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FOREVER WILD: JOURNEYS THROUGH THE NORTH FORK

By

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B.A. English, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, 2001

Thesis

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Abstract Forever Wild: Journeys Through the North Fork

Chairperson: Phil Condon

The North Fork of the Flathead River runs for eighty-five miles, starting in southeastern British Columbia and ending in Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana. The river flows through a rugged valley that plays a vital role in the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem. In the United States, the North Fork is Glacier National Park's western boundary. It is a National Wild and Scenic River and a critical migratory route for an amazing array of wild animals.

There is no electricity on either side of the border except for the southernmost fifteen miles in the U.S., and the only access from anywhere is via rough dirt roads. In Canada, there are no permanent human inhabitants, only a handful of outfitter cabins. In the U.S., prescient and determined land owners have worked for decades to preserve the character of the valley on the sliver of private land that hugs the river. Development is there but limited.

Despite these protections, the river and its valley are vulnerable. Just north of the International Border, the British Columbian land management plan ranks mining as the best use. Though the valley is only thirty miles away from Waterton Lakes National Park, it is almost directly north of Glacier. There are minerals there, to be sure. Coal mining has been proposed in various forms since the 1980s and as recently as 2005. And the rocks beneath include gold and methane gas too.

In 2006, I began a journey into the North Fork that continues today – travelling to Canada as a volunteer, researching and studying as a master's degree candidate, and finally passing through as an explorer in search of a deeper connection. Throughout, I have wanted to build the case for conserving this place and finally making the Crown of the Continent officially whole and functioning.

This thesis puts those experiences into words and stories. I am by no means an expert on the North Fork, and these words include many of my own thoughts and philosophies, unrelated to the river itself. Take from them what you will. It is my hope that they inspire you to learn more and help keep the entire North Fork forever wild.

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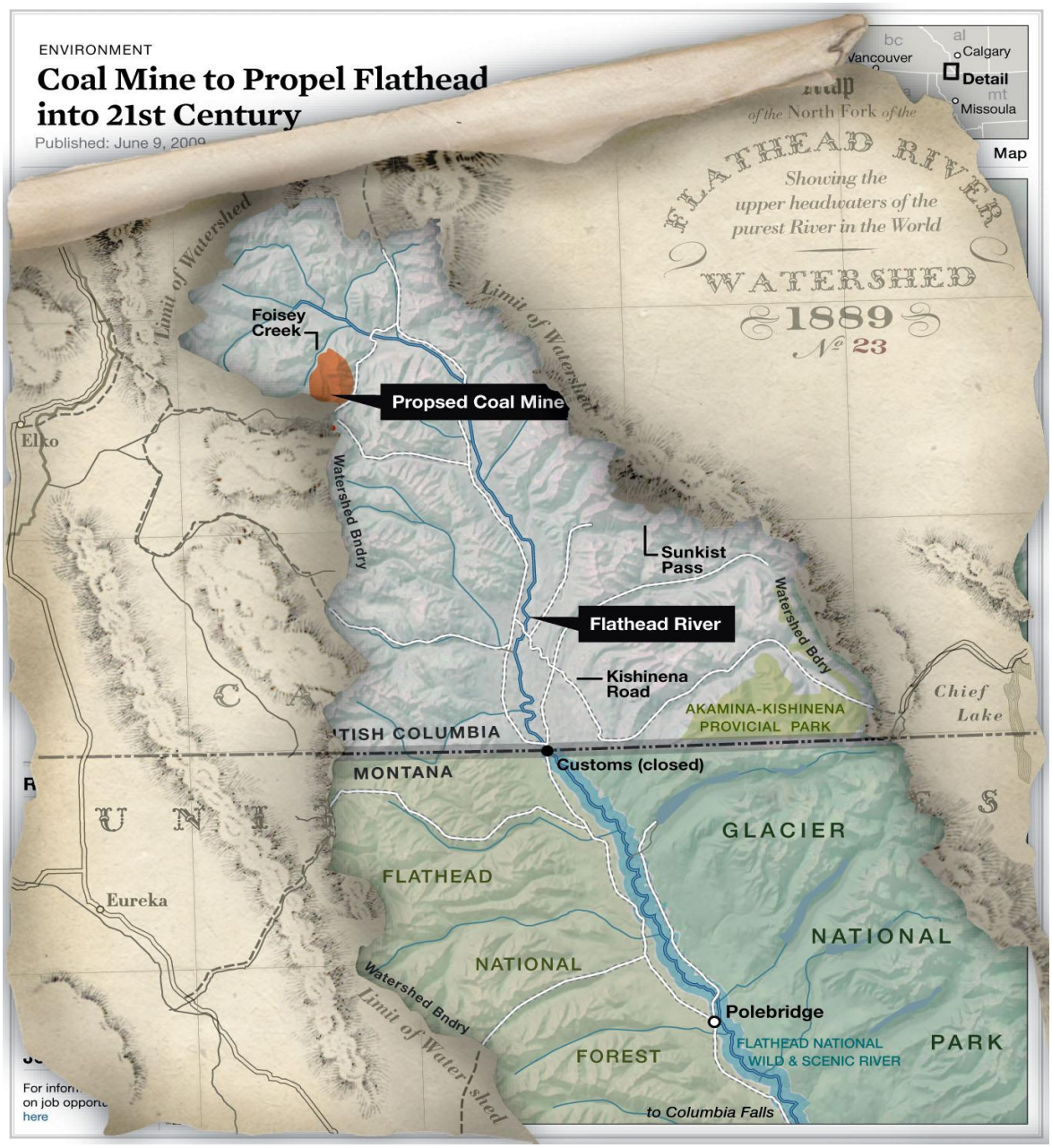
Map of Transboundary Flathead



Map courtesy of Casey Greene, Adventure Cycling Magazine

Part One

In the fall of 2005, my girlfriend and I moved to Whitefish, MT. We lived through the winter at the KOA just south of town, in an RV we had bought and renovated. I worked as a janitor and waiter at the local ski resort. Chrissy was a waitress there too. By spring, we had committed to working on an organic farm just outside of town and moved the RV there. On a beautiful May morning, I swung by the National Parks Conservation Association office located on Highway 93, a few blocks from Whitefish's old west downtown. Erin Sexton, a young staffer and I chatted in the lobby. Yes, she had some volunteer opportunities. Did I have a passport? I did. Did I like to camp? I did. Did I know anyone else who had a passport and liked to camp? I did.

Free Flow

The river here is small. Much smaller than where my friends and I have rafted farther downstream. We follow game trails along the river's edge, where fresh wolf and bear scat dot the ancient paths. While not as dramatic as the landscape to the south, this northern stretch feels old beyond our reckoning. There are no roads here; the river exists separate from our world. Many miles to the south, rafters, fishermen, and recreationists ply the river. The winding, rutted Outside North Fork Road, Route 486, follows its twists and turns to the Canadian Border. We've hiked many miles to get here and will have to hike the same to get back.

It is late July in 2006, and my girlfriend and I have come here as volunteers. On this trip, our first with the group, we are collecting sediment samples from the river bed and from various tributary creeks and streams that feed it as it winds south towards America. In this foreign land, we are very much visitors. We startle a moose and her calf, and they run crashing through the underbrush. We can feel other eyes watching our movements as we splash in the water. Our bear spray stays firmly attached to our belts and we call, "Hey Bear!" as we ply the forest highways, walking deeper into this lost world.

Beneath this river bed lays high grade, metallurgical coal. We are on Crown Land, in southeastern British Columbia and it's hard not to feel like we're trespassing. British Columbia has received yet another proposal to mine this coal, trapped under the forest, in the mountains, beneath the river bed. Our little band of conservationists is collecting base-line data to be used in court battles to prevent the tearing open of this land.

There are other important wildlife resources here. Grizzly bears cross the border to the States. Wolf, moose, elk, mountain lion, lynx, and bobcat glide silently through these woods too. The river is their natural highway, the easiest path for them to follow as they move through this land. Each deserves its own study, but our resources are limited, and we focus our attentions on the fish and the sediment, hoping our data will never have to be used. Hoping our efforts will be for naught. We work in the shadow of the mountain that the company wants to raze, dumping the earth into the creeks, into the river.

They plan to move twenty tons of coal a day, their belching diesel trucks lumbering down the wash-board dirt roads that serve hunters and the few recreationalists that venture here. One truck every twenty minutes, every hour, every day for twenty years. It took us an hour and a half to negotiate the twisted dirt road that runs to where this mountain stands. The roads that access the mountain itself are simple two-tracks cut through the trees.

From where we are, nestled low in the valley, this land does not appear especially beautiful. The foothills hide the majestic mountain peaks that soar above the river's gentle course. They obscure the glaciers winking down from their lofty heights. To be sure, it is lovely, remote, rugged—home to unknown numbers of animals and plants—but it is not spectacular like Glacier or Waterton National Parks. No millions drive through here each year, craning their necks to see mountain goats and waterfalls. No funds exist to help preserve what wildness is here. This land exists as it does by default. There has always been enough somewhere else that this may be left alone. Forgotten by most, this land lies fallow, a rich, diverse catalogue of life, serving humanity passively, yet critically.

The North Fork of the Flathead River begins here where we stand. The samples we draw come from its very waters. Rain, snow, melt, and thaw combine here in this valley and course their way thirty miles or so to the American border and from there, form the western boundary of Glacier National Park for sixty more miles until they converge at Blankenship Bridge with the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Another ten miles farther, the South Fork of the Flathead joins them and together they flow, wide and cold, into Flathead Lake. The Middle Fork forms the southern border of Glacier National Park, running from the Continental Divide west. The South Fork drains the giant Bob Marshall Wilderness and is trapped briefly behind the Hungry Horse Dam, before finally meeting her wild sisters. From the output at the south end of Flathead Lake, the River twists seventy-five more miles, finally joining the Clark Fork River and flowing with this great Montana water to Idaho and Lake Pend de Orielle.

Together, these silty, aquamarine rivers drain millions of acres of the most pristine and wild country left in our mostly battered and broken landscape. But wildland

protection is complicated, and although the tributaries that feed the western shore of the American North Fork could still be developed, it is the forgotten twists in Canada that are under the gravest threat of the miner's shovel, the logger's saw, the developer's pavement. And it is here that we struggle with heavy packs and heavy hearts, hoping our work will never be used in defense of this magic water, hoping our efforts are futile and these studies we conduct will wither over time on the bookshelves of history, needless and unnecessary.

The environmental consulting firm that produced Cline's environmental impact statement claimed that these tributary creeks are "non fish bearing." On our second trip, a month after we collected water samples, we return with Montana Fish Wildlife and Park employees to march up and down these creeks, carrying heavy shocking equipment, and find lots of fish—Bull trout, protected both in the US and in British Columbia, westslope cutthroat trout, sculpin, and others. Thirty, forty, fifty specimens in each one-hundred step section of water we measure.

The Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks crew based in Whitefish are a rugged, intense group. This is a little intimidating to my girlfriend and me, two waiters from the decidedly non-competitive food service industry. The shocking packs we carry weigh about thirty pounds. They hold heavy deep cycle batteries, like car batteries, and have an awkward harness system that doesn't seem to fit any body type well. A twisted wire cable drops from the bottom of the pack and follows in the water behind the person stumbling down the river bed, and a curled wire like an old phone cord attached to a pole with a round metal halo rises from the top of the pack. This apparatus shocks the fish. It also shocks anything else in the water and we cry "Probe out!" if we fail to catch the stunned fish in a net and grab for them with our bare hands. Or at least we're supposed to.

It's a pretty straightforward operation. One person carries the pack and shocking pole. Two others walk backwards, downstream, carrying nets and catching the stunned fish before they are carried out of the electric waters and regain their consciousness. A couple more people carry five-gallon buckets filled with water to collect the fish after the netting. They will be counted, documented, and some will have a fin sample snipped and recorded.

Walking downstream with a thirty-pound backpack is difficult. Walking backwards, downstream, with a net or a bucket is yet more difficult. Walking downstream, backwards, carrying a net or bucket, when the sole of your wader is completely torn and your stocking foot keeps sliding through onto the slippery, rocky river bed is measured on a different scale of difficulty. Add to this scenario a tired, wet girlfriend to whom you plan to propose in a few short weeks and whom you are desperately hoping will say yes, and whose idea of volunteering is vastly different than stumbling down river beds in remote bear country, and it might become apparent why my smile is a little forced this late afternoon.

I first notice the hole just a mile into our day. It is small, just a neat little tear on the inside ankle of the waders the Fish and Parks guy had given me. I didn't actually notice it until we splashed through some large puddles and I felt the first tell-tale wetness in my sock. I try, unsuccessfully, to push it out of my mind, to concentrate on the natural splendor that surrounded me, but it is wet and uncomfortable.

After an hour or so of marching, we stop for some water and a snack on a hillside, over-looking the river. I mention the hole in my wader.

"Bummer!" says Fish Guy and gnaws at his sandwich. The other Fish Guys nod and grunt their agreement that yes, it is a bummer indeed. The hole has grown larger since my initial discovery. I pull duct tape out of my pack and try to patch things up.

"If it's wet, it'll never work. You'll just end up wasting the tape."

"Well, I'll give it a try." And I blow onto the rubber boot, trying to dry it. The air hisses from my pursed lips, air that had it run through my voice box as words, would have sounded a little angry.

They were right. The tape held for about ten steps. I picked it up off the forest floor. In truth, their response was fair. I am here of my own free will; they weren't responsible for my predicament. I plod down the path.

By lunch, the wader has pretty much torn apart. Water pours from the gaping hole each time I lift my foot from the frigid river. It is alternatively annoying, uncomfortable, dangerous, hilarious, and painful. I immerse myself in the work and smile, wanting to prove that food service employees are just as tough as any Fish Wildlife and Parks

employee. My wife-to-be offers her consolations, apologizing sweetly for a turn of events she has no control over. Most everyone else ignores me. At least it is sunny and warm.

It seems the wheels of Canadian bureaucracy move nearly as slowly as the wheels adorning our governmental machinery here, south of the border. More than a year after our trips into the field, I attend a conference sponsored by the University of Montana's Law School at which the North Fork is being discussed. Under the glare of the fluorescent lights of the conference, I learn that the provincial government still hasn't permitted much of anything. The mining companies aren't any closer to firing up the dozers as they were when I bent stiffly over the river counting fish those many months ago. In Canada, provinces have retained political and policy control over "Crown Land." This land, owned by the provinces themselves, may be put to use in whatever manner the democratically elected provincial government sees fit. In British Columbia, the provincial government most often sees resource extraction, timber harvesting, industrial development of some form or another, the fittest of uses. And that is exactly what is happening here. The province's land management plan for the valley ranks mining high on its list.

Four-point-two million people live in British Columbia. Half of them live in Vancouver, a short drive from the 3.3 million people that live in the Seattle metro area. B.C. is larger than Washington, Oregon, and California combined, yet it comprises only 9.5 percent of Canada. Forestry is the largest industry, mining is the third. This small river and its trickling tributaries hold little cache for Canadians. It is one of thousands of pristine, beautiful, ecologically sensitive rivers in this vast land, Casey tells us. And it happens to lie on some valuable coal deposits.

Fernie, the quaint mountain ski town and access point for this region of British Columbia, is home to just under 5,000 people, and is linked throughout its brief history to coal mining. Casey lives in Fernie. It's perhaps my favorite town in North America. Fernie has transitioned from a resource to a service industry in the past two decades. In addition to coal deposits it is home to "legendary powder" and decent trout fishing on the Elk River, the drainage just to the north of the Flathead. Many folks in Fernie don't want the mine opened, some do, most probably don't care. It's just another river, a small one

at that, only a few miles of it in Canada, nobody goes out there anyway, and it's not that pretty, not like Elk River valley, that's for sure.

An hour into the talk and the caffeine has kicked in. I raise my right hand and grip the chair with my left, and a nicely dressed attorney-to-be places a microphone in my face.

"What can we, as activists, do without seeming hypocritical, over-bearing, or like we're putting our noses in another country's business, to help keep this project from happening." I stammer impressed by the control my caffeine addled mind has over my mouth. I ready my pen, anxious to get the answer. Support environmental organizations working on this issue was the first answer I scribble down. Write a hand written letter to the Premier asking him to withhold permitting for this project is the second. I glance up expecting more directives, more orders, more creative ideas to prevent this tragedy. But alas, there is no more. It isn't Casey's fault, it's the simple reality: Americans have no real voice in this issue, so we give some cash, we write a letter.

I look around me – the chair I am sitting in is made from steel. The law school certainly, contained steel. The heat, the lights, the building, the bike I used to ride here, it seems almost everything in our modern lives is tied to this black organic compound that drives our world. Maybe Casey should tell us to turn down the heat, switch off the porch light, buy far fewer Chinese made trinkets, or keep our cell-phones and iPods for another year before we trade them in for the latest and greatest.

I am frustrated when I leave the conference. I didn't learn much. British Columbia controls the fate of the uppermost thirty miles of the river. The federal government in Ottawa could intervene, but probably won't unless someone or something puts enough pressure on them. The tired arguments for industrialization dangle lazily in the air: good jobs, good money, assurances of environmental stewardship. No one at the conference even mentions them, but still they twist above all of our heads, dusty relics of a different age.

As the doors of the law school slam shut, I feel the irony of this issue sting me like the cold November wind. One of the last wild river systems in America lies downstream of this industrial threat. The three branches of the Flathead River and Flathead Lake are relics of a different age too. It is a fabulous tragedy that they flow as

they do, tucked away in this remote corner of the world, not because we respect and appreciate them enough to leave them alone, because they have an inherent legitimacy to exist unperturbed, unpolluted, free-flowing, but simply because they're so close to a pretty place.

Oh but no. Not quite. The South Fork is dammed. The Middle Fork abuts both an interstate highway and the Great Northern Train line. Not quite unperturbed, not quite unpolluted, but still better than most. The North Fork, though, the North Fork has a small, dusty, difficult road that runs beside it. It has no bridges that speed the masses. No motor boat friendly reservoir to grant the simple desires of many local residents. This river is as close to a natural, wild, and free river as we have left in this broken country. This river knows no political bounds. It knows no industrial development. It cares nothing for the desires of men and machines. The river seeks the sea and nothing more.

We are finished for the day and marching back to our encampment. The sun is low on the horizon and I know it's getting late. Summer nights drag their feet in this country, often not arriving until 10 or 11 pm. We are tired, my wife-to-be and I. Nearly the entire sole of my wader has ripped out. My stocking foot protrudes from the ineffective rubber boot, an ill-equipped explorer, hell bent on finding the rockiest, wettest, sharpest, most tiresome route through this terra incognito.

I glance at my would-be wife; her countenance is not encouraging. I glance ahead at the slowest Fish Guy we'd been following. I don't see him. I glance again at the twisted wreckage of my boot and plod along.

"Where are you going?" she calls, "The path is over here." We had separated a few paces ago, and she is now twenty yards to my left. "But there's a path here too." I protest, and I lie, "I think Fish Guy's right up there, I just saw him."

"I haven't seen him for a while." Her voice is quiet.

"I'm sure they're just up there." I point reassuringly in the general direction we've been walking.

"Where's the river?" she asks. I look around, no river, no Fish Guy, just trees and a faint path on the forest floor, some beargrass and wildflowers scattered about. "It must be just down here." I say turning and pointing again, this time to my right. My heart is

beating faster than when I was slogging through the forest. I quickly review the situation: I have brought the person of my greatest desires, my heart's one true love, to a remote, bear infested foreign land to help save this place; we've fallen far behind the group; and I've lost the river, the only landmark with which we have any relationship. Well, I think, time for a brave face.

"Hello!" She cries out to the forest. "You left us! Hello!"

They don't answer. By now, they're probably fifteen minutes ahead of us. The wind has picked up a bit, and the forest seems to absorb sound like acoustic paneling. We're alone, lost, and in truth, the few things I'm confident of are that not only will I never marry this sweet, gentle creature whom I have doomed to these unforgiving woods, but her tragic demise will curse my soul and I shall never marry anyone, eventually dying, lonely and confused.

Together we march forward. Eventually, after an hour of crashing through the forest, trying to find the river, the right trail, the group, some familiar landmark in a vast sea of sameness, fear knotting tighter and tighter in my stomach, we hear a call through the forest. We are saved.

The river sings us to sleep that night. My girlfriend is still mad. She will not work again tomorrow, but will sit, instead, beside the river and read. We sleep soundly, profoundly glad to be in our warm sleeping bags, cocooned in a tent, bellies full and contented. The fear we felt, wandering the forest alone and lost was real. We will not forget it for a long time. Truthfully, we were in little actual danger, perhaps an uncomfortable night spent huddled together under a tree, hunger gnawing at our bellies. But we would have been found, or we would have found the river the next morning. Still, the couple of hours we spent cold and tired, so close, but so far from the comforts of camp, have shaken us. She will never forgive the Fish Guys.

But to the river, we will return many times. Not as scientists, but as lovers, and we will drive the bumpy dirt road to within a few miles of the Canadian border. I will propose marriage on a gravel beach at the head of Kintla Lake, a tributary of the North Fork. She will say yes. We will return again to canoe the American stretches of the river. We will see a black bear on the bank; ospreys and bald eagles will fish for their dinner

while we fish for ours. We will camp on its shores and watch the sun rise over what Blackfeet Indians called the backbone of the world.

We awake to sunshine. It is cool, but my down vest keeps me warm. I walk up the road away from camp, eyes blinking in the crispness of morning. I am proud to be here. Proud to have found such a wonderful woman to come here with me. Proud to be doing what we're doing. We have twice taken time from work, traveled into Canada to tromp through the woods, playing scientist to save one of the last wild river systems in our country. It's meaningful, delightful, and thrilling. It's tiring, dirty, frustrating, and we so hope, pointless. If this data is never used, the mine company will have withdrawn its permit request or the B.C. government will have denied it. It will mean the letters I wrote helped sway a provincial government. It will mean the small amount of cash I donated helped the groups fighting this project succeed. Most likely though, this data will be used, forming the compelling arguments for courtroom drama and litigious maneuvers. This data could save this river.

Or it won't. Industry will win; the coal beds will be developed; the methane gas reserves drilled; the moose, bears, lynx and cougar will be cut down by the giant trucks; the river will be fouled and sediment will spoil the spawning beds of the trout and the osprey and eagles will starve.

Standing by the river the last morning we are there, I have no idea what will happen—the marriage or the fate of this waterway are all many months in the future. I am still tired from the day before, still fearful there is no replacement wader, and I will be forced to work in my sneakers. I am also still relishing this opportunity to play scientist, to feel proud and glad to be here helping, working, saving. I look down at the camp; the Fish Guys are up, their voices break the morning's spell. As I walk back towards breakfast and coffee and the woman who will be my wife, I try to push these thoughts from my mind, pausing one last time, before the day begins, to simply watch. The river – pure, clean, and free by default, breaks the sunshine into a thousand shards of fluttering light.

Part Two

I married Chrissy two years later at a small ceremony in Whitefish. I had been accepted at the University in Missoula, and we moved there in the fall of 2007. But the North Fork haunted me, and I found ways to incorporate it into my studies. An essay here, a reading there. I wrote a state of the watershed report for a watershed ecology class. But the essays were reflections, the reports dry and lifeless. I wanted to write more about the river and the valley through which it flowed. But I wanted my words grounded in experience, in greater knowledge of the land and the place

I wanted to get back on the river, back in the valley, but I didn't want a piecemeal trip, I wanted the whole thing. I wanted to float from the headwaters to the confluence, maybe even to Flathead Lake. Repeated calls to the border office in Whitefish were ignored, intentionally or otherwise, and I failed to get permission to cross the border in a boat. No matter, I figured, I'll just split the trip in two – a nice underline of the political boundary that splits the river.

So, in July of 2009, I again headed north, this time with my friend, Aaron Teasedale. Our plan was to raft the Canadian river in tiny, single-person "Alpaca Rafts" and then bike to the top of the mountain the Cline Mining Corporation wants to raze for its mountain-top-removal coal mine.

I returned a week after that trip with another friend, Jason Myers, who had accompanied me on my first ever overnight on the North Fork. We traded rafts for a canoe and navigated the American portion of the river.

A Picture's Worth

Photo by Greg Peters

Getting Started

We were going to leave at one in the afternoon. Aaron calls at 12:30. He needs more time. He calls again at 3:00. Still more time. He calls at 4:30. Come over to my house he says, I'll be there shortly and we'll load up. Five-thirty finds me still waiting in his living room, small talking with his wife and boys. By 6:30, we're on the road, fresh pepperoni pizza steaming up the cab.

Black hot asphalt spills by as we speed north. We stop in Whitefish – he needs a head light the Princeton Tec sales rep had stashed under a car at the community center. We stop in Eureka for gas and coffee.

The border agent at Rooseville waves us through with a friendly pass of his hand. At the 3 and 93 Dairy Bar, we blast east towards Fernie. Finally, by 10:00 we turn off the highway, trading smooth, windows up pavement for shuddering, open aired dirt.

We miss the turn, but find it after doubling back. The dark is disorienting and the map's scale too big. The road proves rougher and longer then either of us remembered.

My back hurts and my sides are sore from sitting for hours. The darkness surrounds the truck, impenetrable. We stop to pee and the feeling of constant motion confuses our suddenly still bodies. We wobble and waver like drunks.

A half hour after midnight we stop and find a place to pitch the tents. My dry, strained eyes dance, finally free of contact lenses. The air is cold and wet, the grass slick with dew in the soft moonlight. Silence, too big and too soon, goads us into exchanging silly, road-baked phrases. We both read in the blue light of head lamps, too weary for sleep.

We are looking for a road that doesn't exist. The old-timer in the grey Ford says so. We have no choice but to believe him. Twelve noon, the second day: Our fourth pass on this stretch of road in search of what we'll never find. We improvise a Plan B. We'll take another road, the day after we finish paddling, ride up that and camp for the night on the mountain of coal. It's ok. We reassure ourselves. We'll still get the basic feel, even if the aesthetics aren't perfect. We'll achieve our goal.

Two pm. We pull into yet another two-track. Maybe this one leads to the river. It does and to an outfitter's cabin too. No one's home, I use their outhouse, happy to save some of my toilet paper. Thanks. We walk to the river's edge and assess. It seems deep enough to float. We chat some more, building our confidence through mutual agreement and open the back of the truck. Gear spills out, bikes, trailers, dry bags with clothes, food, tents. A rainbow of gear. We stash the boats and paddling gear in the woods. We'll be back here in two days, after we ride the 35 miles back from the border. We'll trade the bikes for the boats and float the river back to the truck. Five days total. Then we'll spend our last night on top of the mountain of coal, riding our bikes four thousand and five hundred vertical feet up a twisting dirt two-track to the summit of the mountain they want to raze for its bituminous treasure.

We bounce down the road towards the border and the start of the adventure. Fifteen miles, twenty five, thirty. The going is slow, I keep the truck in second gear and we stay well below 25 miles an hour, catching occasional glimpses of the river and the surrounding mountains.

Eventually, we crest a long hill, just a few miles from the border, and we decide to stash the camping gear and trailers in the woods, at the top. We're so clever, we congratulate ourselves. Now we won't have to ride with all the gear back up this hill and we'll get a little warm up before hitching up the trailers.

Finally, the border! An old hunting cabin sits ¼ mile from the swath – a massive 200 yard wide clear-cut that stretches the entire length of the U.S.-Canadian Border. We park near it, past the sign warning us of the washed out road. We slip into riding shorts and click our helmets tight. The climb to the stashed trailers is mellow. We chat in easy conversation, elated to be biking after two days of driving. We still have hours of daylight and are feeling strong.

Aaron's bike wheels are too big for the trailer. He can't make it work no matter how hard he tries. He swears and berates himself for such an obvious mistake. Twenty-nine inch tires don't work with trailers made for 26 inch tires. We load as much gear into the trailer mounted to my bike as will fit and stuff the rest into my backpack. Extra food, a bulky camera lens, an extra sweater, my camp shoes are all jettisoned, victims of too little space. They're stuffed into a dry bag and hidden with the unusable trailer deep in the woods. We mark the spot with a big rock just off the road.

I ride Aaron's bike, wearing my backpack, and he rides mine, towing the trailer. He insists. Though it's nearly 7:00 at night, the still high summer sun casts shadows through the trees. The kilometers spin past. Each is marked on these roads, and we watch for them, friendly reminders of the ride's inevitable end. We spend the night by the river, finally stopping at 9:30. We build a small fire and watch the mountains fade from green to blue to black as nighthawks dart through the darkening sky.

Photo by Greg Peters

Eight Millennia

Oh to see the world from the stern of an Old Town, a Mad River, a Wenonah, a Bell; yes, a happy man would I be.

Weighing almost seventy pounds and measuring sixteen-and-a-half feet, my Wenonah Spirit II is forest green. Black vinyl gunwales run the length of each side, providing rigidity and shape to the graceful curve of the canoe. Three wooden thwarts stretch across the opening. A week's worth of gear peeks over the gunwales. Splashes of bright blue, yellow, red, and green contrast with the light grey of the canoe's interior.

Steering a canoe down a river is difficult. Unlike rubber rafts or nimble kayaks, canoes require perfect positioning and constant communication. Finding the smoothest water, the line to run, is an art that requires practice, skill, and confidence. Sliding through rough water, bow pointed straight and true, is grace itself. The present becomes the only. All thoughts of past, of future, of family, of everything but the paddle and the canoe and the water disappear in the flow. This is why I canoe.

The J Stroke - Back straight, arms extended, drop the blade into the wet. Push your top hand forward and pull the bottom hand back. Keep the blade as vertical as possible. When you reach the end of the stroke, rotate the knuckles of your top hand forward towards the surface of water and pull back slightly toward your waist while holding the paddle firmly. The blade, now sideways in the water, pushes back and the boat straightens. Slide the blade out, lift forward, rotating the paddle again so the blade enters the water vertically and repeat. Ten thousand times repeat.

The Brace – Back straight, arms extended, lean out to the side and flatten the blade against the surface of the water, push with your bottom hand. Grab the current with the paddle and hold the boat steady.

The Draw – Extend the paddle out into the water, blade parallel to the sides of the boat. Pull towards the boat with your bottom hand, and it will slide sideways through the water in the direction of the paddle blade.

Archeologists have discovered a dug-out canoe they believe is 8,000 years old. For eight millennia, humans have been taking that one-way trip seaward, slipping into the current, paddles in hand. Eight thousand years of exploration and of the unknown that lies beyond the next bend; eight millennia of Caribs, and Abenakis, of Penobscots and French voyageurs, of tinkering with just one basic design.

The fire hisses and pops while Jason and I relive another day of our adventure. We laugh and shake our heads at the near misses, the repeated bailings, the elation that somehow we escaped the cold clutch of the river. I tell him about the archeological discovery, and we try to span the time with our minds, while the fire casts dancing shadows on the latest example of what those scientists found buried for so long. As the night deepens and our talk wanes, I can't help but wonder just how many such

conversations in how many strange tongues have melted into the river's voice since we first dipped a paddle into the current?

I grew up in Maine and loved the ocean. Sailboats especially drew me into their shapely hulls. I worked at a small marina, ferrying people to and from their boats on sunny weekend days. I crewed weeknight races and borrowed a small daysailer, whiling away lazy summer afternoons drifting among the islands that sprout in Casco Bay. I read every sailing book the local library had. A friend of my father's gave me old books and spare sailboat parts he collected at flea markets and garage sales. One day I asked the owner of the marina, John Marsh, a grey-bearded Mainer who never wore shorts and worked from sun up to sun down, what type of boat he'd like to retire on. Glancing across the bay at the beautiful, graceful, multi-hued sailboats bobbing on the calm evening tide, I felt sure he'd say a Cape Dory or maybe a Sabre. Instead he said,

"A twelve foot canoe."

One winter, my last of high school, I spent my afternoons and weekends at a neighbor's, shaping and gluing eighteen-foot-long and one-inch-wide cedar strips to a frame. I had quit the swim team and needed something to do. The neighbor had a shop and was patient. I figured I'd sell it when I was finished. But with each successive layer, a small, pretty canoe took shape. I sanded it smooth, fiberglassed the inside and outside, painted it blue, and came to love it, even if it wasn't the sailboat I dreamed of. The next summer, my brother and I took my canoe and one he rented on a well-known float in Western Maine. We paddled across two lakes, down a river to the first lake and then back to the car. We brought cold beers, steaks, camp chairs and played Frisbee in the soft evening light. Backpacking it was not.

Years later, when I again caught up with my canoe, and took it on my first western river, I crashed it into a rock just three minutes from my put in. The boat splintered beyond repair. I shouldered it back to the truck and hated myself for wrecking it. Half of it now stands vertically in my office, a bookshelf full of field guides and old photo albums.

I proposed to my wife after paddling an ancient, broken Old Town six miles across Kintla Lake in the northwest corner of Glacier Park. The next spring, her folks bought us a brand new Wenonah for our wedding present. We honeymooned for five days on the Green River in Utah, floating through the impossibly beautiful, redrock canyons. Now our weekends drift by, watching osprey and trout on the Bitterroot, the Blackfoot, the Clark Fork; we haven't backpacked in two years. I keep a list of the next big trip, and it grows with each passing winter: the Missouri, the Yellowstone, the San Juan, the Colorado. Eastern rivers too: the Allagash in Northern Maine, the Androscoggin that flows past my home town, the Kennebec, the Dead.

The North Fork was my first real river. The first time I ran rapids big enough to cause fear, the first time I camped on a river in the West that is my new home. This great, glacial green river that drains the wildest valley is my river. The rapids, the cobbles, the sweeping views stretching for miles, speak to me like no other place can. The North Fork is my birth river, even though I took my first breath three thousand miles from its rugged shores. Yes, the North Fork is my dream, my reality, the place I go when I am trapped by life.

The North Fork and a canoe. Oh a happy man I am.

Photo by Greg Peters

Rain

I stepped nervously into the boat. It was only my second time in an Alpaca Raft, and I struggled to squeeze my feet into the pinched bow. Cold, gray clouds shrouded the mountains. I waited, anxious in my boat while Aaron repacked yet again, trying desperately to fit his camping and camera gear into the tiny craft.

A violent thunderstorm had cracked us awake at 3 am. Hours later, we had dried gear in a few rays of morning sunshine, but the clouds gelled again as we packed for the three-day trip downriver. The boat's diminutive size made things difficult and while we struggled with our gear, the first raindrops fell. Twenty minutes later, water dripped from the soaked brim of my hat.

Only five minutes downstream, and we were back out of the rafts, stumbling on the slippery cobble, the boats heavy with gear, swinging in the current. It was too shallow. We'd put in too high on the river, too late in the season. Icy water, snow melt still in July, clawed through the neoprene socks I wore under my river sandals, strangling

the feeling in my feet. I slipped again, lurching to the right and plunging my leg deeper to stay upright. Splashing forward towards the smooth tongue of deep water, I plopped back into the boat. Frigid water, trapped by the tight elastic cuff of my rain pants, slid down my thighs and pooled at my crotch.

Stumble, slip, stumble, slip. Both in and out of the boats we labored down the creek. Numb feet failed to steady our shivering bodies. We took breaks on the shore, doing pushup and jumping jacks on the sodden ground. But the driving rain robbed us of any benefits from our lurching calisthenics. Every few breaks, we'd turn the boats upside down and empty them of water. The narrow river valley provided no respite from the steady rain. Stunted spruce and larch trees crowded the banks and trapped the mist. Green of every hue crept up the steep valley side. Red roots, exposed on the cutbanks, glistened and shuddered in the rain.

Grey and brown swallows and skimmers darted through the streaks of wet, catching flies. Rain drops crashed into the creek, ripples lost to infinite others. The cold faded into wet, the wet back into cold, and we drifted on. Damp jerky stashed in the pocket of my life vest gave my mouth and mind something to savor while the wet consumed me. I drifted ahead, catching more current and less eddy then Aaron. The weather commanded silence, all words lost to the river and the rain. My boat spun in the drift while mist and drizzle mixed with rain.

The day before, on our bike ride up the road paralleling river, we had scouted a campground nested in spruce trees big enough for shelter should we need it. It became our mantra and we struggled towards it. Time folded onto itself as it does when the distance to a destination is unknown. My thoughts became fluid like the water beneath our boats. Invented futures and rewritten histories bobbed together on the rippled surface of my mind. Grand plans and crushing defeats inflated and deflated me. Lost in thought and prisoner of the present, I kept one desperate eye watching for the grey slab of rock that announced the campground and the promise of respite.

When you're in them, rivers seem to have infinite bends. Each curve and twist promises yet another. They confound maps and GPS and force you to wait and wait.

Like life itself, rivers never reveal their next move. If you paddle until your hands ache and your arms burn, you never go much faster than the river goes. So we sat in our tiny boats, cramped and wet, water pooled to our waists, and we drifted past the world, at once a part of it, and yet always moving on.

Of course we found the campground. We cheered and hollered, breaking the quiet of the valley. We jogged and jumping jacked. We found damp wood and built a fire under the two biggest spruce trees we could find. We piled twigs and leaves dug from beneath the wet duff and burnt our thumbs on the lighter. It smoldered and died. We tore up notebook paper, we scraped pitch from the pine trees, and we doused it all with alcohol from our camp stove. It caught and we blew on it until our lungs were raw and the smell of smoke soaked deep into our tired muscles. All the while, rain drops played a symphony in the forest. Smack on our hoods. Splish in the creek. Foosh through the trees. Hiss on the flames.

In an hour-and-a-half we had a decent blaze. The rain, perhaps affronted by our modest success, redoubled and streaked the air. We huddled over the fire and melted holes in our pants and jackets when bright orange embers jumped from the ring. The white-grey light stayed constant, the sun's movement imperceptible behind the thick cream-of-mushroom clouds. Another hour, maybe two, slipped by as we stood, spinning slowly on an invisible spit near the orange flames, drying our front while our backs sponged in the rain.

We boiled water on the coals to make up for the fuel we'd spent getting the fire lit. Dehydrated soup, Turkey Tetrazzini, some more jerky. The warm food seemed to brighten the sky. The rain lessened and we scrambled to set up tents before it returned. Dry clothes and warmth seduced us to bed long before dark.

Slipping into a dry sleeping bag while rain sings on the tight fabric of a tent is the only antidote to a rain soaked day that heals. Fires help, but ultimately fall short; so too does food. Warm and dry for the first time in a dozen hours, tomorrow seemed far away as we lay in our tents, speaking softly to each other across the campground. Irregular thumps of rain splattered above my head, and the day drifted away on the river's rising waters.

Photo by Greg Peters

Coal

I huddle over my handlebars and pump my legs. Up down, up down, the rhythm dominates my present. I breathe heaving gulps of air. We've been riding hard for a couple of hours, climbing up the unnamed peak that the Cline Mining Corporation plans to "remove." We call it Foisey Mountain because it shapes the headwaters of Foisey Creek, which runs just a few short miles before forming the Flathead River. We are headed for the saddle and then higher – to the summit if we can find a bikable route. The

road is rough and seems to switch back again and again, serpentining up the slope. I keep my bike in the lowest gear and struggle to keep up with Aaron.

"Oh thank God," I wheeze, dropping my pack to the ground and unclipping my helmet. Aaron waits patiently for me at yet another switchback.

"Check this out." He points to the road cut. Sandwiched between the grey and brown rock is a thick ribbon of black. It shines dull and jagged in the mid day sun.

"Whoa. Guess they didn't have to look too hard for it."

"Guess not."

Aaron wants some photos with me on my bike and the coal seam in the foreground. I push my bike up the steep slope, ride down on his cue, and push up again for another round. A model's work is never done. Even a tired, thirsty, stinky, dirty model. Photos captured, we ride on towards the saddle.

This seam, part of the giant Crowsnest coalfield that extends from Alberta through British Columbia, symbolizes in dark, hard reality, the desire of British Columbia's extractive industries to exploit the Flathead Valley. In the 1970's and 1980's a Canadian mining company sought to develop the southern extremity of the Crowsnest field with two open pit coal mines along Cabin Creek, a tributary of the Flathead just six miles north of the American Border. Officials from Glacier National Park, concerned with the mine's proximity to the park, convinced the State Department to invoke the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909. The International Joint Commission created a scientific review committee to investigate the proposal and determined that the mine "as presently defined and understood not be approved." Although the recommendation was non-binding, the mining company let its provincial permit lapse and the mine was never developed. It was 1988.

At the saddle, we see the boxes of core samples. Dated 2005, the six-foot-long, thin rectangular boxes sit bleaching in the sun. A few of them are opened, and we lift the broken pieces out of their boxes. About three inches in diameter, the cores are perfectly round but jagged and irregular where they've broken apart. They're both surprisingly

light and yet dense and weighty at the same time. We handle them a few moments before putting them back into the boxes and snapping some photographs.

In 2005, Cline Mining Corporation, a global mining conglomerate, filed a permit for a small mine, which would escape an in-depth environmental assessment according to British Columbia provincial law. Shortly thereafter, the company amended its proposal to expand the size and scope of the mine, determining that a mountain top removal mine would reap the largest financial rewards for its investors. The shift triggered an environmental review which has yet to be released. The company's website estimates that the mountain top removal mine would produce between two and three million tons of coal annually. The resource is to be developed over a twenty-year period. Twenty years of belching diesel coal trucks pounding up and down the dusty dirt roads that follow the valley's bottom. Twenty years of plowing deep channels though the winter snows, twenty years of moose, elk, and deer collisions, twenty years of dead Grizzly bears and wolves, killed for getting too close to white people who, for the first time in a generation, live permanently in this place.

We find a route to the summit. Ironically, the very mining company whose plans we protest has provided us a way to pedal mountain bikes to the top of this ridge. Pumping up the last climb, my legs scream for mercy. The rough track from saddle to the summit is strewn with rocks and logs and the riding is technical and challenging. Finally, seven hours from the truck and 4500 feet higher, we've ridden as far as we can – a low point between the two peaks of the mountain. We dismount and are enveloped by the view. To the east, jagged peaks rise from a dark green forest to knife ridges of exposed granite – Waterton National Park. To the south, the north and the west, more mountains rise and fall in a sea of cresting ridges. We can see hundreds of miles in each direction – mountains and forests sinking into the curve of the earth.

A carpet of jagged coal covers the low-point where we stand. Elk tracks, a desiccated leather glove, wild strawberry plants add relief – shadow and color – to the monotone. Thrilled though we are to be on top of the mountain, to have earned the right to comment and to know with our muscles and our lungs, there is a feeling of conflict

here. As the machines of bureaucracy grind through the permitting, the appealing, the amendments, the injunctions, the mountain stands mute and vulnerable.

We hike each peak, cooking dinner on the northernmost and watching the sun drip behind the mountains. Another exposed coal seam stripes the southern flank. The sunset is an ever-changing dance of orange, purple, grey, blue, and gold. Alpenglow burns the tops of the grey crags. Finally, in an instant that has lasted for hours, darkness crowns the peaks, and the first planet bursts into view low in the southern sky.

We sit silently, listening to the earth. Exhausted but satisfied, we force ourselves to switch on our headlamps, piercing the night with the industrial blue of Light Emitting Diodes. We scramble down the peak to the bikes and the tents. We agree to be up early in the morning and call our goodnights. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, slip by in the otherworld between awake and asleep. A mournful howl echoes in the valley. My eyes snap open. An answering call floats from below. The wolves are out tonight.

Photo by Greg Peters

Through the Burn

The tent is pitched and dinner simmers on the camp stove. A small pillar of smoke rises from the burning fire, shifting and twisting into the evening sky. Gentle light bathes the river as shadows lengthen on the surrounding hillsides. The soft roar of a creek entering a hundred yards upstream adds a subtle backbeat to the song birds calling the coming of night.

After dinner, I set up my camera and tripod. To the west, grey white trees reach leafless and stark into the darkening sky. Bright, succulent green grasses and shrubs cover the ground. Roses bloom pink against the green. Burned dead in a fire that covered much of the southern end of this valley, the trees shift in the evening breeze. Their lifeless forms contrast the lushness of the green earth and indigo sky. Black and scorched at their base, they rise grey-white to the sky, offset by color and shape from the landscape they helped form. I clip the camera into the tripod and squint through the view finder.

In August of 2001, a huge fire spread across this part of the valley. Started by lightning high on the hillsides, the fire consumed acres and acres of trees. Reaching to the river's edge and at times jumping across, the fire reduced the lodge pole forests to jumbles of toppled snags. Cottonwoods too, fell victim to the lapping flames and died, rooted firmly in place. Their skeletal branches still reach for the sun, denuded of leaves, cold reminders of what once was.

Fire crews battled the Moose Creek blaze for three months as it burned 71,000 acres of Flathead National Forest. Beginning with the August 14th detection, crews responded to twenty-eight separate fires in the next four days. Skies across the valley reeked of smoke and ash. Historically high drought conditions helped the fires as they spread and intensified. Hot, windy conditions added yet another layer of danger and complexity to the blaze.

Fires are, of course, a natural part of the ecosystem in the West. Ponderosa pines, larch, and Douglas fir have thick bark that protects them from occasional, low intensity fires that tear through the understory. Lodgepole pines produce cones which are encased in a hard resin that melts only in fire, releasing seeds onto the blackened earth. Eighty years later, at the end of their life cycle, the lodgepoles topple and provide nourishment to the Douglas fir and spruce that have sprouted and grown in their shade. In the newly opened forests, sunlight finds its way to the ponderosa and larch seeds that lie in wait for the radiating energy to pull them from their sleep. Certain woodpeckers live only in fire-killed trees, deer, elk, and moose browse the regrowth that sprouts abundantly on the sunlit ground. Without fire, we are realizing, forests cannot last the centuries we expect them to.

I fiddle with the camera, adjusting the exposure and reframing the scene again and again. The verticality of trees contrasts beautifully with the horizontal green of the earth. The sky looks colored by hand and the green earth adds kodachrome to the black and white of the trees. The failing light makes the tripod essential, and I adjust the height of the camera to capture a different scene. At my back, just on the edge of the river, the camp fire smolders, and I hear Jason sawing more wood to add to the blaze.

The Moose Creek fire threatened homes and livelihoods. Residents fled, fearful and upset by the natural spectacle that threatened their very existence. They berated the Forest Service for not doing enough to protect homes and businesses built on the private edges of public lands. Fire crews worked heroic hours, days, weeks, months to contain the fires and protect private property without needlessly endangering their own lives. Yet this fire pales in comparison to history.

Responding mostly to drought conditions, like those present when the Moose Fire grew, fires in the early part of the 20th century were huge and truly catastrophic. In 1910, a massive fire swept across the Flathead Valley in days, consuming hundreds of thousands of acres. Again in 1929, the Halfmoon Fire ravaged the valley, burning another hundred thousand acres in just days. By the start of the 1930's fires had reduced almost 40% of the valley to skeletal remnants of once verdant forests. Yet even these amazing burns seem inconsequential to the fire season of 1889, when millions of acres from Jasper and Banff, Canada, to Idaho and Montana burned.

The photographs turn out nicely. The forests, too, will turn out just fine. Composing and recomposing themselves in the infinity that is time, they turn water, hard rocky soil, and sunlight into sugar, wood, and oxygen. Fire returns them to the hard rocky soil, and water and sunlight draw them forth again. An old growth forest is as much a moment in time as a photograph. Neither are the truth and the only.

Fires will worsen before they improve. The earth is getting hotter, drier, more flammable. Forests will disappear in firestorms of unimaginably hot winds and exploding crowns. They will regrow and disappear again; they will stand, black and grey against the green, skeletal promises of what was and what will be. Firefighters will die and houses will disappear into dirt grey smoke.

Residents will complain. They will decry the loss of timber, of good wood, just left there to burn. They will confuse the science and misread the reports, and they will accuse the Forest Service of playing lap-dog to environmentalists and technocrats. They will demand more protection for their homes, greater efforts and bigger expenditures, while decrying government interference in their lives and ignoring brochures and

pamphlets asking them to keep their yards free of woody debris and their private forests thinned. Their anger and resentment will smolder and smoke like the lightning-caused fires high on the hillside above their homes, flaring up when the hot winds blow and the trees burn.

For days we paddle through the burn. It is beautiful and awful. It is immense and insignificant. It is this place like the river is, like the bears and the elk we scope on the open hillsides. Like the photographs I bring home, it is a moment.

Photo by Aaron Teasdale

Strainers and Sweepers

I jammed the paddle into the water, backstroking hard with my right hand. The raft swung immediately to the left. Shifting, I pushed hard against the flow with my left hand and slowed to a stop in the current. Each backstroke stopped my movement with the current, and I hovered in place on the moving water. The dead tree covered the width of the river. Branches, stripped of needles and bark, shuddered erratically in the clear water. An enormous root system anchored with river rocks jammed into its twisted cavities held the tree firmly in place. I spun the raft and forward ferried to the cobbled shore.

Trees line this valley. Their dark green canopies color the sides of the rising mountains. Victims of chance, they grow from the rocky alpine meadows to the very edge of the high water mark, like one mute, imperturbable organism. Spruce, fir, cottonwood, larch, alder, rocky mountain maple, each fill a void, each struggle against the other to find an extra bit of sun. Inevitably, some reach too far and gravity joins

forces with the spring floods to pull them down into the river. In the crushing grey of run-off they bob in the current until they pile upon each other – pick up sticks for giants. Some get snagged on each side of the river, anchored by rocks, sediment, other trees and they strain the current. Water scours under them, pooling downriver and upriver. Gnarled branches tremble in the water, cold inanimate claws reaching and grabbing for anything the water may carry.

Roman Dial, the author of Packrafting!, the book that Aaron lent me prior to our trip, tells a frightening story: He's pack rafting a frigid Alaskan river. The current overwhelms him, and he gets pinned under a strainer. Upside down, strapped into his boat, water in his nose, his ears, his mouth, he grabs at his knife and plunges it into the rubber tubes. The sudden deflation lodges him loose and he wrestles free. Shivering on the bank, he patches his boat and returns to the river.

Standing and stretching on the bank, I wait for Aaron. It's the fourth portage today, so I'm in no hurry to heft the raft and gear around the tree. Like us, the fallen trees follow the fastest, deepest current until they get hung up, piling on the shore and the outside bends of the river. As we ride each turn, we're careful to keep away from them and cheat to the inside where it's shallower and slower. Most show signs of beavers. Huge cottonwoods, three or four feet across, are whittled slowly by the massive rodents, toppling under their own weight and crashing into the river.

Fires, too, kill trees. There's a lookout tower just south of us on the border. Winter's ice and snow crack limbs and freeze sap. Insects – bark beetles mostly – are plaguing giant swaths of forests, reducing them to orange needled dynamite. This valley seems largely free of the massive beetle kill farther south. For now.

Aaron catches up and pulls out. We chat and nibble some jerky. It feels good to stand after being squished into the boat. A breeze rustles the leaves of the cottonwoods behind us.

We paddle for five minutes before another river-wide strainer stops us. The river braided a half-mile up stream and is narrower here. Less flow, steeper, tighter banks, more strainers. We spin and forward ferry to the shore. Stretch and heave the boats onto our shoulders. The motions are memorized now, easy and fluid. Curl one hand under the

tube; grab the bag lashed to the bow with the other. Turn and lift, slipping the tube onto a shoulder. Step across the river stones and make your way. Reverse motions and drop the boat back into the shallow water downstream of the tree. Still we grumble and curse the strainers. Rivers are dynamic and strainers static. Rivers move and ripple, flow and continue. Strainers stand stoic and silent, looming, dark, wet, deadly.

Their constant presence is unnerving. We follow each bend, hopeful that the way is clear, that we won't get swept under. Could I maintain composure, grab my knife and puncture the boat, I wonder, compulsively checking that the knife's still on my chest every few moments. We have repair kits, I have the knife; we have time to wait for the glue to dry and the nerves to settle. But do we have the skills, the calm, to execute such a critical maneuver?

The evening rain shower had quit but the emergent sun held no warmth. Hungry and cold, I was annoyed we were still in the boats searching for a campsite. We'd blown past several that seemed good enough. Aaron insisted we try and find the perfect spot. Good view, cover in case of more rain, flat, preferably with a sandy spot to pitch the tents. A swallow darted in front of me, chasing flies. He's eating his dinner, I snarled under my breath. The grey peaks shone in the evening sun, even as the valley cooled in the shadows. I scoured the banks for a campsite to match Aaron's requirements and shivered in my still damp rain jacket.

I heard the roar before I saw it. Splaying my paddle in the water, I turned to see the jumble. From my angle, low and tight to the water, I saw a log, sticks, still leaved branches shaking in the current behind a deep aqua pool of whirling water. A moment passed and the current carried me closer. I glanced across the river: grey-white bones of wood stretched the distance, no choice but to portage. Another moment passed and I floated further.

I jammed my paddle into the current. The boat spun upstream and I jammed the paddle again. Again and again. The raft jumped at my requests and moved upstream against the current. I aimed to the side, diagonal now, pointing 45 degrees across the current. I dug in and gripped the paddle ferociously. "Strainer," I screamed. "To the side, to the side!!" Aaron mimicked my manic movements and peeled out of the current.

I leaned forward and drove the paddle deeper into the water, slowly inching my way to the side. I heaved and grunted, trying to maintain the 45 degrees that would get me across the current the fastest, but mostly paddling straight upstream. Water splashed my face, my arms, my legs as I spun the paddle in a whirl of motion. Finally, miraculously, I slipped out of the main current and with a final heave lurched out of the boat into calf-deep water steps from the bank. I looked up. The strainer was now twenty feet downstream of me. I looked more closely, safe now on the bank: a smallish cottonwood spanned the river dancing lazily in the current. I had paddled back upstream fifteen feet in a frenzy of adrenaline and fear. The gasping hole that I felt so sure would drag me down was little more than a quiet pool of water bubbling with some swirling current. I laughed at my gross over-reaction, as Aaron dragged his boat down the bank to me. At least, I thought, I'm not hungry anymore, and I'm sure not cold.

Photo by Greg Peters

Rapids

Thick black lines squiggled across the smooth blue. Rapids. For days we'd been eyeing them on the map, three sets of thick, wavy lines, compact and perpendicular to the long blue that inked the river's route. Fool's Hen Rapids, Class II+, the book said. Intermediate canoeists or better. Beware cold, glacial water, wave trains, and dangerous currents. We'd been reading the warnings at night, sitting by the campfire. Today was our day: We'd hit them all and either stay upright or not. No big deal we assured ourselves, we'll be fine. Anxiety nibbled my guts. My wife's only request bounced around my brain: Just don't wreck the canoe.

It was late July; peak flood had blown past a month ago, we reasoned. Less water meant slower current, more time to plan and maneuver, less opportunity to get hung up. But what if it was too low? Rocks that would have been avoidable two weeks ago would be exposed - dark, lurking boulders that could stop us instantly. Stuck in the flow, the canoe would swing sideways. Jason and I would scramble in the trembling craft,

lurching to this side and that; water would rise over the side and in a moment that lasts a lifetime, the boat would dip under the current and wrap itself on the boulder. We'd be thrown into the roiling swirl, our gear, our paddles, our coolers and dry bags would be swept under and the boat would rock in the current until it gave way, finally sliding deformed and broken into the current.

Three years before, almost to the day, I wrapped my first canoe on this very river. A wood and fiberglass beauty I had built my last year of high school, it cracked along the waterline, splintered at the rails, and filled with water. Sputtering as current overwhelmed me, I grabbed the bowline, my fly rod, and an empty beer can as they floated with me through the wave train and somehow kicked to the bank where I lay heaving and coughing. Only minutes from the put-in, I hefted the fractured boat onto my shoulders and limped back to the truck. I had unhappy history on this river. My wife was justifiably worried.

We scouted the first set, picking the smoothest tongue of water from the foaming white – our line. Head straight in, between those two rocks there, kick left with a draw, and side slip past the wave train, I pointed. Those two there? Jason's turn to point. No, *those* two, the one there and over there, past the other one. Sure…We piled back into the boat, hearts thumping and blasted into the current. Suddenly, everything looked the same. Was it that rock or that one? We hollered to each other, found a new line in the moment and snuck through the rock garden.

We scouted the second set, walking up and down the bank making sure we picked rocks big enough that we'd know them once we were back in the boat. While the first rapid had been a rock garden – random boulders planted in the river – this one had a short, steep drop and a long wave train. Straight down the middle we agreed. Hold on like hell to the paddles and dig in hard when we hit that first wave. And we did. The bow rose up, cresting the four foot wave and slammed back down into the trough. Water cascaded over the sides, dropping the canoe lower in the current. Again we rode a wave and smashed the trough. More water spilled over the gunwales. Again and again. With each buck, we took on water. The canoe jerked from side to side, precarious and unsteady. With one hand on the paddle and one on the gunwale, we flailed towards

shore. Jason jumped out too early, sinking up to his thigh in the slower current of the river's edge. Pure athleticism and strength kept us upright as he jumped, one footed, along the slippery cobbles.

We scouted the third set and felt dialed. A bend curved to a drop then to a wave train then to another bend. We disassembled it in our minds, matching each feature with a stroke. Hard forward pull there through that wave, quick right draw to kick the stern around that rock, hard pull through the next wave, and drop into the bend. Keep in the current, close to the bank and then pull, pull, pull through the turn, safe and sound. Confidently, I pushed us into the current and gripped the paddle with both hands. It felt custom carved for my hands, and I smiled and whooped, excited and ready.

We didn't scout the fourth rapid. Swaggering from nailing the third, I vetoed Jason and directed him to the left of the house sized boulder dividing the channel. Between the monstrous boulder and a smooth, steep smear of grey cliff lay a five-foot-wide strip of angry water – our line. Bouncing furiously off the boulder, the river curled in a white, foaming snarl up the cliff side and smashed back into itself, screaming stay away. A deep pool lay directly behind the boulder, and I saw a thick eddy line pinching our line closer to the cliff. Oh sweet Jesus.

We crashed into the curl. Water poured over the left gunwale. I jammed my paddle in the current and the boat turned, pushing against the roiling eddy line coming in from the right. Jason dropped to his knees and paddled furiously. The boat leaned right, way right, and water spilled over the side. We lurched left and the left gunwale again submerged. I heaved my body across the top of the canoe in a last ditch effort to keep us steady. My left leg swung out of the canoe and into the current. It kicked through the cold water, somehow providing enough leverage to keep the boat upright. Jason crouched in the bow waiting for the inevitable. Waiting for the wet.

Deep swirling water slowed the boat to a stop. I looked up. The boulder, the cliff, the curling threatening snarl were all upstream. To the right lay a ledge where we could bail the boat and rest.

Photo by Aaron Teasdale

Potable

I gulp from cupped hands. Water spills from my mouth and onto the grassy stream bank. I gulp again. The water is sweet and cold. Just a few draughts more and I wet my hair. Water streams down my back and onto the ground. I yelp at the cold, but the yellow sun beats down, drying me almost instantly. I wet my head again and fill a water bottle.

Survival guides claim that a person can survive for a week without food. Our bodies burn excess fat and muscle for days and days until we finally starve. Without water, however, we may last two or three days. The books detail countless methods of capturing water: from morning dew, from plants, from seeps, from holes dug in the ground and covered with plastic, even from your body's waste expulsion system. What these books never recommend is drinking straight from creeks. Drink your urine, but don't drink water without treating it – a tragic comedy we don't address.

Omnipresent partners in our exploits, the outdoor gear industry has developed countless purification methods. Pills, chemicals, iodine, mechanical filters, ultra violet

gadgets, solar powered machines. Promises of water without viruses, bacteria, protozoa, critters, and chemicals that will make you sick adorn the glossy ads in Outside, Backpacker, National Geographic Adventurer. A one-to-one ratio of these two chemicals, a few minutes pumping, ninety seconds of stirring with the Ultraviolet pen, ten drops of iodine… like pitchmen promising cleaner laundry and no hassle cooking, the advertisers seduce and we consume. Americans spend tens of thousands on water filtration systems built for hiking and biking each year. I have two such gadgets and always bring backup pills in case they break or fail.

It wasn't always so. Just a few decades ago, people drank straight from creeks in wild places. An advertisement in a Kalispell newspaper from 1975 boasts the clean, drinkable water found in the valley. A man stoops over a lake, cupping water to his lips. A century ago, people drank straight from creeks in developed places. Two hundred years ago, drinking from creeks was one of the primary ways people got water. But fear has bested tradition and now, even in capital "W" Wilderness Areas, we treat the water…too many horses, too many cows, too many people. We are all too ready and capable of conjuring images of elk and beaver defecating in the creek to risk slaking our thirst with cupped hands. Even if we're sure that no beaver has lived in the watershed for a century, we still imagine writhing, flagellated microorganisms intent on disrupting the delicate balance that is our gastro-intestinal tract. No, no, we are told, you have to treat all water, all the time, always.

The canoe bumped gently into the bank. Jason stepped out onto the cobbles and steadied the dark green craft. I followed and we pulled the boat up onto the bank. Ten feet downriver, a rivulet of water burst from the cutbank feeding a small colony of green plants. Monkey flowers, columbine, fireweed – yellow, red, pink and green spilled down the cutbank offsetting the dusky brown. We grabbed water bottles and gallon jugs from the canoe and stumbled to the cascade.

The water was ice cold. It pooled beneath the outlet, and we shifted from foot to foot to maintain feeling. Raising the filled bottles to our lips we drank in long draughts, catching our breaths between each gulping session. We had waited until the last of the water in our bottles was warm and unappetizing, planning on finding such a seep. A

pebble bumped the bottom of my bottle. I dumped it out and refilled again. Unneeded filters stayed buried in the bottom of a dry bag lashed to the canoe.

Drinking water straight from a creek connects the drinker to millions of years of ancestors. The simple act of bending over a stream and using hands to slake thirst is so elemental, so primal, it broadens the connection from human ancestors to animals and plants. We fit into the perfection of the hydrological cycle. Water from the ocean evaporates skyward, falls as rain and snow on mountains and plains, and carves its way back to the ocean again. We sip from the same source that all life sips from. We bend, tired and sore, sweaty and salty, cotton-mouthed and thirsty beyond words, and we partake of the most magical of all nature's doings – cupping our hot dry hands and raising clear, cool, sweet water to our lips. It is my most favorite part of being in the out-of-doors.

Many Native Americans thought that water was a living being. They would insist on dumping water left overnight before rinsing their mouths of sleep's bad taste. Refilling their gourds and bladders with fresh, living water provided them with life. This notion has been so marginalized, so driven from our modern 21st century, that we want the polar opposite of living water. We want sterilized, purified, inanimate water. We want our water bottled and passed through filters and under Ultra Violet light. We want our water dead.

We stop and stretch tired legs. The day is hot and clear. Our bikes rest on the dirt track. Five miles we've ridden and three yet to ride. A culvert passes under the road, spilling the seep down the mountain. We clamor down the steep bank to hold our bottles under the trickle. I take a tentative sip. Cold, sweet, clean. I swallow in big, fast gulps. My head finds its way under the stream and the cold hurts wonderfully. I look around as the sun dries me. An osprey glides on a current of warm air. Dark green fir trees sprout from the mountainside. We are all connected I think, all made mostly of this magic liquid provided so freely for so long for so many. We are all entirely dependent on this unique chemical bond, all entirely at its mercy, all desperate for its infinite existence.

Photo by Greg Peters

Visitors

The tracks amble across the sand. Perfect impressions of the black bear who walked here last night. Our camp is just fifty yards away. He must have known our presence. Canada goose tracks splay across the sand as well. So do squirrel and marten tracks. The night before, we watched as a thick, glistening beaver hauled out of the river and sniffed at the driftwood that lined the bank. His gnawing mark is everywhere, from the biggest, oldest cottonwoods to smallest saplings, neat bites ringing the gnarled trunks.

River otters have joined us, diving and playing like dolphins in the current. Rare carnivores, otters hang on in just a fraction of their historic range. Too many people, too many docks and too much rip-rap have displaced them from the rivers they knew for millennia. But they are here.

For days we watch birds. Killdeer, black stripes across a whiteish chest, dip and bounce along the shore. They are joined by spotted sandpipers, smaller and stockier on the river's edge. Bank swallows emerge from their tiny homes, holes in the sandy cutbanks, and dart and careen through the evening. High above we scope bald eagles and ospreys. Baldies have straight wings, ospreys are bent. Vultures too, soar high and silent on the thermals, wing tips spread like fingers in the air.

Brown-headed mergansers scoot across the water, playing. Entire families float the riffles, tiny bobbing juveniles behind a mother. The youngsters dive two inches below the surface, plowing through the water and leaving a wake behind. Saw-toothed bills catch and firmly hold their prey, young, slippery trout, until the ducks swallow them whole safely on the bank.

Great blue herons squawk their guttural cry if we drift too close, lifting their massive bodies into the air with strong beats from spread wings. They circle above us, waiting to resume their patient fishing after we've left, necks curled tight to grey-blue bodies, long yellow legs trailing behind. They congregate in communal rookeries, raising generations year after year in the same place.

Diminutive willow fly-catchers and northern flickers forage the bushy edges of the river, chasing bugs and singing the break of day. Our last night on the river, an owl – probably a barred owl – hooted us awake. The spine of my Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds becomes bent and broken. The pages wet from spray and smelling like smoke from evening's fire.

Grizzly bears live here too – the highest concentration in North America, south of Alaska and the Yukon where still massive salmon runs up the Yukon River support huge and numerous grizzlies. The last viable population of wolverines lives high in the perpetual snowfields to the east. Ferocious and far ranging, these mustelids are the stuff of legends and comic book characters. Lynx and bobcat share this place. Wolves slipped unseen across the border in the 1970's, reestablishing themselves without biologists' or government's help in the timbered forests of the North Fork.

This valley is soaked with wildness. The richest biodiversity of caddisfly, mayfly, and stonefly in North America scramble among the rounded cobble beneath the North Fork. Endangered bull trout and threatened westslope cutthroat trout haunt the

aquamarine pools that punctuate the river. We glimpse white-tailed deer sipping at the river's edge, tentative and guarded. Lumbering moose feast in the network of wetlands that stretch east of the river, and ermine and martens hide in the forests that line the bank.

This rugged land is the gene factory for North America's Rocky Mountains. Animals carry fresh DNA from their Canadian cousins across the border and spread it freely among their American brothers and sisters. This genetic swapmeet is their key to preservation. Variation is critical to perpetuating species for generations. Isolated populations can breed disease and affliction, depressing survival rates and dooming the survivors.

The North Fork is unique in location and topography to facilitate this genetic mix. The Canadian Valley is unpopulated, the last remaining southern valley in Canada where no humans live permanently. The American Valley is heavily protected: Glacier National Park extends to the middle of the river, and the Flathead National Forest is designated as critical grizzly bear habitat, which reduces timber sales and road densities far below other national forests. A commitment to peaceful coexistence permeates the American Valley. The rough dirt road discourages all but the hardiest travelers and a twenty-acre-minimum subdivision requirement prevents the land from being chopped into so many small lots. No power or phone lines parallel the river, further discouraging newcomers. Still, the valley is changing.

Despite the twenty-acre minimum, we spend our first day on the American North Fork paddling past cabin after cabin. Though they are small, simple, sparse structures, they impose a humanness on the valley that's jarring. Sixteen thousand acres of private land lie in the American North Fork. The town of Polebridge is growing, if slowly. A young couple just bought the Mercantile and the cabins that stand mute in the green meadow surrounding it. The saloon hosts a music festival each summer that draws hundreds of visitors up the rutted, dusty road. For twenty years the pave or not pave debate has raged: A recently commissioned study on the effects of dust is tacked to the community message board in front of the Mercantile.

For now, though, the bears and wolverines can mostly ignore the human intrusions into their place. The electric wires and phone lines that will hasten their deaths are still decades away. The road is still an unpaved, dusty rattle. The generator that

powers Polebridge is turned off at 10:00 each night and the musicians in the saloon play acoustic numbers for their last set. The night sky is brilliantly unpolluted.

We saw no bears, no wolves, no moose on our trip, only their footprints in the sand. It was enough. To know that they live here in concentrations unlike anywhere else in America is enough. To listen for a howl on the wind as dark settles into the valley is enough. Even with the cabins, the Mercantile, the music festival, and the recent increase in floaters slipping across the rippling surface of the river, the valley is wild. Even with detailed maps and convenient river access points, we are the visitors in this place and it is right. Intentional avoidance of modern conveniences preserves this place. But for how long will the rugged few that live here be able to stave off the inevitable? For how long will the wild dominate? For how long will we be the visitors?

Photo by Greg Peters

Appekunny Love

We float over them, tan ones, green ones, red ones. Rounded and smoothed by ten thousand years of river water, they are solid and beautiful. They are Precambrian sedimentary rocks; the oldest among them formed over a billion years ago. Ancient rains and winds moved sand, mud, and lime across what we now call North America, depositing layer after layer of sediment. For 600 million years, these sediments hardened and grew, a veneer of rock over the hard, deep basement of the North American continent, while blue-green algae split carbon dioxide into carbon and oxygen making animal life possible on this third rock from the sun.

Roughly 175 million years ago, North America began shifting westward, opening the Atlantic Ocean. The continent smashed into the oceanic crust that underlaid the Pacific Ocean and the crust slipped under North America, pushing the continent upwards. For the next 85 million years, the layers of sedimentary rocks that had been deposited by the primeval winds and rains were folded like an accordion, shoved up by the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

Eventually, these sedimentary slabs piled too high and slipped eastward across the continent. It was this slippage that formed the Rocky Mountains, starting roughly 90

million years ago. For 20 million years, these massive slabs each several thousand feet thick, slipped eastward, while dinosaurs lumbered across the continent, finally grinding to a halt where the Front Range of the Rockies lies today. To the east of where they settled, lay a giant inland sea that swelled and shrunk as climate shifts provided more rain or less. Eventually the dinosaurs died and the inland sea retreated for good about 65 million years ago, leaving the Great Plains fenced by the Rockies to the west and the Appalachians to the east.

It is these sedimentary rocks, formed hundreds of millions of years before dinosaurs hunted and foraged through Montana that we float past and over. Called the Belt Formation by geologists, they are mudstone, limestone, and sandstone. They are devoid of animal fossils because there were no animals when they formed. Instead, they contain blue-green algae fossils, and records of rain storms, ancient streams, and sun-cracked mud. But it is their colors that fascinate me.

The tan cobbles are the oldest. Made of Altyn limestone, they are flecked with grains of sand. Appearing white when freshly cut, these rocks weather to a warm tan. Next oldest are the rocks of the Appekunny Formation. These gorgeous green stones are my favorite. Given their color by silicate minerals that contain iron in a reduced ferrous state, they glisten spectacularly in the late July sun. Geologists believe that ancient rains falling through an atmosphere laden with carbon dioxide were acidic enough to keep the iron in its reduced state and therefore green or dark grey as these rocks sometimes are.

Next is the Grinnell Formation and these beautiful, barn-red rocks seem purposefully crafted to contrast with the greens and tans. Oxidized iron gives them their color and some boast a thin layer of snow-white sandstone that also seems intentionally placed for effect. Both the green Appekunny rocks and the red Grinnell rocks are mudstone, and they're made from the same minerals. Their delightful contrasts are a simple function of oxygen levels which turn iron into rust. These colorful rocks display ripples and mudcracks, remnants of ancient lakes and droughts. These two formations, the Appekunny and Grinnell, measure 3500 and 2500 feet thick respectively. As they meet, they blend in an alternating mosaic of red and green layers several hundred feet tall.

Smoothed and jumbled on the bed of the river, these rocks are as aesthetically intriguing and as fun to watch as the majestic peaks from where they came. We spend days with our eyes turned down, peering through the ripples and the pools, watching the colors and shapes. On shore, we toss palm-sized cobbles from hand to hand and stash our favorites in a dry bag to bring home as mementos from this place.

But the valley's story does not end with minerals, mudstone, or limestone. It does not end 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs died and the thick slabs of sedimentary rocks halted their grinding migration. The valley's story is both ancient and fresh, and if it ends at all, it ends with ice. If primeval winds and rains gave the North Fork rocks their color, sheets of ice thousands of feet thick gave the North Fork its shape.

The Bull Lake Ice Age started 130,000 years ago and lasted for 60,000 years. Snows accumulated, hardened to ice, and started to slide. The great slabs of sedimentary rocks that had been the Rocky Mountains for so many millions of years were now capped by massive ice sheets which scoured and shaped them. During the peak of the glaciation, the ice covered all of Glacier in a continuous ice sheet, its highest peaks the only stony outcrops in the great white sea. Glaciers stretched south through the Flathead Valley, finally stopping near present day Polson.

When a glacier moves, a gap opens at its head, between the glacier and the rock behind and beneath it. Fresh snow and water fill the gap and freeze both to the newly exposed rock and to the moving glacier. As this new ice moves, rocks and boulders are pulled along, leaving steep, sheer walls behind. The North Fork Valley was entirely filled with ice both during the Bull Lake Ice Age and again, 15,000 years ago, when the entire operation repeated itself during the Pinedale Ice Age. The sheer, steep walls of the surrounding mountains are evidence of the icy, violent forces that created them. The broad U shape of the valley is a signature of glaciers too. As the giant ice sheets melted, these valleys opened up and glacial moraines and boulders appeared, silent relics of the past.

From the canoe, the valley seems too perfectly formed for such seemingly random events. A lack of free oxygen made rocks green over a billion years ago. An abundance made them red. The inexorable grinding of plate tectonics moved them here where they sat for millions of years until the air cooled and warm rains changed to snow. For a

hundred thousand years, ice sheets moved up and down the valley, carving cirques, horns, and arêtes.

I understand only the rudiments of geology, but in truth, they're all I need to know. I palm a red and white rock. It is warm from the sun and it radiates heat to my hand. I sidearm it across the river and it skips several times before sinking beneath a growing ripple. Here, in the river, surrounded by a billion years of movement, by violent forces and time beyond reckoning, science loses its appeal. I care less about the terminology and the physics that painted these rocks and carved these mountains. Instead I am captivated simply by their presence. There is magic in these rocks that can never be contained by science. I pick up a green one and slide it into my pocket. Like being in love, I want this feeling to last forever.

Part Three

The river trips were great – the weather just fickle enough for us to appreciate the sun's July heat without complaint; the immensity and wildness of the valley powerful and inspiring; the simple camp food and cold beers as fine as filet and old vine zinfandel. I had seen the valley in its entirety. I had lived it for two weeks. But I wanted more. I glimpsed its ghosts shuffling through the dark, starlit nights, and heard their whispers in the rustle of history. I wanted to know their names and their stories.

My Paddler's Guide to Montana *spoke briefly of James Talbott and the* Oakes' *fateful journey. I had puzzled over the strange iron artifact on the shores of Kintla Lake while on a camping trip in 2006. A fellow student mentioned the Glacier View Dam in class one time. It was clear that my knowledge, however I'd earned it, was incomplete.*

House of Cards

On the northeastern shore of Kintla Lake, in a remote corner of Glacier National Park, lies a rusty iron relic. It sits half-submerged in the crystal mountain water, slowly flaking away with each rain storm and spring melt. A boiler once owned by the Butte Oil Company, it is a mute, cold, hard reminder of a time when landscapes were defined by the resources they held and the profit those resources could generate.

Kintla Lake drains into the North Fork of the Flathead River, which begins forty miles farther north in southeastern British Columbia. Its outlet, a two-mile-long creek bearing the same name as the lake, sprints west, tumbling over ancient rocks and past towering trees to its confluence with the North Fork. From there, its waters glide forty miles to the confluence of the North Fork and the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Together the two rivers wind another ten miles, before meeting the South Fork of the Flathead, and finally twelve miles later, they pool in massive Flathead Lake. All three rivers are part of the National Wild and Scenic River System. The South Fork drains the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, the Middle Fork drains most of the southern mountains in Glacier National Park and forms its southern border, while the North Fork drains the Park's western peaks and forms its western border. These rivers are the recreational, spiritual, ecological, and symbolic blood lines of one of the largest, most pristine and iconic landscapes in the United States.

That these rivers flow unpolluted and free a decade into the 21st century is remarkable in a West that commits resources to industry as often as it can. The North Fork of the Flathead, and the wide North Fork Valley through which it flows, have been particularly seductive for the men who seek profit and progress. Yet for over a hundred years, this valley has escaped the bulldozer's grind, the excavator's crush, the ravages that are the fraternal twin to industrial development. The North Fork's still pristine condition owes less to the environmental laws enacted in the U.S. in the 1970s than it does to the failed gambles of those men who wished to exploit it for their own benefit. For over a century, coal, oil, and cheap hydropower have lured businessmen and corporations into the North Fork. Yet success has proven elusive in this remote corner of

America. Until now. The Canadian North Fork, 35 miles of pristine, unpopulated country, is thick with coal, and global mining conglomerates have filed plans to develop this country, to turn the wild into progress and the land into money.

Coal doesn't mine itself of course. Roads, or even better, railroads are needed to sprint the coal dug from the ground to the factories and the power plants that seem to never have enough. In the spring of 1890, the North Fork seemed ripe for such incursion. Surveyors for James J. Hill's Great Northern Rail Road had finally completed their arduous mission. Hill wanted to extend the Great Northern through Montana and on to Washington, and the surveyors had labored hard to plot a route over the Continental Divide. Marias Pass, the lowest pass in the Northern Rockies, and a closely guarded secret of the Blackfeet, had been discovered at long last, and when Hill's men laid the lines west from Havre, blasting flat a route through the mountains, the Flathead was too. In the decade preceding the Great Northern's completion, small, rugged pioneer towns had sprouted in the sprawling valley despite difficult and costly travel to the region. The railroad ensured their growth and prosperity.

For the decades preceding the Great Northern, settlers took a different route to the Flathead Valley. A spur line off the Northern Pacific Railroad, the southern counterpart to Hill's as yet unbuilt, transcontinental Highline Route, steamed north from Missoula to Ravalli, where settlers began a week-long stage coach journey across the Flathead Indian Reservation to the southern end of Flathead Lake. Settlers then boarded a steamship to travel up the thirty-mile-long lake, where they loaded their gear onto another stage coach and plodded the final few miles to one of the young frontier towns. The ships ran as late into the cold Montana winters as the lake would allow, once even freezing in place when a bitter January storm descended on the valley. Passengers simply waited until the ice was thick enough to support their weight, then walked a couple miles to warmth and civilization. Hill's new rail line equaled access. And access equaled money.

By the end of 1891, Hill finished his transcontinental railroad, and on January 1, 1892 a silver-spike ceremony was held in Kalispell, Montana, to mark its official completion. Stories about the area's virgin forests teeming with game, its immense mineral wealth, and its productive agricultural lands sped east and west with the trains.

Homesteaders and prospectors drifted in from all directions. Hard rock mineral exploration exploded. East and north of Kalispell, prospectors had been picking across the land for decades, but by the early 1890s several miners worked in what would, in 20 short years, become Glacier National Park. Straight north of Kalispell, 50 miles up the North Fork of the Flathead River, lay known coal deposits and oil seeps. Grizzly bears killed in the area were rumored to have hides that smelled of kerosene. Speculation was bursting in every corner of the valley.

For years, the small towns that dotted the valley had battled to be the regional hub, and when Hill elected to grace Kalispell with his rail line, Kalispell won. The communities of Ashley and Demersville were abandoned, residents fleeing to more prosperous hamlets. But not all towns rolled over as quickly. Ten miles north of Kalispell, young Columbia Falls redoubled its effort to attract settlers and commerce. Led by The Northern International Improvement Company, the town proclaimed it held the key to unlocking the region's timber and coal resources. The company owned the rights to mine the coal fields and was strategically located on the shores of the main stem of the Flathead River.

The Northern International Improvement Company hoped that Hill would build a rail line north along the North Fork of the Flathead to access the southern end of the coal fields that were thought to straddle the international border. The line would open up the land to exploitation, oil slicks discovered near Kintla Lake just a few miles south of the border would be accessible, and the giant forests of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and towering larch trees could be harvested and processed at local lumber mills. But Hill, a capitalist of the oldest American tradition, refused to build the line unless he gained full control of the coal fields and the bounty they held. The businessmen, capitalists too, refused to sell Hill the rights to the coal, and the line was never built. This fateful decision, greed vs. greed, forever affected the North Fork of the Flathead River. Without a rail line to speed supplies and men, exploitation of the North Fork Valley required perseverance, endurance, and money. But even more, it required the optimistic faith that only gamblers possess.

Such faith ran thick in the men of the Northern International Improvement Company, and following Hill's refusal, the men devised a plan to develop the coal. Led by James A. Talbott, the Company determined that the most promising alternative to a rail line would be to construct a rugged steamship and power it up the North Fork of the Flathead River on the spring flood. Arriving at the fields, the enterprise would mine the coal and return down river the following spring, loaded with black wealth.

Over the winter of 1891, Talbott's boat builder crafted the seventy-five-foot ship, which Talbott christened the *Oakes,* after the president of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, James J. Hill's chief rival. The boat was equipped with two massive steam engines, one salvaged from the defunct steamship *Crescent,* which for years had navigated Flathead Lake but was made obsolete by the Great Northern. The *Oakes* was a tough, shallow bottomed stern-wheeler. Talbott, anticipating a difficult journey, ordered that a massive winch be attached to the bow so that ropes could be tied off to giant trees that lined the river and the boat could be winched through particularly difficult sections.

As winter turned to spring, Talbott's $5,000 gamble was made ready for its maiden voyage. The Company hired Captain A.J. Lanneau to pilot the *Oakes* upriver and loaded the boat with supplies. A crew was assembled and local newspapers, led by *The Columbian,* ran articles glorifying the mission and predicting success. By late spring, the boat, the Captain, the crew, and the Company were ready. In May of 1892, the *Oakes* started up the main stem of the Flathead River.

The Flathead is very much a glacial river, which is to say its mood shifts wildly from season to season. In late summer, its deep pools appear an otherworldly aquamarine color, an effect produced by glacial silt suspended in the water below. During the spring flood, by contrast, the river turns into a chalky-grey terror, ripping trees from its banks and roaring through the valley. Running at roughly 27,000 cubic feet per second in May and June, the Flathead is powerful and dangerous.

As the *Oakes* slipped into the flood, the men aboard must have wondered about the wisdom of their enterprise. The swollen river made for extremely arduous passage and the boat crawled upstream. In an effort to stretch his $5,000 as far as possible, Talbott had only one boiler installed on the ship. The giant steam engines Talbott had

purchased for the *Oakes* required massive amounts of steam, and the single boiler proved too small to reliably power the ship.

Forced to compensate for the anemic boiler, crew members repeatedly labored through the current and tied the rope that snaked from the winch to one of the behemoth trees crowding the river. The boat hovered in the current while the boiler raged, building enough steam to power the engines. Only then did the stern paddle grind through the grey river and the boat inch upstream towards the coal fields.

From Columbia Falls, which borders the main stem of the Flathead, the *Oakes* battled some fourteen miles east to the confluence of the Middle and North Forks and present-day Blankenship Bridge. From there, the ship headed straight north, towards the Canadian border, finally steaming up the actual North Fork itself. For another week, the ship crawled north, gaining only ten miles and making it to Canyon Creek, near Fool's Hen Rapids. The river had only grown more furious as May's hot sun melted the snowpack. The boiler was working almost constantly, and the men were exhausted. The *Oakes* had averaged less than two miles a day.

On a gorgeous spring morning in the last days of May, only two weeks into the trip and only 24 river miles from Columbia Falls, the *Oakes' c*rew orchestrated their now familiar routine: A row boat, small and insignificant against the 75-foot ship, ferried across the raging current towing the heavy, wet hemp rope affixed to the *Oakes'* winch. After scrambling out of the boat and through the thick vegetation that lined the bank, the crewmembers searched for a tree thick enough to hold the massive boat steady in the flood. Frustrated by the brutally slow progress, the men hastily swung the rope around a giant Douglas fir that stood guard a few steps from the bank.

Meanwhile, aboard the *Oakes*, the boiler man madly shoveled coal into the boiler as the ship shuddered in the center of the river. The boiler shook and hissed, straining to build enough pressure to run the giant steam engines that kept the boat upright and upstream against the current.

The full weight of the ship pulled at the rope and it dug into the three-hundred-year-old tree. A deep groan escaped from the Douglas fir, and the *Oakes* angled into the raging water, jerking like an angry dog. Suddenly the boat shifted hard, sliding forward in the current.

On deck, a nightmare unfolded. The *Oakes'* bow, riding too low in the current, plunged below the swell. Frigid water covered the deck. Crewmen slid and crashed into the pilot house on the slippery wooden boards. The *Oakes* sank deeper into the river as water pooled in her hold. The crew set about frenzied bailing. Wooden and canvas buckets were passed from hand to hand, emptied and passed back in a desperate attempt to put the river water back where it belonged. But the added weight was too much. The giant tree shuddered under the additional strain and began to pull from the ground. The bow dipped again under the grey-green waters and the boat sank farther into the river.

Entirely overwhelmed, the tree heaved a final groan – its massive root system torn from the ground, sending a shower of loosened soil and river rocks skyward. The *Oakes* swung sideways in the current and the men again lost their footing and slid across the slick deck. Suddenly, sickeningly, the rails slipped under the current and the *Oakes* foundered. The crew jumped off the boat and swam toward the bank, salvaging whatever supplies they could. Miraculously, all members made it to shore safely, if terrified, then watched helplessly as the raging river tore their ship apart.

While townspeople deduced the fate of the *Oakes* from the debris that floated past Columbia Falls' Main Street, it took several days for the crew to cross the swollen river and pick its way through the thick forest back to Columbia Falls. Talbott's gamble had failed, and the coal fields were left undeveloped.

For the decade following the *Oakes'* fateful journey, the North Fork flowed undisturbed. Homesteaders carved settlements into the wilderness and the valley's towns began to lose their Wild West feel. Montana continued to grow as well, and the cities of Butte and Anaconda became shining examples of both American capitalism and American greed. Business was booming across the country and especially in the frontier west. By the turn of the century, the North Fork once again inspired dreams of wealth – fresh players, new gambles.

On December 28, 1900, a group of prominent Butte businessmen formed the Butte Oil Company and filed a claim on thirty-three quarter sections of remote land at the head of Kintla Lake. An oil seep had been discovered at the head of the lake decades before and the Butte Oil Company wanted to sink a well and develop the deposit they felt

sure was there. Not all geologists, however, were so certain. In the summer of 1901, while the Butte Oil Company was busy building a rough road from Belton Station to the lake, a government geologist, Bailey Willis, surveyed the area. His report pulled no punches.

The geology of the region was complicated, and among the complications was an unusual formation that promised to frustrate Butte Oil's efforts. A giant table of rock, known today as the Lewis Overthrust, had pushed its way up on top of younger, fresher minerals. The thrust, Willis argued, was responsible for the oil seeps, but held no actual pools of oil, "Even in the most favorable locality," he wrote, "it is probable that the drill must go deep and with but slender chance of success."

For the Butte Oil Company, slender chance was chance enough, and they labored on. For four weeks in the fall of 1901, the company hauled drilling and sawmill machinery up its new road, a trip of fifty-two miles. They felled trees, built cabins, a mess hall, and an eighty-foot-tall oil derrick. On November 15, as the last of the cottonwood leaves fell to the ground and the larch trees burned golden on the Boundary Mountains that hemmed Kintla Lake, the Butte Oil Company began drilling.

Progress was agonizingly slow. By the end of the year, the drill had bored only 224 feet into the ground. By February, they reached seven hundred feet. In June, after the light green leaves of the cottonwood trees had weathered darker and the air was awash in their floating seeds, the drill broke down, shutting down the operation for a month, while the men waited for the replacement part to arrive from Pennsylvania. They felled more trees and worked to build a new road farther into the drainage where they planned to drill another well. August arrived and the dry dusty grass rattled in the warm breeze. The drill hit 1100 feet and broke down again. More delay, more money lost. Fall painted the hills red and orange, the low hanging sun shimmered on the lake's dark waters and soon the camp world was white.

The oil company had drilled for fourteen months but produced nothing. Another outfit, the Kintla Lake Oil Company, suffered a similar fate, sinking a well a few miles south of the lake, on the shores of the North Fork, also finding no oil. Frigid, putrid, sulfurous water cascaded from both wells as did flammable gas, which set the drillers on edge.

When 1903 was just a few weeks old, the drill made 1400 feet. It was as far as it would go, but not because of the resistance of the rock or the stubbornness of the company owners. Maybe a careless miner lit his pipe too close to the well, or maybe an orange spark shot from the grinding metal of the drill, but the flammable gas that seeped from Butte Oil's well somehow caught fire. Frenzied cries echoed off the steep mountains surrounding the camp. The men scrambled from the cabins and mess hall, grabbing buckets and trying to douse the growing blaze. But the flames were driven by the natural gas that had been long trapped beneath the rock. In an instant, the eighty-foot derrick that had presided over the operation for a year and half burst into flames, shooting red hot embers high into the air. Soon the entire camp was ablaze. The men backed off from the inferno as flames consumed the cabins and all their belongings, the mess hall, the sawmill. By late afternoon, the entire camp was reduced to a smoldering ruin. Just as the steamboat crew had stood paralyzed onshore some eleven years before, the oilmen watched in disbelief as their $40,000 investment went up in smoke.

Early spring provided no favors to the Kintla Lake Oil Company down on the shores of the river either. By March the company was broke and unable to raise additional capital. The derrick and drill bordering the shores of the North Fork were dismantled and hauled back to town. Geologist Bailey Willis' predictions had proven true. The jumbled, broken bedrock of the region held no substantial pockets of oil, only brutally hard limestone, just enough natural gas to fuel a fire, and an abundance of stinking, icy water. The second North Fork gamble had failed.

By 1910, just seven years after the oil companies' efforts ended abruptly, America's budding conservation movement won a decisive victory and Glacier National Park was established. The braided North Fork of the Flathead River formed the western boundary of the new park. The fast-flowing Middle Fork, beside which ran the Great Northern Railroad, formed the southern border. Waterton Lakes National Park's superintendent, Kootenai Brown, remarked that the designation of Glacier as a national park created a two-legged stool on which the preservation of the region rested. The missing third leg was the Canadian portion of the North Fork of the Flathead River. The omission was glaring. Political rather than ecological boundaries had prevented the

Canadian Flathead from being included in Waterton Lakes National Park when it was created, in 1895. The park rests in Alberta, the Canadian Flathead just to the west, in British Columbia. Vulnerable, despite the conservationists' victory, the North Fork flowed on, shrouded in the cold mists that settle in its forested valley.

By the 1940s timber, agriculture, and recreation drove the economy of the Flathead Valley. But there was only so much lumber and only so many cherries, and after Little Boy and Fat Man vaporized Hiroshima and Nagasaki, industrial interests again set their sights on the North Fork. America's dam building boom had begun, and the Bureau of Reclamation was itching to capitalize on the success of the Grand Coulee Dam it had built on the Columbia River. The massive amount of energy produced by Grand Coulee made large scale hydroelectric development a top priority of President Roosevelt; joined by political leaders of both parties, his demand for more projects grew.

As part of the Columbia Basin Project, the Bureau and the Army Corps of Engineers had surveyed all of the Northwest, identifying sites that, in their view, were best suited for their massive dam projects. The North Fork of the Flathead seemed perfect – conveniently rural and almost entirely surrounded by federally owned lands. Engineers measured flow, elevation, and velocity, then plugged the numbers into complex formulas. Draftsmen penciled thin lines on impressive sheets of white paper while politicians smiled in Helena and Washington D.C., wagering that jobs, cheap energy, and progress would trump the loss of park acreage.

The Corps wanted to stitch together the river's narrow opening between Glacier View and Huckleberry Mountains. Here, where the broad, sweeping Camas Plain rises to the northeast in virgin stands of ponderosa pine; where Wolf Gun Mountain, Longfellow Peak, and Anaconda Peak loom dark above the undulating green, here would be a 30-square-mile reservoir of stagnant, frigid water. The grey, silty North Fork, stalled by the massive concrete wall, would flood 20,000 acres of the Park, all of it critical winter feeding grounds for the Park's elk, white-tailed deer, and moose. The reservoir would stretch twenty five miles upstream, turning half of the free flowing river into a still lake whose levels would fluctuate seasonally. The Glacier View Dam, as it would be known, was touted as a reclamation project, an economic necessity, and a recreational boon.

But park and its resident wildlife were more valued then politicians had surmised, and the dam proposal met fierce opposition by national and local environmental organizations. Led by Secretary of the Interior Julius Krug, Howard Zahnizer and Olaus Murie of the Wilderness Society, John Emmert, Glacier's Superintendent, and others, the conservationists quickly mounted a campaign to defeat the dam's construction. Letters flooded the desk of the Acting Secretary of the Army, William H. Draper, Jr., and inundated the offices of the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors, the group that regulated the use of America's rivers.

On May 25, 1948, Colonel L.H. Hewitt, of the Army Corps of Engineers, held a public hearing in Kalispell. Olaus Murie travelled from The Wilderness Society's headquarters near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to plead for Glacier's preservation. National Park Service Director Newton B. Drury joined Murie at the hearing. Their testimony reflected the growing scientific evidence that the North Fork of the Flathead River and its namesake valley provided a disproportionate amount of critical lands for Glacier's wildlife. Drury worked the numbers like an environmental bookie: White-tailed deer, unique in the west to Glacier, would be decimated by the flooding. Elk, white-tailed and mule deer, moose, beaver, and birds – all would lose significant amounts of winter habitat.

By the end of the year, the Secretary of the Army had withdrawn the proposal. But in 1950, the dam was again proposed. John Emmert, Glacier's Superintendent, devised a plan to forever quell the dam building fervor. In 1953, he utilized the Civilian Conservation Corps to improve the rutted two-track dirt road that the Butte Oil Company had built fifty-one years earlier and constructed two campgrounds at Logging Lake and Quartz Lake, which would be flooded if the dam were ever constructed. Campers, hungry to explore a new part of the park, undertook the bumpy ride and camped among the moose, deer, elk, and beaver as they still do today. Another gamble had failed. The powerful politicians and businessmen promoting the dam failed to foresee the challenge of conservationists and a public clamoring for the protection of wild places. They had been outmaneuvered and outplayed. In 1976, Congress designated the U.S. reach of the North Fork a Wild and Scenic River, forever protecting it from dams or industrial development.

But the federally guaranteed protective status applied only to the North Fork, not the land through which it flowed. The Forest Service cut roads into the Flathead National Forest, west of the river, and significantly widened and rerouted Route 486, the Outside North Fork Road, which parallels the river from Columbia Falls to Canada. Chainsaws shrieked in the trees, and timber trucks pounded down Route 486, hauling their quarry to the mills in Columbia Falls and Kalispell. Logging companies, in their shortsighted focus on immediate profits, pushed farther and farther into the unspoiled country that surrounded the valley. Sediment, bleeding from the haphazard dirt roads and open clear cuts, fouled some of the tributaries that flowed into the North Fork and spoiled the breeding grounds of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

Remarkably, despite the many incursions, the North Fork remained largely wild. The Magic Pack, one of the first packs of gray wolves to naturally recolonize America, slipped across the border in the 1970s. A committed and conscientious group of landowners worked hard to preserve the rural and rugged characteristic of the valley. In 1975, the Grizzly bear was listed on the Endangered Species List and the Flathead National Forest was designated prime recovery habitat. Logging quotas were slashed, and slowly the forests recovered.

Only one part of the North Fork remained open to natural resource speculators, the part that lay north of the border, beyond the reach of American environmental laws. Industrial mining interests in Canada were looking for new opportunities to expand their operations, and their gaze settled on the Canadian Flathead, which overlays massive coal deposits, part of the Crowsnest Coalfield, a giant sweep of land that stretches from Alberta to British Columbia. The ever-increasing size and capacity of haul trucks obviated the need for rail lines to transport coal, and new excavating techniques reduced the cost of large-scale extraction in such a remote, mountainous region. Almost exactly one hundred years after the *Oakes* broke apart in the frigid glacial waters of the North Fork, coal mining interests returned to the valley, convinced that this time they would beat the odds that had proven too steep during the previous century.

In the mid 1980s, the Sage Creek Coal Company proposed a large open pit coal mine near the confluence of pristine Cabin Creek and the North Fork, just eight miles

north of Glacier. Park officials, activists, and the state of Montana immediately sprang to action and convinced the U.S. government to invoke the International Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, claiming the mine would damage downstream habitat and water quality. The International Joint Commission formed a scientific review panel to investigate the proposal, and in 1988 it recommended that "the mine as presently understood and defined not be approved." While not bound by law to accept the ruling, the British Columbian government let the permits held by the Sage Creek Company lapse and the mine was abandoned. Montana appropriated funds to create the Flathead Basin Commission, whose mission was to lay the scientific, legal, and diplomatic groundwork to preserve the North Fork.

The victory proved short-lived, however, and by 2001, another proposal garnered headlines in the local newspapers and again mobilized Montana state and U.S. federal officials. The Cline Mining Corporation initially proposed an open pit mine that would recover 250,000 tons of coal annually, a project small enough to escape environmental review, according to British Columbia's weak environmental laws. Cline, however, planned to increase its production to between two and three million tons a year in short order. After the details of Cline's true plans became known, the company agreed to conduct its own environmental analysis as required by British Columbia's laws.

But environmental analyses, especially those conducted at the bequest of industry, focus on potential impacts and the ability of the land to absorb pollutants and toxins, not biological abundance and diversity. Consider the Elk River, one drainage north of the Flathead. Flowing through downtown Fernie, the Elk still supports a fishery vibrant enough to encourage numerous fly shops and outfitters to hang signs on Fernie's main street, despite a century of coal mining near its tributaries and along its banks. But a few big game fish, suckered by a well-tied fly, do not a healthy ecosystem make. Michels Creek, located among the sprawling coal mines that operate within the Elk River Watershed, is laced with 18 times the amount of sulfates as the North Fork, 650 times the amount of nitrates, and 57 times the amount of selenium. The invertebrates that provide food for fish, which, in turn, provide food for bears, birds, and river otters, can barely scrape an existence from the polluted waters.

In Michels Creek, stoneflies average 450 per square meter, caddisflies under 100 per square meter. In contrast, the Flathead in British Columbia boasts the greatest diversity of mayfly, caddisfly, and stonefly in North America. In Foisey Creek, the tributary Cline will bury under a mountain of slag, stoneflies average over 3500 per square meter. Caddisflies are almost as abundant, averaging just under 3500 per square meter where the Foisey confluences with the North Fork. These tributary streams are critical spawning grounds for the endangered bull trout. A genetically distinct species of the westslope cutthroat trout also spawns in these headwater creeks. The largest non-coastal concentration of grizzly bears in North America resides partly in the valley, crossing the international border without passports. Gray wolves hunt elk and deer in the timbered hills that rise from the valley.

Cline's proposed Lodgepole Mine is one of several that would decimate both the invertebrates and the animals that depend on them. They've expressed interest in reproposing the Sage Creek Coal Company's Cabin Creek Mine in addition to the Lodgepole. The Lillyburt Mine, what would be another open pit coal mine located in the North Fork's floodplain, has also been proposed – a joint venture by Australian and Canadian firms. In 2008, Max Resource Corporation was allowed to explore for gold along pristine Howell Creek, just a few miles from the border. Such massive operations are impossible to mitigate, impossible to control. Giant coal trucks will rumble along new, wider, faster, dirt roads every hour of every day for twenty years. Pipelines and cabins, massive diesel machines, tankers full of fuel, garbage and refuse will deface the valley. Polluted waste water will seep through the ground and resurface as part of the hydrological cycle, fouling the North Fork and inexorably spreading to Flathead Lake. Wolves and grizzlies, curious or simply hungry, will be shot by miners, the rifle's cold report echoing through the valley. Game will be driven north, across the Flathead Divide and away from the fertile valley that has supported them for millennia.

On the saddle of the mountain Cline plans to raze rest stacks of long, thin boxes, bleached nearly white by the harsh summer sun. The boxes contain core samples that Cline dug in 2005. Like the rusting boiler on the shore of Kintla Lake, they are relics, too, but they represent the future, not the past. If Cline's plans are approved by the

government of British Columbia, which, ever anxious for more tax revenue and new jobs, wants to approve them, the mountain on which the boxes sit will cease to be. Cline's proposal – a gamble in this time of global warming and economic collapse – is poised to succeed. Theirs is no frontier adventure. They are not confounded by geologic happenstance. No strict environmental laws prevent them from realizing their goal. Theirs is a well-engineered, proven calculation, bolstered by international financing and a Chinese market hungry for coal.

But a nascent local environmental movement based in Fernie is slowly gaining momentum. Proposals to expand Waterton Lakes National Park west to the North Fork, finally adding the vital third leg of the stool, are receiving serious consideration. A representative from one such group, Wildsight, and a representative from the National Parks Conservation Association, just testified before the United Nations, which listed the entire region a World Heritage Site at Risk this past summer. American Rivers, a national advocacy group, and its Canadian counterpart listed the North Fork as one of the top ten most threatened rivers in North America.

The North Fork still flows pure and clean, over a hundred and twenty years after the *Oakes* thundered from the dock in Columbia Falls. No dam blocks bull trout from migrating up the river, no oil rigs pump rhythmically along its banks. The river is as it has been for millennia. A legacy of failure has preserved this wild place, but now the possibility of success threatens it all. Conservationists have no ace in the hole, no bluff that will force Cline to fold. This time, the odds favor industry.

Part Four

The North Fork of the Flathead's story is still unfinished. A few months after I completed my trips, Max Resource Corporation announced that it had found considerable gold deposits in the region. Vancouver's Winter Olympic extravaganza is set to commence in January of 2010 and tax revenues are needed to offset its cost.

The North Fork's story also contains far more than what is here. It is difficult to ignore the hypocrisy of the United States in its position on the valley's development. Other transboundary rivers that flow south from the U.S. to Mexico are dewatered and polluted. The Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf of Mexico are home to some of the largest dead-zones in the ocean because the rivers that feed them are so full of agricultural and industrial pollutants that their waters kill everything except algae. In December of 2009, the State of Montana voted to open a vast coal deposit that borders an Indian Reservation, despite the protests of environmentalists and the tribe. Because the Forest Service has not changed its land management plan for the Flathead National Forest in decades, oil and gas leases are still held by multi-national corporations with the same goals as Cline and Max Resource.

British Columbia has left this small, insignificant river alone for these past one-hundred years. That grizzly bears live there, that wolves moved into the U.S. across the border, that many of U.S.'s most wild places are revitalized and repopulated by this single place, is a gift that we must acknowledge and appreciate. It is a gift for which we must fight. And we must lead, not by political pressure or ultimatum, but by example. The U.S. has its share of mountain-top-removal mines, its share of environmental catastrophes, its long, sordid history of exploitation. How then can we stand up and demand that another country do as we say, not as we do? Only when we stop demanding the steel for which this coal is destined to produce and the cheap energy that is the product of our own mountain top mines, only then will we have the moral authority to ask the British Columbian government to protect this place.

My travels through this area have taught me several things. Life is neither unique nor fragile. It will exist, albeit diminished and pushed ever closer to the proverbial edge, even if the mines are opened and the earth is torn apart. They have taught me the

undeniable comfort of a dry sleeping bag on a wet ground, of sipping straight from a creek, of effort and exhaustion that are required to claim that one knows a place. I can hear Howard Zanhiser and Olaus Murie in the bubbling rapids that are preserved because of their fight for wildness sixty years ago, and they are asking that we continue their struggles in this new century.

The North Fork is a place like no other, a place that can, and should, offer the world a glimpse of what the earth once was. Its fate is still unwritten, still spinning in the great river that is history.

I began my journey in the North Fork as a volunteer, hoping to contribute something to the efforts that might prevent one more sacrifice to industry and business. I was seduced by the wildness, the beauty, the uniqueness, as I am still. But if I never again feel its cold water on my hands, or look up from a canoe as the Camas Plain rises to the Livingston Range, or hear a wolf howl in the dark, starlit night, I will feel no sadness compared to the crushing despair that would follow if the bulldozers tear down the mountain of coal and this valley becomes yet another lost world.

A Helping Hand

The following organizations are working to protect the North Fork and are always in need of some help.

North Fork Preservation Association – www.gravel.org

Flathead Basin Commission – www.flatheadbasincommission.org

National Parks Conservation Association – www.npca.org

Wildsight – www.wildsight.ca

Yellowstone to Yukon – www.y2y.net

Further Reading

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