber industry. While there were no spotted owls in the Kootenai National Forest, everyone surveyed agreed that the decision did not bode well for the future of the timber industry.⁹²

Loggers in Libby believed that environmentalists clearly planned to limit or prevent access to the forests at the risk of residents' livelihoods, or even worse. One letter writer wrote that, "In the last few years the Sierra Club, Earth First, Cabinet Resource Group, Save the Yaak Committee and other so called environmental groups have succeeded in ousting the majority of the people who really need and use the forest. If you think Hitler was bad look at what these groups have done!"⁹³ Another resident agreed: "I thought that it really doesn't surprise me! The big city, liberal, radical, ecologists have been trying to destroy our way of life for years and they're succeeding - closing logging, stopping mining and skiing, closing roads."⁹⁴ Anger filled the letters as one local commented, "You'll notice the radical environmentalists...run around spewing garbage

⁹¹ "Owl Harming Economy," *Great Falls Tribune*, February 22, 1992.

⁹² "Man On the Street," *Western News*, June 27, 1990.

⁹³ Jim Slaven, "Environmental Groups Compared to Hitler," *Western News*, January 23, 1991.

⁹⁴ Bob Kehn, "Forest Service Gives to Pressure," *Western News*, January 23, 1991.

which in turn is eliminating jobs by the hundreds.”⁹⁵ The editor at the *Western News* stated most Americans were against people like Libby loggers: “It’s fairly clear that the rest of America view the Olympic Peninsula, the Columbia George, the Cascades and virtually all of Montana as a park. Their park. Rather than see their pristine vistas diminished, they are quite content to allow logging, mining and, in fact, industry of any sort to wither.”⁹⁶ The paper noted that the jobs of residents were not important compared to “critters” like the spotted owl, snail darter, and the Coeur d’Alene salamander.⁹⁷ The belief that environmentalists and the government valued “critters” over people was shared by newspaper editors and letter writers across the state.

While there was a pervading anti-environmentalist attitude in Libby, not everyone agreed. Some wrote in asking residents to stop bickering, reminding readers that locals were part of two local environmental groups – Save the Yaak Committee and the Cabinet Resource Group.⁹⁸ More often than not, however, those who wrote editorials and letters felt under attack from environmentalists, the federal government, and others who did not appreciate the work of loggers and miners.

⁹⁵ Marie Cripe, “Environmentalists Want More,” *Western News*, January 23, 1991.

⁹⁶ “You Know Who’s Really Threatened,” *Western News*, editorial, January 15, 1992.

⁹⁷ Ann E. Ferris and Eyal G. Frank, “Labor Market Impacts of Land Protection: The Northern Spotted Owl,” *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* 109 (2021): 102480, DOI: 10.1016/j.jeem.2021. The timber industry projected job losses from the ESA listing of the Northern Spotted Owl at more than 100,000. An economic study of the ESA listing in 2021 found that the decline in timber jobs was 32,000 jobs in the Lumber and Wood Products section nationally, and 16,000 jobs in the region. While these job losses had economic impacts on workers, they were nowhere near as large as the numbers trumpeted by the timber industry and loggers.

⁹⁸ Bill Moran, “Stop Bickering,” *Western News*, February 13, 1991.

Libby's Political Shift

Residents did not just write to the local paper to explain their frustration. They also expressed it at the voting booth. In essentially one election, Lincoln County moved from one of the more reliable Democratic voting blocks in the state to a conservative stronghold. For much of the twentieth century, voters in the county elected Democrats. Between 1912 and 1979, only three Republican presidential candidates won Lincoln County – Warren G. Harding in 1920, Herbert Hoover in 1928, and Dwight Eisenhower in 1956. The rest of the state looked like Libby for the first half of the century, but then turned red and voted almost exclusively for Republican Presidential candidates between 1952 and 1988, except for Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

The ratio between the political parties was even more skewed in Lincoln County in Congressional races – for the same time period a Republican candidate won the county vote once.⁹⁹ And state legislative elections for Lincoln County looked very similar: between 1974 and 1980, Democrats ran unopposed in most Montana senate and house races for the county and Libby.¹⁰⁰ Gayla Benefield remembered her dad taking her to

⁹⁹ Lincoln County election results, Montana Secretary of State Archived Election Results, <https://sosmt.gov/elections/archives/#1950s>.

¹⁰⁰ “1974 General Election Returns for Legislative Candidates By District,” Archived Election Results Legislative Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/returnsbydistrict1974montrich/page/n1/mode/2up>; “1976 General Election Returns for Legislative Candidates by Districts,” Archived Election Results, Legislative Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/returnsbydistrict1976montrich/page/n1/mode/2up>; and “1978 General Election Returns for Legislative Candidates By Districts,” Archived Election Results, Legislative Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/returnsbydistrict1978montrich/page/n1/mode/2up>.

vote for her first time and his expectations: “‘Gayla, I’m only going to tell you once, you go in there and you vote as a Democrat.’”¹⁰¹ Gayla and her father were not alone in their politics. As she pointed out, “During the [building of Libby] dam, any major elections in the state of Montana...we could swing any vote in the state of Montana because we had such a large bloc of registered Democrats right here in Lincoln County.”¹⁰²

Another long-time resident, when interviewed in 1980, agreed that Republicans were scarce in Lincoln County. In his oral history, Winton Weydemeyer talked about his parents moving to Lincoln County in 1901 and homesteading there. Weydemeyer admitted that his Republican family was a rarity, stating that “I can remember when there were five Republican votes in the whole precinct.” When he was asked if his family members made up all those voters, Weydemeyer responded with a laugh saying, “Just about.”¹⁰³ Weydemeyer had a sense of humor about his Republican leanings, but he was clearly outnumbered by Democrats in the area.

Once the county decided to vote Republican, however, the shift was quick and happened in the 1992 election. Ronald Reagan won in 1980 and 1984, and the county swung left for Michael Dukakis in 1988, but the 1992 election is when voters turned the county red. That year, three parties almost equally split Lincoln County’s votes at the presidential level: Bill Clinton won the state and the presidency while Lincoln County, with just 34 votes, voted for George H.W. Bush’s second term. But neither Clinton nor

¹⁰¹ Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 31.

¹⁰² Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 31.

¹⁰³ Don and Winton Weydemeyer, interview by Victor Bjornberg and Sparky Hileman, Spring 1980, Lincoln County Oral History Project, Lincoln County Public Library, Libby, MT.

Bush were wholeheartedly embraced considering that Ross Perot came within 150 votes of defeating both.¹⁰⁴ All three candidates shared the same, apparently unenthusiastic, support from local voters. The *Western News* editor weighed in on the lack of a clear choice bemoaning the fact that none of the presidential candidates really appealed to Libby residents: “It seems to us that no matter who wins the American people are the losers.”¹⁰⁵ Even with the lackluster attitude for all three parties, Lincoln County firmly shifted to the GOP for national and state candidates, with very few exceptions. At the local level, the days of Democrats running unopposed were over — by the mid-1990s, many Montana legislative elections in Lincoln County listed only Republicans on the ticket, a reversal of the 1970s when Democrats ran unopposed in most elections.

The shift to the right in Libby mirrored a similar change in other rural communities in the West. Lincoln County residents joined others in resource communities who believed the federal government no longer had their best interests at heart. Almost immediately upon taking office, President Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, and a collection of cabinet members held a forest summit conference in hopes of mediating between the factions fighting over the forests in the Pacific Northwest. Clinton had campaigned in timber towns on a platform of protecting jobs and the environment, but the resulting Northwest Forest Plan reduced the timber harvest in California, Oregon, and Washington by eighty percent to better manage old growth forests.¹⁰⁶ Many in Libby

¹⁰⁴ “Election ’92 Results,” *Western News*, November 6, 1992.

¹⁰⁵ “Some Choice,” *Western News*, November 4, 1992.

¹⁰⁶ “The Northwest Forest Plan,” American Forest Resource Council, July 21, 2011, <https://amforest.org/the-northwest-forest-plan/>.

and the West saw Clinton as a friend to environmentalists and an enemy to loggers. Gayla Benefield felt conflicted about Democrats' focus on the environment, saying "They were shutting down the logging, and I was absolutely against them. But they were of the Democratic Party. It was a really difficult time."¹⁰⁷ An editorial in the *Western News* succinctly summed up their concerns about Clinton's perceived support of extremists who used the ESA as a way to stop industry including logging, mining and dam construction, saying, "It threatens to be a very long four years."¹⁰⁸

The area also saw a rise of anti-government and militia activity comparable to other communities in the state. With the layoff of 300 Asarco mine workers and the termination of 400 employees at Champion International mill in Libby in 1993, militia speakers found a welcoming audience in the Libby area. At a militia meeting in Troy in April 1994, speakers exhorted between 150 and 200 attendees to hold government officials accountable for their abuse of power.¹⁰⁹ In addition, militia members asked Lincoln County sheriff candidates if they would sign a contract announcing, among other acts, that they would notify federal agencies that they could not enter the county without a sheriff's escort.¹¹⁰ Militia speakers also reiterated a common refrain heard in other extremist meetings throughout the state — the Brady Law was unconstitutional.¹¹¹ John Trochmann from Militia of Montana urged attendees to oppose gun control and be aware of UN troops training in MT. Trochmann spoke about gun control, the Waco siege, and

¹⁰⁷ Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 32.

¹⁰⁸ "The Fox is Guarding the Chickens," editorial, *Western News*, March 3, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Roger Morris, "Militia Fires Verbal Volley at Feds," *Western News*, April 22, 1994.

¹¹⁰ Morris, "Militia Fires."

¹¹¹ Morris, "Militia Fires."

Ruby Ridge while on stage.¹¹² He also included a video from the attack on Waco and argued it was all part of the government plan to control citizens.¹¹³ All in all, the meeting was representative of other extremist meetings around the state.

The *Western News* denounced the militia meeting and said that the fact that the meeting had so many attendees was “both discouraging and embarrassing.” The paper admitted that the speakers’ anti-federalist ideology might be attractive to some in the area: “To put another face on the meeting, obviously a lot of people feel that the walls are closing in around them. They feel persecuted. They feel they are being turned into victims. Cutbacks in logging and the Brady Bill are all cut from the same piece of cloth as far as they are concerned. One can feel a twinge of sympathy with militia advocates where their paranoia is concerned, but overall, you have to admit that sessions like this aren’t exactly hallmarks of progress.”¹¹⁴ While the paper rejected the militia’s goals, others found the screeds against the federal government, the Clinton administration, the USFS, and gun control persuasive.¹¹⁵

Conspiracy theories, mirroring those in other papers around the state, started to show up in letters to the editor. The Brady Gun Act had a similar effect on Libby residents as many others: handgun sales rose quickly before the Act was instituted. One

¹¹² Morris, “Militia Fires.”

¹¹³ Morris, “Militia Fires.”

¹¹⁴ “The Militia Meeting,” editorial, *Western News*, April 22, 1994.

¹¹⁵ This was not the first time Libby had a brush with the extreme right. A few years earlier a white supremacy newsletter had been circulated in town. A *Western News* editorial strongly denounced racism and worried that Libby might be associated with the Aryan Nation in northern Idaho. “Stand Against Racism,” editorial, *Western News*, August 9, 1989.

gun store owner said sales skyrocketed because of fears that the federal government had a plan to disarm residents.¹¹⁶ A letter sent soon after the militia rally reminded residents that “government tyranny is only held in check by an armed citizenry,” and to “get serious or you won’t have any rights.”¹¹⁷ Another letter the next month warned residents that Senate bills were in the works and if they passed “about 35 million Americans would have to give up their guns overnight. And if you refuse, the police and federal agents will have the power to kick down your door, and put you in prison and seize all your assets.”¹¹⁸

Interestingly, one popular subject of anti-government letters in other newspapers in the state was rarely invoked in the Libby paper: Ruby Ridge. The eleven-day siege took place sixty miles west of Libby in the northern Idaho panhandle. The armed standoff between Randy Weaver and his family and the FBI, and the subsequent death of Randy’s son, Sammy, and his wife, Vicki, proved to many right-wing extremists nationwide and across the state that the federal government was capable of the violent repression of American citizens. One Libby resident alluded to the siege and claimed Randy Weaver was a target because Weaver refused to give the government names of armed Christians in the area.¹¹⁹ Besides that one brief mention, residents who wrote of a tyrannical,

¹¹⁶ Joe Chopyak and Roger Morris, “Gun Sales Flourish Prior to Brady Act Taking Effect,” *Western News*, March 2, 1994.

¹¹⁷ Richard H. Williams, “This Is No Joke, Get Serious or You Won’t Have Any Rights,” *Western News*, May 13, 1994.

¹¹⁸ Bob Kamena, “Kamena Says Tyranny of Repressive Government is Already Here,” *Western News*, June 17, 1994.

¹¹⁹ Dwight Reber, “Socialist Government Continues Attack on Constitution,” *Western News*, March 12, 1993.

communist, socialist federal governments in the Libby newspapers avoided invoking Ruby Ridge.

As the midterm elections loomed, one letter writer encouraged residents to “Vote Republican: they have the most American values left and if they are not encouraged they too will also fall to the Bolsheviks and then keep them accountable.”¹²⁰ Whether or not the residents read the letter, they certainly took the advice and in the 1994 election voted across the ticket for Republican candidates. The high unemployment rates and anti-federal rhetoric moved Libby residents moved to the right politically and have stayed there ever since.

News Breaks of Libby’s Asbestos

News of asbestos contamination would soon push residents to reevaluate their relationship with the federal government. As described earlier, WR Grace had been known as a benevolent corporate entity in town by supporting local non-profit groups. In addition, locals used leftover vermiculite in their gardens, yards, and public spaces such as schoolyards, the Little League field, and high school track. Grace also contributed to Libby in other, less beneficial, ways. Mining and processing vermiculite was a dusty process and that dust spread throughout town. David Benefield commented,

you noticed the dust. We used to park downtown-well, like in '68, '69, when I was running the bar and cars was parked right down in the parking lot there, and some days after a shift, you'd go out and you could write your name on your car with the dust. My father-in-law worked for W. R. Grace,

¹²⁰ Rob Delaney, “Voters Warned - Watch It, Don’t Be Fooled Again by Democrats,” *Western News*, November 4, 1994.

and he had his cars in the parking lot, and he had to wash them off. He had to wash them, like, every night. The dust would be just coated on there.¹²¹

Of course, most of the dust was at the mine and the processing plant. Bob Dedrick described the area around the mill as “Extremely dusty. When we were doing those conveyer belts, putting the metal on them, we’d pick up a sheet of metal and the dust would flow off of it and by the time we got to the next one, there would be a lot of dust on the next one. A lot of dust!”¹²² According to Dedrick, while the area outside the mill was dusty, “It wasn’t so bad that you couldn’t breathe. It wasn’t like it was inside the mill. Man, that was terrible in there. You couldn’t even hardly see your hand in front of your face.”¹²³

While Grace classified the dust as a nuisance, it was, in fact, much more dangerous. Vermiculite itself was not harmful to human health, but Libby vermiculite contained a highly toxic form of asbestos. Asbestos is a fibrous mineral that, when airborne, is invisible to the naked eye and has deferred toxic effects on the human body. Thought to have been discovered by the ancient Greeks over four thousand years ago, asbestos has long been known for its fire resistant characteristics.¹²⁴ In the late nineteenth century asbestos was increasingly used in the Western world for fireproofing materials, and by 1919, it was used in thousands of products.¹²⁵ With the fibers’ “extreme fineness, high tensile strength, unusual flexibility, spinnability, and resistant to heat and the

¹²¹ David Benefield interview, April 24 and 26, 2002, 46.

¹²² Bob Dedrick interview by Fred Quivik, April 23, 2002, Libby Oral History Project, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT, 38.

¹²³ Bob Dedrick interview, April 23, 2002, 38.

¹²⁴ Sasha Litvintseva, “Asbestos: Inside and Outside, Toxic and Haptic,” *Environmental Humanities* 11, no. 1 (May 2019): 154, DOI 10.1215/22011919-7349466.

¹²⁵ Litvintseva, “Toxic and Haptic,” 155.

elements,” asbestos was essential to industry and intrinsically connected to America’s mid-century prosperity.¹²⁶ The *New Yorker* touted the appeal of asbestos in 1968, writing that, “There is not an automobile, airplane, train, ship, missile, or engine of any sort that does not contain asbestos in some form or other, and it has found its way into literally every building, factory, home, and farm across the land.”¹²⁷

Those in industry portrayed asbestos as the miracle mineral. Others appreciated asbestos as well. In 1941, Lilian Holmes Strack authored a primer on asbestos for school aged children. While her ties to the asbestos industry were unclear (Strack acknowledged asbestos companies and the US and Canadian Bureau of Mines in her book), she obviously appreciated the mineral. One description stands out: “Little pockets of asbestos seem to be scattered all over the world, and nothing else in the world is like asbestos. No other mineral has beautiful soft dainty fibers which look like glossy silk and feel like a bit of soapy cotton — shining fibers which weigh no more than a dandelion seed. Even when the asbestos fibers are still in the rock they glisten.”¹²⁸

Strack had a glowing summary of asbestos: it was a helpful and protective material that made life easier and safer for everyone. Oliver Bowles at the United States Bureau of Mines agreed with Strack in his 1946 forty-page book on asbestos, conveniently published by the Ruberoid Company, a manufacturer of asbestos products. Bowles noted the ubiquity of asbestos in Americans everyday lives: “So indispensable

¹²⁶ Paul Bordeur, “The Magic Mineral,” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 1968, 119.

¹²⁷ Bordeur, “The Magic Mineral,” 120.

¹²⁸ Lilian Homes Strack, *Asbestos: A Magic Mineral* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 13-14.

has asbestos become, that we make almost constant use of it as we go about our daily businesses or pleasures.”¹²⁹

Libby's Toxic Asbestos

While asbestos may have been indispensable to “our daily businesses or pleasures,” it also was exceedingly dangerous to our health. And both Strack and Bowles wrote their enthusiastic endorsements of asbestos well after the mineral had been scientifically associated with worker illness and death. The first time that asbestos was formally connected to the death of a worker occurred in 1900 by Dr. Montague Murray, a physician who worked at Charing Cross Hospital in London. After performing a postmortem on an asbestos factory worker, he found the mineral in the lung tissue and established a connection between the worker’s occupation and the disease that killed him.¹³⁰ In 1924, Dr. W.E. Cooke conducted an autopsy on a young woman who worked in an asbestos-textiles factory who had died from lung problem¹³¹ and his study established asbestosis as an industrial hazard.¹³² After Cooke established asbestosis as a disease of the lungs, studies on asbestosis flourished.

A century’s worth of studies have determined that asbestos is a health hazard and for that reason it has been highly regulated by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the EPA since the early 1970s. The federal government

¹²⁹ Oliver Bowles, *Asbestos: The Silk of the Mineral Kingdom* (New York: Ruberiod Company, 1946), 6.

¹³⁰ Bordeur, “The Magic Mineral,” 124.

¹³¹ Bordeur, “The Magic Mineral,” 125.

¹³² “Asbestosis,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 112, no. 20, 1939, 2067-2068.

requires that employers must reduce the risk of exposure to airborne asbestos but, in fact, “There is no ‘safe’ level of asbestos exposure of any type of asbestos fibers.”¹³³ The form of asbestos found in Libby was particularly toxic: Libby amphibole tremolite asbestos (LAA). This form of asbestos was unusual because it did not conform to the six federally regulated asbestos minerals: chrysotile, anthophyllite, amosite, crocidolite, tremolite, and actinolite, but residents and the popular press most commonly used the name tremolite.¹³⁴ Regardless of the exact classification, reports are in agreement that LAA’s particular toxicity comes from its shape made up of needle-shaped fibers (as compared to the curly fibers found in serpentine asbestos). Because these fibers can so easily enter human bodies and embed themselves into the lining of the lungs, studies suggest that they can cause cancer with less exposure than other forms of asbestos.¹³⁵ According to asbestos.com, “even incidental contamination by amphibole forms of asbestos is still hazardous enough to cause asbestos-related illnesses.”¹³⁶

The microscopic tremolite asbestos fibers, shaped like needles, accumulate in the human body, most often in the lung tissue, which can lead to the scarring of the lungs. The exposure to asbestos can cause asbestosis or can lead to lung cancer or

¹³³ “Asbestos,” United States Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration, accessed January 26, 2019, <https://www.osha.gov/asbestos>.

¹³⁴ Ann G. Wylie and Jennifer R. Verouteren, “Amphibole Asbestos from Libby, Montana: Aspects of Nomenclature,” *American Mineralogist* 85, 10 (2000): 1540, DOI: 10.2138/am-2000-1028.

¹³⁵ Daniel King, “Types of Asbestos,” *asbestos.com*, last modified December 20, 2018, <https://www.asbestos.com/asbestos/types/>.

¹³⁶ King, “Types of Asbestos.”

mesothelioma, which is a rare cancer that covers the lungs and chest cavity.¹³⁷ Regardless of the diagnosis, all three diseases share several common symptoms: shortness of breath, persistent cough, and chest pain, and the symptoms can take forty to fifty years to develop after initial exposure. One graphic description of the impact of asbestos on the lungs described that “[t]he tissue changes from the elasticity and thickness of a balloon to that of a thick orange peel,” making it impossible to take a deep breath.¹³⁸

The miners were the first exposed to asbestos as they dug vermiculite from the ground.¹³⁹ Early state reports on the mine show that the asbestos content in the dust at the plant probably exceeded twenty-one percent and at times was as high as forty percent.¹⁴⁰ Mills in town further crushed the ore, releasing asbestos-laden dust throughout the community. The men came home with dust on their clothes that their wives and children breathed in. Les Skramstad noted that he was “just covered with this dust always, every single day. No matter how hard I tried to get it off of me, I’d carry it home. I had it everywhere. Our cars were full of it, pickups full of it. I’d come home, and hard as I tried

¹³⁷ “Health Effects of Asbestos,” Agency of Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, last reviewed November 3, 2016, https://atsdr.cdc.gov/asbestos/health_effects_asbestos.html. Asbestos exposure can also cause cancer of the larynx and ovary and may cause cancer of the pharynx, stomach, and colorectum.

¹³⁸ Andrew Schneider, “Uncivil Action: A Town Left to Die,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 18, 1999.

¹³⁹ Karen Piper and Rocio Gomez both offer relevant studies on dust and health. Piper examines how the dust from a dry lake outside of LA, containing arsenic, nickel, selenium, and cadmium, has caused respiratory health issues in Central California, most notably in Native American and Hispanic communities in *Left in the Dust: How Race and Politics Created a Human and Environmental Tragedy in L.A.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006). Gomez explores the effect of industrial mining on water and Mexican bodies in *Silver Veins, Dusty Lungs: Mining, Water, and Public Health in Zacatecas, 1835-1946* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

¹⁴⁰ Cook and Hoas, 106.

to get it off me, I couldn't get it. It would stick. The kids would come in and grab me by the legs.”¹⁴¹ The ubiquitous vermiculite and vermiculite dust in Libby meant that citizens breathed in asbestos throughout their day.

Residents Respond: Blaming Grace

The first known case of asbestosis was diagnosed in Libby in the 1950s.¹⁴² Numbers grew over the following decades with sicknesses and deaths. Horrified by the illnesses and deaths, some in Libby rallied to hold Grace responsible. By the time the mine closed, residents had brought more than 140 lawsuits against Grace.¹⁴³ Gayla Benefield was convinced that Grace had known of the hazardous nature of the vermiculite. Although her father's listed cause of death was heart failure, Gayla was sure that the dust at the mine was toxic and that Grace knew: “The mine killed them but the company...[Grace] knew exactly what they were doing when they came to town, and they're still doing it to this day. It's a shame.”¹⁴⁴ Yet people outside of Libby, as well as many living in town, generally did not appreciate the wide-reaching impact of asbestos on Libby. Some residents pushed back against Gayla's criticism of Grace. According to Gayla, years before the news came out about asbestos she had questioned whether

¹⁴¹ Les Skramstad, “Les Skramstad Interview,” interview by Jodi Foley on May 23, 2002, in Libby Montana (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society, 2002), 18.¹⁴¹ Les Skramstad interview, May 23, 2002.

¹⁴² Schneider, “Uncivil Action.”

¹⁴³ Matthews, “Libby's Dark Secret.” Michael Bowker noted that most of the lawsuits settled before going to trial and Grace had insisted that the settlements include gag orders so plaintiffs could not tell their stories. Michael Bowker, *Fatal Deception: The Untold Story of Asbestos: Why It is Still Legal and Still Killing Us* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2003), 141.

¹⁴⁴ Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 49.

vermiculite should be spread on the baseball fields, and was told, “Leave it alone, Gayla. Leave it alone.”¹⁴⁵ Not everyone was ready to accept her contention that the town was contaminated. Eventually, however, the numbers of the victims of asbestos exposure grew too large to be dismissed and federal action was taken.

The legacy of Grace’s malfeasance finally became a national story in November 1999 when *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (*P-I*) reporter Andrew Schneider published a series on Libby’s asbestos titled, “Uncivil Action: A Town Left to Die.” The articles focused on WR Grace, the state of Montana, and the federal government, all of whom Schneider accused of being complicit in the asbestos contamination of Libby residents.

Libby’s newspaper, the *Montanian*, responded to Schneider’s expose with a front-page article titled, “EPA to Help State Evaluate Asbestos in Libby.” While recounting how the *P-I* stories provoked EPA administrators to explore the possible health threat in Libby, the *Montanian* challenged the “anecdotal and highly speculative interviews” cited by the *P-I*’s writers. According to the Libby newspaper, “There is no scientific evidence to support [the health concerns], and that no local, state or federal health agency can produce records to suggest that any health hazard remains.”¹⁴⁶ Over the next six months the *Montanian* downplayed asbestos concerns. Schneider’s numbers of 192 deaths and 375 asbestos-related fatal illnesses were refuted in Libby’s paper by a Montana doctor, Michael Spence. According to Spence the number of asbestos-related deaths was much lower than reported: fewer than one hundred deaths in the entire state over the last ten

¹⁴⁵ Gayla Benefield interview, May 24, 2002, 57.

¹⁴⁶ “EPA to Help State Evaluate Asbestos in Libby,” *Montanian*, November 24, 1999.

years.¹⁴⁷ In addition to challenging the higher casualty numbers, the *Montanian* contested the stories of widespread asbestos contamination. According to Libby's newspaper in the first few months of EPA testing only two local properties had asbestos fibers at levels that caused concern.

Residents Respond: Acceptable Risk

Not everyone agreed with Gayla Benefield's assertion that Grace knowingly poisoned the town. Some made it a point to say they did not hold Grace accountable for the asbestos contamination. Residents often pointed out that the risks of working for WR Grace were balanced by good jobs, good benefits, and good retirements; all of which made it possible for workers to thrive and support their families. Long-time resident Ken Baeth grew up in Libby and worked for Grace for a short time building vermiculite storage bins and a conveyor belt across the Kootenai River that brought the ore to the processing plant. Although Baeth was diagnosed with asbestosis, he was not interested in suing the company and knew others who felt as he did: "One of my relatives, he worked up there his whole life and he died from it. He had an oxygen tank and he wouldn't sue them for nothing. He says, 'I worked my whole life up there and they treated me wonderful. I'm not about to sue them for nothing.' And he died, but he was happy. They gave him free oxygen. And there is a lot of guys like that...the old-timers."¹⁴⁸ Baeth attributed his own asbestosis to his decades-long employment at the local lumber mill.

¹⁴⁷ "Governor Addresses Asbestos Concerns," *Montanian*, December 22, 1999.

¹⁴⁸ Ken Baeth interview by Fred Quivik, April 25, 2002, Libby Oral History Project, Libby, MT, Montana Historical Society, Helena, MT, 68.

Tony Berget also took a generous approach to the contamination and made an interesting comparison: “I don't think W. R. Grace was out to kill the people of Libby, Montana. It was a different time...so how can you completely condemn what they did? How can you completely and totally condemn the white man because there were slaves? It was a different time; it's a different time set. If I had some great great grandparent that was a slave owner, can you condemn me all the way down?”¹⁴⁹

Residents Respond: Unacceptable/Intolerable Risk

The discovery of asbestos contamination challenged residents to reconsider what they believed were acceptable risks at the mine. Resident Don Peterson succinctly summed up what, for many residents of Libby, contributed to the sense of helplessness and desperation that necessitated the turn to the federal government for Superfund assistance. For Peterson, the lung diseases of Grace employees may have been an acceptable occupational risk, but not the ill-health of family members who had never worked at the mine: “You worked up there. If you knew the risks, I guess that’s the risk you took. It was just kind of an attitude, I guess. You just find out these people in Libby just suffered in silence. But we never started really associating it to the wives and the children of these people.”¹⁵⁰ Peterson argued that employees had assumed a certain level of risk to work for Grace, but the asbestos found in the lungs of family members was an unacceptable trade. The workers in Libby’s forests and mines were men who defined their masculinity by their physical labor and their paychecks. WR Grace violated an

¹⁴⁹ Tony Berget interview, May 23, 2002, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Don Peterson interview, April 23 and 24, 2002, 86.

unspoken contract that their workers would be able to care for their families. When wives and children sickened and died because of the dust on men's clothes, residents felt intense anger. They also felt helplessness. They could not save their loved ones. Only their foe, the federal government, could.

Les Skramstad, who joined Gayla in blaming Grace for knowingly contaminating the town, clearly explained the important distinction between his exposure and his family's. Skramstad, who started shoveling vermiculite at the mill and moved on to operating heavy equipment at the mine, explained, "if they'd [exposed me to asbestos] because I was an employee, that's one thing."¹⁵¹ He, along with others believed there was an acceptable level of risk for those who worked the good-paying jobs at Grace. But by the time of his interview, Skramstad, his wife, and two of his children had all been diagnosed with lung disease. His three other children had not yet developed lung diseases, but Skramstad said he believed they would all develop health issues. Skramstad felt both the intense anger and the desperate hopelessness when he found out that his wife and children were sick. Skramstad said he felt

total outrageous rage. I was so mad that I don't think I have the words to describe it. Well, I'm not a violent person; in fact, I don't even hunt because I don't like to kill anything. But at that moment when I found out [my wife] and kids had it, I probably could have walked into W.R. Grace's office...and tried to find the head of the company...I believe that person would have been in trouble. I just don't think that anybody has the right to do that to someone else...to do it to my family and do it to the population of the town is an entirely different situation.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Les Skramstad interview, May 23, 2002, 37.

¹⁵² Les Skramstad interview, May 23, 2002, 37.

Skramstad's anger propelled him to join Gayla as an activist determined to hold Grace accountable for their unconscionable treatment of Libby residents.

Anger at the Media

Not all residents saw the asbestos contamination in the same way — many Libby residents had greater fears about how their community was characterized locally and nationally than potential health risks. Frustration mounted that Libby was misrepresented as a valley of death, and several local citizens expressed anger at the media for its perceived unfair portrayal of the community. In January 2000, Tony Berget, Libby's mayor, wrote a letter to the *Montanian* defending himself against criticisms that his concerns for Libby only focused on the economic well-being of the town rather than residents' public health. Berget stated that the negative news coverage had damaged Libby's economy when, in fact, the preliminary findings from the EPA reassured him that asbestos was not a problem.¹⁵³ Montana Senator Conrad Burns followed the next week with an editorial criticizing the "exaggerated" asbestos claims that had "impacts on tourism, real estate, and the economy of Libby."¹⁵⁴

Accusations against the media and its coverage of the asbestos issues came to a head in February 2000 when a *Montanian* editorial defended the freedom of the press and denounced the local community advisory committee whose members had reservations about media coverage and considered excluding the media from informational meetings between the EPA and the community. The editor criticized the committee's attempt to

¹⁵³ Tony Berget, "Libby Still Alive Despite News Reports," *Montanian*, January 19, 2000.

¹⁵⁴ Conrad Burns, "Asbestos Bill Meant to Help People," *Montanian*, January 26, 2000.

control public information on Libby's asbestos problem and noted that the consistent lone voice advocating freedom of speech came from the EPA on-site coordinator, Paul Peronard. Peronard had defended the press and its reporting by reiterating several times, "This is America," when faced with arguments against media coverage. The newspaper's final words on the importance of a free press were clear: "And stop blaming the media. The media didn't invent the asbestos problem. But they did make it possible for everyone to know about it."¹⁵⁵ Residents were clearly angry, but it was not clear who they were angry at: Grace, the media, or community activists.

Another sticking point for the community was that not everyone believed that the solution to Libby's asbestos problem lay with the federal government. Marlon Orr wrote a letter to the *Montanian* arguing that Libby did not need monies for cleanup but instead should have the right to use the area's natural resources without federal regulations: "We can't allow our proud, blue collar, resource-based heritage to be cast off by portraying our town as a victim of this asbestos issue, begging for a handout. What kind of message does that send to the industries we are trying to attract to this town? We cannot still thrive without federal 'help' if we fight for the right to access the resources we have in this area, but we have to work together to reclaim the heritage we are losing...Libby's greatest resource is her people but we must be free to use that resource."¹⁵⁶ Orr believed that Libby's problems could be solved through more mining and logging. He was not

¹⁵⁵ "Speech Is Still Free," *Montanian*, February 9, 2000.

¹⁵⁶ Marlon Orr, "Let's Re-Establish the Rights We Are Losing," *Montanian*, March 22, 2000.

alone is his view and others started to plan a rally to demonstrate their opposition to the federal government.

“Forceful Civil Disobedience”

In early spring 2000, the need for funding for Libby’s cleanup and anger at the federal government collided in Libby as some residents coordinated a massive anti-government rally. Brothers D.C. and Scott Orr organized the rally. Scott was a Libby business owner and, at the time, an outgoing member of the Montana House of Representatives. Rally organizers picked April 15, Tax Day, to protest the regulatory control exerted by the federal government over “gun owners, loggers, miners, snowmobilers, ranchers, off-road vehicle users, and others who are faced with changing land-use policies on America’s national forests.”¹⁵⁷ The “forceful civil disobedience” rally included a parade and demonstrations against the federal government and the United Nations by burning federal tax forms and the UN flag.¹⁵⁸ One Libby resident was unsurprised at the planned rally, noting that Lincoln County residents engaged in “this weirdness, this weird mentality... There’s always this anti-government undercurrent.”¹⁵⁹ Organizers, who announced that three thousand frustrated citizens would join them in Libby, claimed that the “War on the West” rally would be peaceful and that no one would break the law.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Jamison, “Anti-Government Fervor to Spill into Libby Streets,” *Missoulian*, March 15, 2000.

¹⁵⁸ “Organizers Cancel Rally in Libby, Blame Media,” *Missoulian*, April 1, 2000, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6AUvgGikVeXc8xHgryGm7F>.

¹⁵⁹ Jamison, “Anti-Government Fervor.”

Locals such as Hugh Hollyday supported the rally and wrote into the *Montanian* to say that although he had never been sympathetic to groups like the Militia of Montana, he had recently received the census in the mail and it was “an affront to freedom.” While he did not say what specifically angered him, he was so upset at what he perceived as President Clinton’s goal to enforce socialism that he planned to join the protest to prevent “being led into serfdom by the sociopath that my neighbors put into the oval office.”¹⁶⁰ He ended his letter vowing not to “join the conspiracy to thwart freedom” and encouraged others to only fill out their name and address on the census in protest of “social engineering.”¹⁶¹

A *Missoulian* editorial was sympathetic to the plight of Libby residents who had seen the bases of their economy, timber, and mining erode while their friends and relatives were dying from asbestos related causes. In this situation, the editorial commented, “you can start to understand that these are scary, unsettled, jittery times for Libby [and] it’s human nature to look for someone to blame.”¹⁶² According to the paper, the federal government who owns much of the land in the West and had “stupid, foolhardy” policies was an easy target. Even sympathetic, the paper called out the irony of fighting against federal government, which had directed funds to Libby.¹⁶³ In fact, just a week after the rally was announced, Montana Senator Max Baucus requested \$11 million in emergency funding “to deal with asbestos-related problems” in Libby, which

¹⁶⁰ Hugh Hollyday, “Clinton Will Enslave Us All,” *Montanian*, March 29, 2000.

¹⁶¹ Hollyday, “Clinton Will Enslave.”

¹⁶² “Criticism is Welcome: Blanket Judgements Are Not,” *Missoulian*, March 22, 2000.

¹⁶³ “Criticism is Welcome.”

included \$3 million for the funding of a community pulmonary health clinic. The other \$8 million would go to infrastructure and public service needs, since “the magnitude of the health problems have left few city resources for taking care of usual infrastructure upkeep and maintenance.”¹⁶⁴

Libby law enforcement officials and many business owners were concerned that the rally could easily get out of hand, noting that the Aryan Nation in Idaho and Militia of Montana in nearby Noxon were just a short drive.¹⁶⁵ Other critics of the event believed that the rally publicity, featuring black helicopters and references to the United Nations, would encourage other violent fringe groups to attend.¹⁶⁶ The Libby Area Chamber of Commerce sent an open letter to the *Montanian* at the end of March asking the organizers to call off the rally because members feared that violence might occur during the event.¹⁶⁷

On April 5, the Orr brothers announced that the rally had been canceled to ensure safety in the community, although D.C. claimed local law enforcement and the media fabricated concerns about violence and blamed “The fear mongers [who] have twisted our words until there is no hope of advancing our message of empowerment.”¹⁶⁸ Scott accused newspapers of turning their “strong, forceful event” into an “ugly affair” that encouraged violent groups to attend.¹⁶⁹ Resident Jim Pierce wrote an angry letter in

¹⁶⁴ “Max Baucus press release,” March 22, 2000, MSS 862, series VIII, box 83, A;5:25, “press releases, January 1999 - November 1999” folder, Max S. Baucus Papers, University of Montana archives, Missoula.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Jamison, “Libby Expects Peace,” *Missoulian*, March 18, 2000.

¹⁶⁶ Jamison, “Anti-Government Fervor.”

¹⁶⁷ “Libby Chamber Says ‘Cancel Rally,’” *Montanian*, March 29, 2000.

¹⁶⁸ “Organizers Cancel ‘Civil Disobedience Rally,’” *Montanian*, April 5, 2000.

¹⁶⁹ “Organizers Cancel.”

which he railed against “the hate-mongers of the radical liberal left spewing their venomous hate propaganda” who forced the rally’s cancellation. In case he was not clear, Pierce ended his letter saying Libby needed more leaders like Scott Orr and fewer like “those socialist, far-left communists expecting ‘Big Daddy’ to come take care of them.”¹⁷⁰ The rally was not rescheduled.

Even with its cancellation, about forty supporters, some from Idaho and Wyoming, came to protest the “oppressive global government.”¹⁷¹ The tenor of the rally changed with these new attendees. While the Orrs had planned to protest logging, mining, and federal land use plans, protestors instead burned the UN flag and expressed their fears of American national parks and monuments being turned over to the UN as peace parks.¹⁷² The *Montanian* did not even cover the small group.

The rally’s scaled down version still came to the attention of the Montana Human Rights Network (MHRN), which connected the Libby rally with the Jarbidge Rebellion in Nevada. In December 1999, a group of Jarbidge citizens formed an “independent citizens work party,” and, as an act of civil disobedience, defied the closure of a wilderness access road. The Forest Service had closed the road to protect threatened bull trout and planned to reopen it with a walking trail. The “bull trout rebels” found support in Montana when the owner of the Eureka mill developed a scheme to send 10,000

¹⁷⁰ Jim Pierce, “Hate Mongers Caused Rally to Fail,” *Montanian*, April 5, 2000.

¹⁷¹ Michael Jamison, “Lots of Shouting, Little Trouble Near Libby,” *Missoulian*, April 16, 2000.

¹⁷² Jamison, “Lots of Shouting.”

shovels to Jarbidge.¹⁷³ Eight hundred shovel-toting residents marched up to rebuild the road in defiance of Forest Service orders. Montana Lt. Governor Judy Martz, soon to be elected Governor, joined the protests and sent a shovel to protestors. The MHRN told Martz that her actions were concerning and her symbolic gesture legitimized harassment and intimidation of government employees.¹⁷⁴ Martz responded that Americans had the right to peacefully assemble and ““Most of these Americans who sent shovels are decent, law-abiding citizens who want nothing more than information.””¹⁷⁵ Martz would soon be in Libby listening as residents asked for federal assistance.

In July 2000 the EPA suggested all who lived in Libby before 1991 had probably been exposed to asbestos and should receive medical screenings to assess their risk of asbestos-related diseases.¹⁷⁶ After documenting the results from asbestos sampling and resident health screenings, the EPA declared that a “public health emergency” existed in Libby. This gave Libby the dubious distinction of being the first and only place to receive this designation, and Libby was described as “the worst case of industrial poisoning of a whole community in American history.”¹⁷⁷ By early 2001 the EPA declared that it would be easier to list who was unaffected by asbestos in Libby than to count all those who

¹⁷³ “Eureka Mill Owner Organizing Shovel Protest for “Rebels” in Nevada,” *Montanian*, January 12, 2000.

¹⁷⁴ Ginny Merriam, “Anti-Government Talk Must End, Group Says,” *Missoulian*, May 2, 2000.

¹⁷⁵ “Network Criticizes Martz Over Shovel Protest,” *Independent-Record*, May 3, 2000.

¹⁷⁶ “Total Exposure: EPA Says All Libby Residents Breathed Asbestos Before 1991,” *Montanian*, July 19, 2000.

¹⁷⁷ “Asbestos Awareness Lesson Plan: Libby Montana,” US Department of Labor, accessed April 2, 2019, 1, https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/2018-12/fy11_sh-22297-11_Asbestos-LibbyMontana.pdf.

were affected. According to Peronard the percentage of affected citizens was “much worse than anyone thought.”¹⁷⁸ The EPA expected that ten to fifteen percent of those tested would have lung abnormalities. While the percentage of miners screened with lung scarring was not very surprising at fifty percent, the EPA expressed shock that twenty-five percent of residents who had not worked at the mine had lung health issues.¹⁷⁹

Libby residents clearly were suffering from their exposure to asbestos. They were not the only people sickened, however, as asbestos-related lawsuits were being brought against many companies (usually from construction workers exposed to asbestos products).¹⁸⁰ Chapter 11 bankruptcy and corporate restructuring became popular way for companies to discharge their debt from legal claims and WR Grace adopted the strategy. In early April 2001, Grace filed for bankruptcy citing “a preponderance of asbestos-related lawsuits that have sent the company’s stock plummeting and depleted the company’s cash reserves.”¹⁸¹ The early stages of cleanup in Libby had been done under an EPA program with limited funds, and the scope of the asbestos contamination necessitated funding only available under Superfund designation.¹⁸² The EPA, therefore, recommended residents advocate for Superfund designation in light of assumed future remediation costs and the challenges of petitioning a bankrupt Grace for funds.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ David F. Latham, “Screening Finds Widespread Asbestos Exposure,” *Montanian*, February 28, 2001.

¹⁷⁹ Latham, “Screening Finds Widespread Asbestos Exposure.”

¹⁸⁰ Peacock, *Libby, Montana*, 210.

¹⁸¹ David F. Latham, “W. R. Grace Files for Bankruptcy,” *Montanian*, April 4, 2001.

¹⁸² Clinton Maynard, “Dear Gov. Martz: Please Listen and Consider our Concerns,” *Montanian*, November 21, 2001.

¹⁸³ “Case Summary: W.R. Grace & Co. Bankruptcy Settlement,” US EPA, updated July 25, 2022, <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/case-summary-w-r-grace-co-bankruptcy->

Superfund

For the nation's most contaminated landscapes, only one entity can help them identify, assess, and clean up hazardous wastes: the EPA Superfund program. Superfund developed in response to several environmental emergencies, often due to toxic and hazardous waste, in the second half of the twentieth century. In the decades following World War II, Americans saw the ramifications of rampant, and often unregulated, industry in communities around the nation.¹⁸⁴ Several key federal environmental laws passed to protect humans and the environment from the ravages of pollution, most notably the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act (1972). On January 1, 1970, President Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) into law. Often called the "Magna Carta of environmental law," NEPA articulated a national policy to protect the environment. Nixon then created the EPA as an umbrella agency under which to consolidate environmental programs from other agencies. The focus of the EPA at this time was primarily pollutants in the air, surface water, and from solid waste.

[settlement](#). In 2003, the EPA filed a lawsuit against WR Grace to claim past and future asbestos cleanup costs from Grace. In 2007, the EPA and the Department of Justice announced that WR Grace had agreed to a \$34 million bankruptcy settlement for cleanup. This was one of a number of lawsuits that the federal government brought against Grace on behalf of asbestos contamination victims across the country and Libby residents as well.

¹⁸⁴ American communities have seen the effects of industrial waste in the skies and waters of the nation since the late 1800s. After World War II, some spectacular environmental disasters occurred that spurred the burgeoning environmental movement and drew public attention to the need for industry regulation and the effects of pollution including Donora, PA (five-day smog inversion in 1948 killed twenty residents) and the Cuyahoga River, OH (river caught fire thirteen times, most notably in 1952 and 1969).

While the health and environmental effects of air and water pollution were dramatic, they paled in comparison to the scope of toxic contamination caused by industry and chemical companies. Widespread pollution and hazardous waste led many to join environmental groups and petition the government for regulation of industry and its waste, but the catalyst for congressional action came from a planned community in Niagara Falls whose residents had long been suspicious of the substances flowing through nearby Love Canal. Investigation led to the discovery in 1978 of a sixteen-acre chemical landfill located under pastoral suburban homes. Subsequent investigative efforts revealed massive health concerns including above average rates of leukemia, birth defects and miscarriages, and chromosomal damage for many residents.¹⁸⁵ Love Canal stirred up public anger and fears about hazardous waste time bombs ticking under communities throughout the country that subsequently led to Superfund legislation. Along with many others, legacies of mining and industry encouraged an understanding that health and environmental quality needed to be protected and remediated from the damages of pollution and led to the creation of the EPA and the Superfund program.

The Superfund program was established in 1980 under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) in direct response to well-publicized incidents like Love Canal. Superfund sites are places so toxic and contaminated that the EPA recommends (and often funds) their cleanup. While Superfund eventually came to Libby (and orchestrated a seventeen-year cleanup process),

¹⁸⁵ Jordan Kleiman, "Love Canal: A Brief History," *Geneseo, The State University of New York*, accessed October 19, 2017, https://www.geneseo.edu/history/love_canal_history.

the path to Superfund was not inevitable in Libby and for the first two years after the asbestos contamination was announced, residents had conflicting opinions on what should happen next.

Superfund designation cannot be arbitrarily imposed by the federal government but instead requires community support and a request from the state governor. In May 2001, the EPA encouraged Superfund status as the best way to clean up Libby's asbestos contamination.¹⁸⁶ Governor Judy Martz, raised in Butte, Montana, was critical of the EPA's slow cleanup process there — the Butte area had been declared a Superfund site in 1983 and much of it was still under remediation. Because of her concerns about Butte, Martz would not commit to asking for Superfund designation. The governor also expressed concerns about the state's share of Superfund costs estimated to be \$5 million to \$10 million.¹⁸⁷

That summer some residents questioned the possible effects of Superfund designation on Libby's economy.¹⁸⁸ In response EPA representatives acknowledged that

¹⁸⁶ The Superfund program only contributes to the costs for remediation and cleanup of contaminated sites. Libby was receiving, and continued to receive, a variety of funds to address residents' health issues. For example, all the free asbestos health screenings offered to "anyone who lived, worked, played, or attended school in the Libby area for at least six months prior to December 31, 1990" were funded by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a public health agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services, and, starting in 2010, by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Dawn Ballou, "Free Asbestos Health Screenings Through MASSA to End Sept. 19," *LibbyMT.com*, September 4, 2008,

<http://www.libbymt.com/news/2008/09/Freeasbestoshealthsc.htm>.

¹⁸⁷ "Martz Nixes 'Silver Bullet' Option for Libby," *Montanian*, October 17, 2001.

¹⁸⁸ "Libby Community Advisory Group Meeting Summary," University of Montana, June 14, 2001.

<http://www.umt.edu/bioethics/libbyhealth/introduction/meetingpages/01jun14.aspx>.

negative publicity and economic consequences often did accompany Superfund designations but reminded residents that the public already knew of Libby's toxic environment and that federal cleanup could only improve the situation.¹⁸⁹ EPA official Peronard admitted that he prioritized the health of Libby's residents over Libby's economic interests. When challenged in a public meeting about this decision, Peronard responded, "If I think I need to do a cleanup because there's a risk to people, that outweighs all other considerations. If that means I get eaten up by the local folks [for affecting Libby's economy], then I'll take my beating."¹⁹⁰ Many of those opposed to Superfund were members of the business community, particularly real estate agents who worried about the impact on house and property sales.¹⁹¹

Angry residents also accused WR Grace of inciting an anti-Superfund attitude when Grace argued the federal program would cause economic harm to Libby. One sarcastic response from a letter to the editor in the *Montanian* revealed how some in town viewed Grace's opinion: "Well, W. R. Grace, our community is already hurting, but thanks for the free advice!"¹⁹² The letter writer pleaded with fellow citizens to support Superfund designation: "Governments on all levels failed to protect us. One government has acknowledged that failure and that is our federal government. Uncle Sam is reaching

¹⁸⁹ "Libby Community Advisory Group Meeting Summary." May 17, 2001.

<http://www.umt.edu/bioethics/libbyhealth/introduction/meetingpages/01may17.aspx..>"

¹⁹⁰ "Citizens Group Discusses Expanding Its Authority," *Montanian*, March 1, 2000.

¹⁹¹ Bowker, *Fatal Deception*, 300, and Peacock, *Libby, Montana*, 202-204.

¹⁹² Clinton Maynard, "Libby Must Unify to Solve Asbestos Problem," *Montanian*, May 16, 2001.

out a hand to a drowning community and we need to take hold.”¹⁹³ Residents were taking sides in the debate over Superfund designation.

In August 2001 Martz’s Attorney General, Mike McGrath, recommended Superfund designation after W. R. Grace declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and their ability to fund a cleanup came into doubt.¹⁹⁴ The pro-Superfund contingent in Libby was gaining traction. Almost three hundred residents, local officials, and members of the press met with Governor Martz to present a unified front against a cleanup done by WR Grace, arguing that Libby needed Superfund designation and asking Martz to fast-track the cleanup process.¹⁹⁵ This process is commonly referred to as the “silver bullet.” Every state has one silver bullet — a one-time opportunity to select a site to bypass the lengthy Superfund evaluation process. The EPA recommends that this selected site should be one identified by the state as “presenting the greatest danger to public health, welfare, or the environment among the known facilities in that State.”¹⁹⁶

Yet Martz remained uncommitted to Superfund designation. In a later visit to Libby in October 2001, Martz “flatly rejected a request by Lincoln County commissioners to put Libby’s potential Superfund designation on a fast track” on the premise that the recent 9/11 terrorist attacks made her wary of using the state’s sole

¹⁹³ Maynard, “Libby Must Unify.”

¹⁹⁴ “Attorney General Recommends Superfund Cleanup for Libby,” *Montanian*, August 22, 2001.

¹⁹⁵ “Libby Presents Unified Front to Governor,” *Montanian*, August 15, 2001.

¹⁹⁶ “Mechanisms for Placing Sites on the National Priorities list (NPL),” Association of State and Territorial Solid Waste Management Officials, *astswmo.org*, August 2017, 1, https://astswmo.org/files/Resources/CERCLA_and_Brownfields/SAFG-NPL-Designation-Paper-8-22-17.pdf.

option for a streamlined Superfund option.¹⁹⁷ However, in late December Martz surprised residents by using Montana's silver bullet and formally requesting that the EPA fast-track the Superfund process for Libby.¹⁹⁸ This request shortened the process of Superfund designation and did not allow opponents, such as WR Grace, to slow or stop the process.¹⁹⁹ With the designation Libby became "one of the nation's top one hundred cleanup sites in spending and attention priority."²⁰⁰ Martz's announcement prompted tears and a standing ovation from grateful residents, and cleanup began in earnest in Libby in 2002.²⁰¹

On February 26th, almost immediately after Martz used her silver bullet, the EPA designated Libby as a Superfund site and, in August 2002, EPA HazMat teams began cleaning the first house in Libby. The time between the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* article, "An Uncivil Action," and Superfund designation was just under three years. The time to be designated a Superfund site is much shorter than the time to be removed from the list: in 2022, twenty years after designation, the EPA had cleaned half of the eight remediation units in the Libby Superfund site (although the four that had been cleaned up contained most of the residential, commercial, and public properties in and around Libby and Troy). The cleanup required the investigation of 7,500 properties, included a cleanup

¹⁹⁷ "Martz Nixes 'Silver Bullet' Option for Libby," *Montanian*, October 17, 2001.. "Martz Nixes."

¹⁹⁸ "'Merry Christmas,' Gov. Martz Fires 'Silver Bullet' for Libby; Asbestos Cleanup Now Guaranteed," *Montanian*, December 26, 2001. Martz never gave a reason for her change of heart on the Superfund silver bullet.

¹⁹⁹ "'Merry Christmas.'"

²⁰⁰ "Superfund Status Becomes Official," *Montanian*, March 6, 2002.

²⁰¹ Kathleen McLaughlin, "Martz Puts Libby Cleanup on Fast Track," *Billings Gazette*, December 21, 2001.

of 2,400 properties, and cost over \$600 million (WR Grace paid \$250 million of the total).²⁰² The total Superfund site consisted of eight units encompassing land and property around the Grace mine, forty-two miles bordering the BNSF railroad, thirty miles along US Highway 2, and the cities of Troy and Libby. In November 2015, more than a decade after cleanup started, the EPA released a health risk assessment for Libby that asserted that “[t]he amount of [LAA] in the air in downtown Libby is now nearly 100,000 times lower than when the vermiculite mine and mill were operating.”²⁰³ According to the EPA, the successful cleanup resulted in asbestos levels in the ambient air consistent with other communities in Montana and the nation.²⁰⁴

Libby Extremism On the Decline?

While the EPA touted a successful cleanup, Libby residents have worried about the town’s future and many of the issues that caused anger, and frustration, and division. The divisions in the 1990s have not disappeared.²⁰⁵ In recent years, grizzly bears returned

²⁰² Matthew Brown, “Montana Set to Take Over Deadly Asbestos Cleanup Site,” *Business Insider*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-montana-set-to-take-over-deadly-asbestos-cleanup-site-2017-9>.

²⁰³ “Libby Asbestos Site,” US EPA.

²⁰⁴ “Site-Wide Human Health Risk Assessment, Executive Summary: Libby Asbestos Superfund Site, Libby, Montana,” CDM Smith, US EPA, November 2015, 5, <https://semspub.epa.gov/work/08/1562964.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ The naturally occurring asbestos has not disappeared from Libby either. Short of relocating the entire town to a new location, Libby residents will always be at some risk from asbestos, which still lurks in the soil, houses, and, even the trees of the area. As of 2020, more than seven hundred properties in Libby have not been investigated because the owners cannot be found or will not work with the EPA. Tim Povtak, “Bittersweet Ending to Asbestos Cleanup in Libby, Montana,” The Mesothelioma Center, December 11, 2018, <https://www.asbestos.com/news/2018/12/11/asbestos-cleanup-libby-ends/>. While over one million cubic tons of contaminated material have been removed from the area, the EPA also decided to contain asbestos in homes and yards as well, which means a possibility of future exposure if the asbestos is disturbed. Rob Chaney and Vince

as a focus of discussion in Libby as residents debated the route of the Pacific Northwest Trail (PNT). The Trail, developed in the 1970s as a western alternative to the Appalachian Trail, runs twelve 1,200 miles from Glacier National Park to the Washington Olympic coast. Instead of arguing for or against grizzly bear augmentation, residents were now debating if the PNT should be extended to the Yaak valley so that the local economy could benefit from upwards of four thousand trail hikers per year, or if that change would have a deleterious effect on the ESA threatened grizzly bears.²⁰⁶ In an echo of the debate over grizzly augmentation in the 1990s, letter writers again sent in a host of letters to the *Western News* about the charismatic ursine in 2019 and 2020, but, unlike the earlier debate, no one appeared to be arguing against the bears' listing on the ESA.

In another meeting, discussions about grizzly bears returned as Stimson Lumber Company contemplated a conservation easement on land in Lincoln County. Attendees had relatively few questions about the easement itself. While some attendees debated whether or not the land should be locked up in an easement or sold to developers, others

Devlin, "Libby Residents Express Concerns with Agency's Final Cleanup Plan," *Independent Record* (Helena, Mont), May 6, 2015. Scientific studies assessing the possible exposure to asbestos from tree bark warn that the forests surrounding Libby are "reservoirs" of asbestos released during seventy years of mining and processing. Tony J. Ward, Terry M. Spear, Julie F. Hart, James S. Webber, and Mohamed I. Elashheb, "Amphibole Asbestos in Tree Bark – A Review of Findings for This Inhalational Exposure Source in Libby, Montana," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 9, no. 6 (June 2012): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1080.15459624.2012.682217>. Finally, the latency period for asbestos-related disease and cancers upwards of fifty years means current and former residents will continue to sicken and die.

²⁰⁶ Duncan Adams, "Diverging Approaches Taken to Pacific Northwest Trail," *Western News*, February 25, 2020.

pressed Stimson delegates to bring a mill back to Libby as the nearest mills are in northern Idaho.²⁰⁷ Mill or no mill, residents still pushed for logging and argued for a 29,000-acre timber harvest near Libby while environmental groups sued to stop the project claiming that building new roads in the Kootenai National Forest would threaten the grizzly bear population.²⁰⁸

Debates about the future of mining in Lincoln County also appeared on the newspaper's pages. No one advocated for the return of the vermiculite mine, but a proposed silver and copper mine south of Libby reignited the debate over economy versus environment. As environmentalists pushed state officials to examine the mine's possible environmental impacts, Lincoln County Commissioners vowed that they would assist the mine in quickly navigating the permitting process. While unemployment in Lincoln County is much lower than it had been in the 1990s (8.5 percent in December 2019 versus the statewide unemployment rate of 3.4 percent), the Commissioners argued that residents would see economic benefits from the mine and its employment of between 300 and 450 full-time workers over its twenty-year life expectancy.²⁰⁹

Far-right extremism and hate still found a home in Libby in the twenty-first century. In 2006, two neo-Nazis from Libby were charged with a felony of malicious intimidation for yelling racial slurs at a woman and her children, who had Native

²⁰⁷ Derrick Perkins, "Residents Weigh Conservation Easement," *Western News*, July 20, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Mike Garrity, "Don't Hack the Yaak," *Missoulian*, October 6, 2021 and Tim Dougherty and Doug Ferrell, "Support for Ripley Project," *Missoulian*, October 25 2021.

²⁰⁹ Duncan Adams, "The Future of Mining: Hecla Pushes Ahead as Environmentalists Voice Concerns," *Western News* February 21, 2020.

American ancestry. The men had also been investigated for distributing Nazi flyers in town.²¹⁰ Neighboring Flathead County, located to the east of Libby, has seen a rise in hate crimes and neo-Nazi and white supremacist activities, so perhaps it is not surprising that Libby saw similar actions. In 2021, the Federal Communications Commission assessed a \$9.9 million fine against a Nazi sympathizer in Libby for “racist, anti-Semitic and threatening robocalls.”²¹¹

Northwest Montana was not alone in seeing these types of incidents in recent years as the FBI reported that hate crimes in 2020 were at their highest level since 2008.²¹² But anti-government rhetoric in Libby seemed to cool somewhat after Superfund came to town. The cleanup in Libby did not unify residents in support of the federal government, but the explosive anger expressed by residents in the 1990s appeared to have diminished. I have argued that concerns over asbestos remediation and the health of family members overrode the far-right ideology that was aflame in Libby at the end of the last century. Libby newspapers did not report on anti-government protests or rallies during the Superfund years. While the newspapers continued to run letters and editorials accusing the federal government of tyrannical actions and espousing conspiracy theories, residents did not take to the streets in protest — but that does not mean they gave up their anti-government ideology.

²¹⁰ Gwen Albers, “Neo-Nazis Enter Pleas in Hate Case,” *Western News*, July 26, 2006.

²¹¹ Chad Sokol, “FCC Slaps Libby-Based Neo-Nazi with \$10M Fine,” *Daily Inter Lake* (Kalispell, MT), January 27, 2021.

²¹² Federal Bureau of Investigations, “FBI Releases 2020 Hate Crime Statistics,” FBI press release, August 30, 2021, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/press-releases/fbi-releases-2020-hate-crime-statistics>.

In 2002, the *Missoulian* brought Project 56 to the attention of Missoula readers. A Kalispell area man, Dave Burgert, was accused of plotting to kill law enforcement officers, judges, and elected officials in Flathead County by police who claimed he had connections to right-wing militias. Burgert had no clear connection to Lincoln County, but had started a secret group called Project 7, based in Flathead County, where all the license plates started with the number seven. Another group called Project 35 had been founded by John Trochmann, co-founder of the Militia of Montana in Sanders County, where the license plates start with a 35. Ken Short, the founder of Project 56 (the number on Lincoln County plates), denied connections to the other groups but admitted a shared anti-government ideology and fears of federal tyranny over American citizens.²¹³ The mission statement of Project 56 promised to “promote the moral, physical and economic well-being of Lincoln County and the people living here by utilizing our natural resources through the empowerment of the Lincoln County government.”²¹⁴ The group supported the principles upon which “this Christian nation was founded” and opposed tyranny, socialism, atheism, racism, and the New World Order and. It focused its attention on “individual rights, private property rights, access to public lands, mining, logging, and the regulations that impact those activities.”²¹⁵

With that mission statement, it is not surprising that members stated that their group grew out of the planned “War on the West” rally set for April 15, 2000. When that rally was canceled, local organizers formed Project 56. While Missoula residents may not

²¹³ Michael Jamison, “Watchdog or Attack Dog?” *Missoulian*, March 10, 2002.

²¹⁴ “Project 56 Mission,” *Missoulian*, March 10, 2002.

²¹⁵ “Project 56 Mission.”

have heard of Project 56 before, the group was visible in Libby for a few years. Meetings usually drew around forty members who would write occasional letters the papers. The Lincoln County Sheriff claimed Project 56 was engaging in campaigns to discredit the sheriff's office, local judges, and prosecutors. In 2001, members also presented county officials with a draft ordinance to declare Lincoln County a "United Nations-free zone" to prevent the UN from controlling public lands, using the ESA to stop industry, and disarming American citizens.²¹⁶ Member DC Orr defended Project 56 and accused the Sheriff and others of trying to "continually paint this area as a 'hotbed of right wing extremists.'"²¹⁷ Orr believed what many in the group espoused: "A belief in God, respect for the Constitution, and a health disdain for the United Nations sticking their nose into our nation's business is not a crime."²¹⁸ Although members denied Project 56's connection to extremism, the groups shared many of the talking points used by militia and other groups in the state: anger at environmentalists and environmental regulations, frustration with federal land-use policies, distrust of the UN, and concerns about gun control. Project 56 also supported "home rule" ordinances that gave counties the power to enforce local decisions over public land.²¹⁹

MHRN advocated for a measured response to the different "Project" groups saying that diversity existed between the different extremist groups around the estate. While they shared some beliefs, they had different concerns and were not necessarily a

²¹⁶ Jamison, "Watchdog."

²¹⁷ DC Orr, "Chicken Little: 'The Militia is coming, the Militia is coming,'" *Montanian*, March 27, 2002.

²¹⁸ Orr, "Chicken Little."

²¹⁹ Jamison, "Watchdog."

threat to public safety. The bigger concern for the human rights nonprofit was that these groups “poison the political debate in a community with misinformation and fear” and were generally opposed to democracy.²²⁰ Project 56 used the democratic process to its advantage and was successful in placing a group member on the school board (three Project 56 candidates ran for Libby City Council in 2001, but none won). Project 56 seemed to disappear after 2002 as no mentions of the group occurred in local or state papers. A Google search in 2022 found no website or other information for the group.

Lincoln County did become darker red as Republican candidates gained more and more of the vote in recent elections. As mentioned earlier, in 1992, Republican George W. Bush won the count by thirty-four votes over Democrat Bill Clinton (although Independent Ross Perot came within 162 votes of winning the county).²²¹ In 2020, Democrat Joe Biden received less than a third of Donald Trump’s 8,672 votes.²²² In an exception to Lincoln County voters’ move to the right, Senator Max Baucus continued to win elections there in the 2000s, which might be attributed to the fact that Baucus visited Libby more times (sixteen) than any other elected Montana official between 2000 and 2002 and made federal funding to Libby for public health and cleanup-related activities one of his top priorities. Baucus beat his 2002 Republican challenger by 402 votes in 2002 and the goodwill from Libby continued in 2008 when he trounced Republican

²²⁰ Jamison, “Watchdog.”

²²¹ Legislative Election Results 1992, Archived Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://sosmt.gov/elections/archives/#1990s>.

²²² Legislative Election Results 2020, Archived Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed October 25, 2022, https://sosmt.gov/wpcontent/uploads/State_Canvass_Report.pdf.

candidate Bob Kelleher by more than two thousand votes.²²³ Whether or not Baucus could have continued to win with such overwhelming support, or even win at all, was not tested. While the county's support of Republicans increased, Baucus did not seek reelection in 2014 but instead accepted an ambassadorship to China. By 2020, however, Baucus probably would not have stood much of a chance on the Lincoln County ballot.

Anger at government officials and county health boards exploded across Montana and much of the West during the pandemic, as evidenced by the Montana Legislature passing House Bill 121 that limited the authority of health boards and public health officers.²²⁴ Libby's experience echoed other communities around the state, both large and small. Libby differed from other towns in one substantial way – local officials and residents had already dealt with a major public health emergency: the asbestos contamination that, to date, has sickened more than 2,400 people with asbestos-related illnesses and caused at least four hundred documented deaths.²²⁵ The scope of contamination was so vast and the consequences of exposure so dire that only government intervention, in the form of the Superfund program, could address it. And so,

²²³ Legislative Election Results 2002, Archived Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://sosmt.gov/Portals/142/Elections/archives/2000s/2002/2002-GenState.pdf?dt=1523477333219> and Legislative Election Results 2008, Archived Election Results, Montana Secretary of State, accessed February 29, 2020, https://sosmt.gov/Portals/142/Elections/archives/2000s/2008/2008_State_General.pdf?dt=1523477333219.

²²⁴ Will Langhorne, "Officials Examine New Rules governing Local Health Boards," *Western News*, June 22, 2021.

²²⁵ Jim Robbins, "Ex-Worker Wins \$26.5 Million from Company That Hid Asbestos Damage," *New York Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/us/asbestos-libby-montana.html>.

the EPA came to a town that believed that the federal government favored environmentalists and other groups over the livelihoods of hard-working loggers and miners.

While many residents met the federal government with suspicion and hostility at first, as more information came out about Libby's plight, the government became the best and only option for cleanup. A tenuous and sometimes fraught relationship developed between the hated EPA and residents who had cast their lot with Republican candidates advocating for smaller government. As Superfund finished remediation and a new pandemic entered with federal and state restrictions and regulations, the relationship quickly soured and conspiracy theories, threats of violence, and anti-government sentiments returned to Libby, and this time public health would not temper the anger.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

On January 6, 2021, a violent and heavily armed mob, supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump, stormed the US Capitol. Lawmakers and staff were shepherded to secure locations to protect them from more than two thousand rioters who pushed past Capitol Police and entered the building in an attempt to prevent Congress from confirming the election of Joe Biden as president. The insurrectionists traveled from across the nation to Washington D.C. based on conspiracy theories and the shared belief that the 2020 election had been stolen through widespread fraud, a claim definitively refuted by election officials and experts.

Studies of the insurrectionists have shown that the demographic profile of many of the suspected Capitol rioters did not fit the previous profile of far-right extremists: they were employed, many in white-collar jobs, or owned their own businesses. In addition, many came from counties where Biden won the vote instead of the reddest parts of the country. While they overwhelmingly shared the goal of preventing Congress from certifying Biden as election winner, the majority had no existing affiliations with far-right militias, white nationalist gangs, or other violent groups.¹ Fueled for years by conspiracy theories, often rooted in racist, antisemitic, and nativist beliefs and with the goals of

¹ Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists,” *The Atlantic*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895/>.

casting doubt on democratic processes and delegitimizing government officials and institutions, those who descended on the Capitol were primed for violence.²

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, core conspiracy theories have existed for decades, including “fears about door-to-door gun confiscations, martial law, supposed takeover of the U.S. by the ‘New World Order’ and anxieties around the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).”³ Freemen, the Militia of Montana, and other extremist groups around the state espoused and propagated all of these in the 1990s. During the Trump presidency, conspiracies expanded to include critical race theory; increased hysteria over ideologies such as communism, Marxism, and socialism; and belief in ‘QAnon,’ a conspiracy that Trump was waging a war against a shadowy cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophile Democrats.

Conspiracies may seem ludicrous, but their defining characteristic is that people believe them no matter how much disconfirming evidence is presented, and when new evidence is presented to refute the conspiracy, believers find ways to convert that evidence into support for the theory. The Freemen believed these and other theories and they were not alone: a 1997 poll found that one-quarter of Americans believed that a secret and evil government conspiracy existed to disarm and control citizens.⁴ In fact, the

² “Conspiracy Propagandists,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed October 16, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/conspiracy-propagandists>.

³ “Conspiracy Propagandists.”

⁴ Lori Linzer and David Rosenberg, “Vigilante Justice: Militias and ‘Common Law Courts’ Wage War Against the Government,” *Anti-Defamation League*, 1997, 24, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/combating-hate/adl-report-1997-vigilante-justice.pdf>.

anger and paranoia expressed by rioters in the Capitol sounded eerily familiar to the language in the newspapers in Jordan and Libby in the 1990s. Studies on conspiracy theories assert that Americans have long endorsed conspiracy theories and these beliefs have important political implications.⁵ More importantly, conspiracy theories have become a pathway to radicalization and politically violent behavior. All people who believe in conspiracy theories are not potentially violent, but anecdotal evidence has shown an association between political violence and conspiracy theories.⁶

The American West has seen its share of such political violence. Scholars of extremism have noted that the far-right ideology that fueled the insurrection has been incubating in the West for years as self-described “patriots” have stormed government buildings, threatened public employees, and vandalized federal property.⁷ These demonstrations have revived in the West after they were a popular tactic employed by protestors in the peak days of the 1990s sovereign citizen movement. President Trump’s pardons of westerners who resisted federal authority displayed, at the very least, tacit support of anti-government rebels. Joe Arpaio, a former Arizona law enforcement official

⁵ Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, Hugo Drochon, Kamal Premaratne, and Manohar Murthy, “Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased Over Time?” *PLOS One*, July 20, 2022, DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0270429; J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, “Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 952-966, DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12084; Abdul Basit, “Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences and the Implications,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 3 (June 2021): 1-9.

⁶ Federico Vegetti and Levante Littvay, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Attitudes Towards Political Violence,” *Italian Political Science Review* 52, no.1 (2022): 18-32, DOI: 10.1017/ipo.2021.17.

⁷ Kirk Siegler, “Roots of U.S. Capitol Insurrectionists Run Through The West and Northwest,” *Northwest Public Broadcasting*, January 12, 2021.

who touted himself as “America’s toughest sheriff,” ignored a federal district judge who told him to stop racially profiling Latinos on the suspicion they were in the country illegally. In his statement, Trump called Arpaio an “American patriot” who “kept Arizona safe” and agreed with Republicans who praised Arpaio for doing the job “the Feds refused to do.”⁸

Trump also pardoned Oregon cattle ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond who were convicted in 2012 of setting fires they claimed were preventative on their land but then spread to public land. In the statement announcing the pardon, the White House noted that the Hammonds were “devoted family men, respected contributors to their local community, and have widespread support from their neighbors, local law enforcement, and farmers and ranchers across the West’...and were victims of ‘overzealous’ and ‘unjust’ criminal trials.”⁹ Environmental groups and federal agency employees criticized the pardons saying that they would encourage “lawless extremists” to reject federal law on public lands.¹⁰ Even before Trump’s election loss, experts who monitored far-right activity noted an increase in armed vigilantes and paramilitary groups

⁸ Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Pardons Joe Arpaio, Who Became Face of Crackdown on Illegal Immigration,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/us/politics/joe-arpaio-trump-pardon-sheriff-arizona.html>.

⁹ Eileen Sullivan and Julie Turkewitz, “Trump Pardons Oregon Ranchers Whose Case Inspired Wildlife Refute Takeover,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/10/us/politics/trump-pardon-hammond-oregon.html>.

¹⁰ Carl Segerstrom, “Trump Pardons Oregon Ranchers, Symbols of Anti-Federal Movement,” *High Country News*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.hcn.org/articles/sagebrush-rebellion-donald-trump-pardons-oregon-ranchers-whose-arrest-sparked-Malheur-standoff>.

protesting across the nation, but particularly in western states, where they claimed to be protecting private property and keeping the peace.¹¹

Trump's pardons of western rebels received attention, but Betsy Quammen and James Skillen argue that the connection between western rebellion and extremism goes beyond western characteristics. They see how western rebellions over public lands moved from regional skirmishes to a national stage and attracted many non-westerners who shared a hatred of the federal government. The standoffs and rebellions in the 1990s and early 2000s were part of an ongoing movement by conservative Christians to radicalize the far right, nationalize the anti-government rebellion, and blur the lines between mainstream Republican politics and extremist ideology. The fight of the western antihero has transformed into a battle between the conservative Christian far-right movement and the federal government over gun rights and culture wars. Resistance to federal authority is no longer just a western fight, but a battle between the conservative movement and federal authority and has pulled mainstream Republican politics increasingly further to the right of the political spectrum.

The communities I examined have escaped public notice for much of the twentieth century — barring some notable dramatic and catastrophic events. An overview of Jordan, Denton, and Libby reveals that they have struggled to overcome many of the same issues they dealt with in the 1990s. Denton and Jordan, in particular, have disappeared from public view. On notable anniversaries of the Freeman standoff,

¹¹ Erika Bolstad, "Emboldened Far-Right Groups Challenge Cities, States," PEW Charitable Trust, October 13, 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/10/13/emboldened-far-right-groups-challenge-cities-states>.

reporters will descend on Jordan and describe tightlipped residents who would rather not commemorate the standoff that brought national attention to their small town and caused divisions between residents. Beyond that, Jordan has received little notice over the past thirty years. A wildfire threatened the town in early September 2020 and residents, which according to the 2020 census numbered less than 350, were ordered to evacuate, but the blaze skirted town and they returned to their homes.¹² Garfield County had another challenging fire season in 2021 when five federal firefighters sustained burn injuries after weather conditions shifted. When editor Janet Guptill passed away in the fall of 2021, the *Jordan Tribune* closed its doors, which cut off most information about Jordan to the outside world. While the *Billings Gazette* carries sporadic news about Jordan, mainly about the high school sports teams, there is little news about the community that once hosted hundreds of FBI agents and reporters during the Freeman standoff.

Denton has not seen its conditions improve much in the past thirty years. The town completed another water project to improve its drinking water at the cost of \$2.5 million in 2020. Although this project did not address the historic nitrate issues, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality determined that Denton's water system was being contaminated by surface water pathogens. Overall, interviewed residents were resigned to the new project — just like the earlier project in the 1980s, they found the government regulation restrictive and unnecessary, but could not avoid the DEQ orders to replace water lines, the filtration system, and a new storage tank.

¹² Paul Hamby, "Crews Still Battling Fire Near Jordan," *Billings Gazette*, September 4, 2020.

Residents commented in their interviews that the new water system would not improve the town's prospects, and they were correct. School enrollment, always a concern of rural communities, has been in constant decline - thirty-eight students were enrolled in the 2021-2022 academic year, almost half of the students enrolled six years earlier.¹³ Every resident interviewed acknowledged the fear that the school would close and without a school, the community would have no future. Like Jordan, a wildfire came to town, but in the case of Denton, the unusual December wildfire ran through town, destroying twenty-six homes, eighteen other structures, the landmark 100-year-old grain elevators, the train trestle, and the highway bridge into town. Amazingly, considering that the fire, whipped up by seventy mph winds, started close to midnight on November 30, 2021, no lives were lost. However, the Mayor counted at least eight residents who left town when they lost their homes — a substantial loss when the town only has two hundred residents.¹⁴

Libby has received the most attention over the years as an active Superfund site costing more than \$600 million. The extreme health and environmental crises from asbestos contamination explain the relative speed of the cleanup and lack of controversy. While residents did not plan any more civil disobedience rallies after the aborted attempt in 2000, anti-government rhetoric still echoed in town through the short-lived Project 56, which touted itself as a government watchdog group. A few incidents with white supremacists occurred in 2006 and 2021, not surprising considering that Flathead County,

¹³ "Denton School Overview," Montana Office of Public Instruction, accessed October 17, 2022, <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/school-district-data>.

¹⁴ Brett French, "Rising from the Ashes," *Billings Gazette*, October 9, 2022.

located just to the east of Lincoln County, saw an increase in white supremacist groups and hate crimes. In the twenty-first century extremist groups in the Flathead Valley included anti-government radicals who handpicked which laws they would obey, Christian Identity adherents who espoused antisemitic beliefs that whites are the true chosen people of God, and survivalists prepping for the government's collapse and subsequent chaos.¹⁵

Libby had very few incidents in comparison to neighboring counties — at least until COVID-19 hit the community. In the first weeks of the pandemic, residents in Libby, like many in other communities across the state, offered little resistance to federal and state public health regulations. One reason for this may have been that the first death from the coronavirus in Montana happened in Lincoln County within weeks of the pandemic's start.¹⁶ While Jim Tomlin had not grown up in Libby (he and his wife had moved to Troy to retire in 2007), his death foreshadowed an eventual 317,000 cases and 3,581 deaths across the state (in Lincoln County the respective numbers are 5,526 and 92). Tomlin's death also concerned county officials as many in the area obviously suffered from asbestos-related pulmonary issues and the Lincoln County Health Department issued mask mandates and social distancing requirements in an attempt to keep coronavirus cases low.

¹⁵ Ryan Lenz, "A Gathering of Eagles: Extremists Look to Montana," *Intelligence Report* (Southern Poverty Law Center Publication), November 15, 2011, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2011/gathering-eagles-extremists-look-montana>.

¹⁶ Duncan Adams, "COVID-19 Claims life of Lincoln County Man," *Western News*, March 31, 2020.

DC Orr, who had planned the aborted disobedience rally with his brother in 2000, used the health department regulations to resurrect his fight against government tyranny. Like many communities in Montana, Libby has its share of anti-vaxxers, pandemic deniers, and civil libertarians. Orr accused the county's public health officer of perpetuating a hoax within months of the pandemic's start.¹⁷ Along with others in Libby, Orr pushed county commissioners to dissolve the Lincoln County Health Board, dismiss Dr. Brad Black, the public health officer, and defy statewide COVID-19 restrictions.¹⁸ The angry group warned of Nazis and communists in the community and gathered more than 700 signatures in support of their demands.¹⁹ The Commissioners were receptive to the demands, particularly concerning the mask mandate, but said their hands were tied by state regulations.²⁰ Some residents took to the newspaper to advocate for masks and kindness and area health clinics took out ads to encourage mask wearing, but many used newspapers and public meetings to fight back.

By December 2020, Orr, who was encouraging local militia members to attend health board meetings, warned commissioners that "violence would break out in the county" and that Black had failed to show that coronavirus was a threat in Lincoln

¹⁷ Derrick Perkins, "Groups Again Calls on Lawmakers to Defy Governor, Reject Pandemic Rules," *Western News*, November 3, 2020. Orr also accused Black Lives Matter of orchestrating appointments to the health board. Derrick Perkins, "City Council Candidate Accuses Black Lives Matter of Meddling in Health Board Appointment," *Western News*, October 26, 2021.

¹⁸ Perkins, "Groups Again Calls."

¹⁹ Perkins, "Groups Again Calls."

²⁰ Perkins, "Groups Again Calls."

County.²¹ Orr also accused “Team 56,” a local grassroots group founded during the pandemic to encourage residents to take simple pandemic precautions, of working with the Black Lives Matter Movement — which he claimed was very active in Libby — and “indoctrinating local schoolchildren with Marxist ideology.”²² Orr’s conspiracy theories and anger at regulations were not unusual during the pandemic. In light of increasing coronavirus cases and mandates from the state and federal governments, any acceptance of COVID-19 restrictions ended quickly, and residents fought against health boards across the nation.

What is more interesting is the lull in anti-government activity in Libby during the Superfund cleanup. Residents had become increasingly angry at a host of targets in the 1980s and 1990s as the town’s economy collapsed. Libby residents blamed environmentalists, Democrats, and the federal government for their woes. They shared these targets with many other struggling communities in the West, including Jordan. The discovery of the asbestos contamination, however, muted many of the extremists’ arguments. As the scope of the contamination expanded beyond the workers at the mine and mill operations, the public health emergency necessitated a more measured response to the federal government and fostered a reluctant acceptance of Superfund. Denton residents responded in a similar fashion. Even when they questioned the nitrate regulations and chafed at the costs of new drinking water infrastructure, residents worked with the state and federal governments to address the hazard. Residents adopted a

²¹ Perkins, “Former City Councilor Offers Services as Peacemaker,” *Western News*, December 15, 2020.

²² Perkins, “Former City Councilor.”

frustrated, yet resigned, attitude toward the regulation — instead of rebelling, they saw the value in maintaining relationships with state and local government officials to remedy the situation.

Many in Jordan did not see any advantages to working with the federal government and paranoia and anti-government anger grew there until a small group declared themselves sovereign from federal rule and threatened their fellow residents. Others in town may have shared the Freeman's anger, but outright rebellion was a step too far. Even when their local newspaper whipped up conspiracy theories and fury directed at many targets, most residents saw the Freeman's actions as too extreme.

All three communities vacillated on a spectrum in their responses to the federal government in the 1990s — from resignation, to desperation, to rebellion. As I address in earlier chapters, extremism and anti-government anger was growing across the state and the West. When communities had a need for government help, however, tempers cooled. These rural western communities with dwindling economies did not have the resources to address their challenges — only the federal government could rally the resources necessary. Yet as western extremism has returned in full force in recent years, even a public health emergency as dire as COVID-19 no longer mutes the tempers of residents who have been radicalized by conspiracy theories and white supremacist ideology, but instead inflames accusations of government tyranny.

In this dissertation, I argue that rural western communities followed national political trends towards a smaller federal government and believed that other groups, most commonly aligned with the Democratic Party, were benefiting from government

programs even as they were losing their industries and economies. When faced with emergencies, however, Denton and Libby chose to work with the federal government. Whether accepted reluctantly, or resentfully, or desperately, the government offered resources beyond the reach of these communities. Rebellion, such as seen in Jordan, was a rare response to the government. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has revealed that many residents no longer see the benefits of federal regulation in a public health emergency. As long as rural communities do not see a need for government regulation, extremism will continue to grow in the West and across the nation

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