

MONTANA



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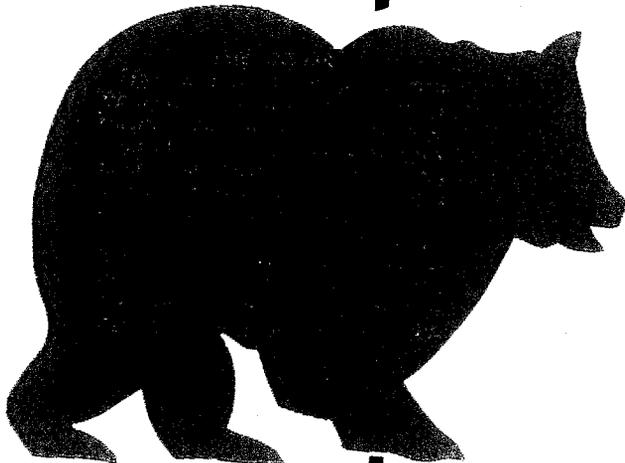
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MONTANA COAL--part one

by Bill Schneider

THE BIG SACRIFICE

EDITOR'S NOTE—The Department of Fish and Game views the upcoming extraction of billions of tons of "black gold" and the subsequent industrial development slated for eastern Montana as our most serious current environmental issue.

Anyone who has visited these rolling prairies, pine-covered hills and sagebrush flats couldn't bring himself to "write them off" as Montana's contribution to an unwarranted demand for electricity. The charm of the western plain quickly captivates even the casual observer. This area has irreplaceable environmental, cultural, scenic, social and historical values, all of which stand to be lost or altered beyond recognition.

Of initial concern to us, as an agency, is, of course, the nationally famous fish and wildlife resource found there. But even more important is the land, air and water on which this resource depends. This high quality aquatic and terrestrial habitat could disappear forever from Montana's landscape, leaving fish and wildlife as unfortunate stragglers and Montanans as the "biggest losers of all."

Evidently, the question of whether or not the coal will be watched from the earth has already been answered. It will. Now, we as Montanans, must decide how we should allow it to proceed and how it should be controlled.

To do our part, MONTANA OUTDOORS has planned a lengthy series of articles on virtually every aspect of the development. The following, the first, is general in nature and sets as a preview of more detailed stories to come.

Hopefully, our voice won't be lost in the noise or drowned in the applause. Instead, we hope to make a meaningful contribution to de-

termining the correct course the development should take.

IN PRIMEVAL TIMES, members of ancient cults sacrificed lambs, poultry and even humans to "please the Gods." Today, that practice is generally intolerable and quite illegal . . . or so it seems.

But now as this state braces itself for the sure-to-come development of its incredibly wealthy coal fields, some Montanans find it difficult to avoid the analogy.

That's right. Montana is now on the altar to "please the Gods" . . . the altar being the projected power needs or so-called "energy crisis" of this nation and the Gods, the coal companies, utilities, eastern and midwestern cities and water development interests.

For openers, Montana stands to lose 770,000 acres of productive prairie and excellent wildlife range, 2.6 million acre-feet of Yellowstone River water, air quality ranking close to the cleanest in the nation and another contest with "boon and bust" resource exploiters.

After all the coal is stripped (about 35 years) and burned for thermo-electric energy, Montana gets a lower quality environment, a stagnant economy, reduced fish and wildlife populations, a declining tax base and an even higher unemployment level.

So, let's call it the *BIG* sacrifice.

what exactly is happening?

This feature is by no means a great exposé of proposed industrial growth spawned by rich eastern Montana coal reserves. Much has already been said and written, some bad and some good, but mostly bad.

Lying beneath eastern Montana and parts of neighboring states is probably the richest mineral deposit in the world—34 billion tons of strippable black gold—sub-bituminous coal and lignite. To

THE BIG SACRIFICE continued

Montana's strippable coal is a positive thing and already underway.

Never before has the Big Sky State faced a situation with the possible environmental and socio-economic ramifications of this impending development. The wonders of modern technology have provided the strip miner with tools to assault the land with a destructiveness previously believed impossible. And this same miner, the stripper, has staked his claim in eastern Montana.

In fact, coal companies, utilities and water developers view it as the "hottest thing going" and take the extraction and subsequent industrial complex for granted.

"We're sitting on one of the largest, if not the largest, coal deposits in the world," said Gene Tuma of Peabody Coal Co. at a Land and Water Use Seminar in Billings in May, 1972. "We're committed to this development because of the need for energy."

(Incidentally, Peabody is one of the four present strippers of Montana coal, holds one-third of the coal leases in Montana and North Dakota and has a questionable environmental record.

But as developers applaud the "discovery" which was actually discovered decades ago, landowners, angered by the possible loss of their livelihood—the land, condemn it.

"If we don't stop this powerful coalition of industries," warns Rosebud Creek rancher Don Golden, "they will gobble up the whole southeastern corner of Montana before the public even realizes what's happening."

Most landowners in that region and most developers involved share the strong feelings of Tuma and Golden.

is it really real?

Yes, it's "real" on two counts. First, the urban centers of the Midwest and East are, for the first time, feeling the "pinch" of air pollution controls. Industrialists are shifting their economic eye from more accessible coal fields to low-sulfur western deposits. (Montana's coal averages one per cent or less sulfur whereas that of Kentucky, Appalachia and Pennsylvania runs four per cent or more.) By using Montana coal instead of that of closer reserves, industry can escape clean air restrictions by pouring less sulfur oxides into the surrounding air and can avoid painful economic changes in their plant's machinery.

(Some observers, however, believe it would be much better to clean up once and for all instead of "weaseling around it" with different fuel.)

The truism that urban America views Montana coal as an escape route past needed air pollution control devices brings to the surface one of the rarest bits of irony ever unearthed. The quest

for a cleaner environment in larger cities in the form of pure air will, unless immediate action is taken, degrade the environment in the form of uprooted land, dry rivers and filthy air in eastern Montana.

Or, in short, an environmental action program (clean air in big cities) will indirectly destroy the sparsely populated and supposedly "desolate wasteland" on eastern Montana.

The very idea of shipping Montana coal to be burned in Chicago, Minneapolis or St. Louis was unthinkable a few years ago. But now, with the ghosts of air standards haunting polluters, the ancient economic laws are collapsing.

Not all of Montana's black gold will be loaded onto trains for long rides to urban centers. Some will fuel electric generating plants in and around Montana with the resulting power transferred out of the state via a proposed giant transmission grid requiring about 4,600 square miles of right-of-way. And some fire coal gasification and liquefaction plants.

Building the power plants here instead of where the energy is needed prevents further damage to already devastated environments. Eastern Montana (where the land, water and air is still pure) has the capacity to absorb dirty air and wrecked land. Perhaps the logic behind it all is to "spread out" the pollution rather than concentrate it all in a few urban areas.

Secondly, the need for energy will supposedly increase as pointed out by Tuma of Peabody, the now infamous North Central Power Study (NCPS)—prepared by the Bureau of Reclamation and 35 major utilities—and all others dependent on power development for subsistence. That means the black gold will fire monstrous power plants in Montana and other western states. The plants (the NCPS forecasts 21 for Montana) will sprout from the rolling prairies destroying the serenity and balance of rural culture. Many Montanans are already wondering how the complex can fit into their way of life. Some think it can not.

But the Bureau of Reclamation, which will play a big role in the development, does. The federal agency notes, "Construction of water supply facilities and associated development of the coal resources would change portions of the southeastern Montana-northeastern Wyoming area from a quiet ranching economy into a bustling energy-producing or industrial-based economy."

Regardless of how "outside interests" and federal agencies view the development, it's safely said that Montanans hold that particular part of their heritage in high esteem and will be quite reluctant to consider it their donation to technology.

is there really an energy crisis?

Must the demand for power "double every 10

years," as predicted by the NCPS?

Don L. Brown, director of the Montana Department of Fish and Game, thinks not. He points out that NCPS fails to discuss "present frivolous and wasteful uses of electrical power."

And John Goers, reclamation administrator for the Montana Department of State Lands, also wonders. In the same panel discussion where Tuma took the energy need for granted, Goers asked, "Why are energy companies still urging the public to get an electric toothbrush and the 'when-I'm-not-there' yardlight and then complaining about the energy crisis?"

That's like advising someone to eat all their food today so they can go hungry tomorrow.

The entire question of whether or not there actually is an energy crisis will be brought up many times before development goes further. Predictably, those now dependent on energy development will insist the crisis is approaching disaster proportions, and environmentalists of various extremes will contend it's only a hoax conceived and blown up by power companies to assure their future existence.

What nearly all concerned—pro and con—will agree to is that it may not be a power shortage but a simple fact of power in the wrong place at the wrong time and the lack of inter-connection in the power grid. Supposing that's true, the 53,000 mega-

ban on all coal-burning, electric-generating plant construction until more attention is given to other power sources.

Such a moratorium becoming a reality is about as likely as a bolt of lightning striking the reader as he reads this. But nevertheless, the point is made—the actual "need" for energy, other than financial profit for coal and power companies, must be carefully investigated before the green light flashes and not "after the fact" as is the case with many resource-degrading developments.

how far has it gone?

Montana strippers are already wresting 16 million tons (disturbing 275-500 acres) of black gold from the prairie each year. Most of it is then loaded on trains bound for points east—St. Louis, Chicago, Omaha, Minneapolis. That's up 16-fold from 1968, and by 1975 the state's annual output is expected to reach at least 20 million tons. Maximum consumption of 200 million tons annually (involving about 5,000 acres) is projected for sometime after 1980.

What does Montana get from all this? Very little, according to Director Brown. He believes the "most shortsighted action we could allow would be to burn our coal in inefficient generating plants to be consumed as electricity in the midwestern United

"THE ONLY REAL ARGUMENT I HAVE HEARD AGAINST STRIP MINING IS THE CLAIM THAT IT RUINS THE LANDS." —Congressman James Kee (D-W. VA.)

watts of electric power predicted to come from the Montana-Wyoming complex may not be needed right now. And that means there may be an excellent reason for tightening the reins on coal development until such time as the power is positively needed.

(A megawatt equals 1,000 kilowatts, so 53,000 megawatts is enough electricity to light up 530 million 100-watt light bulbs.)

That action would certainly be strongly supported by the Montana ranchers who fear they have little to look forward to but gaping holes and spoil banks where their livestock now roams.

And again, if the extraction of coal were slowed, which is very unlikely, other non-polluting and undestructive energy sources like steam, wind or solar energy may be perfected . . . and eastern Montana prairies could remain themselves forever.

The Sierra Club, for one, has decided to do more than cuss the energy crisis, something they view as a complete fallacy. They've advocated a

States." And most others likewise concerned about Montana's natural resources and social welfare agree.

The NCPS notes coal reserves will only last 35 years if developed to the report's suggested level, and the coal will be burned in inefficient power-generating plants with 60 to 70 per cent written off as waste. (Montana Power admits the J. E. Corette plant at Billings is only 27 per cent efficient.)

is there any alternative?

Considering the traditional American fashion and the economics of it all, it's doubtful any alternative to strip mining/power plant generation will be seriously considered. However, at least two exist.

Bruce Driver of the Environmental Policy Center (a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of conservation groups) says deep mining represents "the only realistic substitute for surface-mined coal. Even in today's economic and technological frame-

THE BIG SACRIFICE continued

ing the environment, hired more people to study various phases of the development, made it a political issue and formed a six-agency task force.

And to further the state's grip on industrial growth and mining, the 43rd legislature will have before it a new and tougher reclamation law. Its major provisions (listed in an accompanying table) have already been heralded by most politicians and conservation groups. A few, however, claim it's still "too weak" and will allow environmental damage. But that view is shunned by the Department of State Lands which feels it's the best law we can hope for.

On the national level, some legislation involving strip mining will surely pass and probably this year.

Its provisions include: (1) a ban on contour mining for coal on steep slopes where damage is greatest, (2) prohibition of any surface mining without a special permit from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), (3) a requirement that the permit guarantee the land be reclaimed to "original use," (4) a moratorium on federal issuance of coal leases and exploration permits on public lands, (5) special federal protection and aid to assure the restoration of any jobs displaced by surface mining controls and (6) provisions for full public participation.

The Wisconsin senator argues that the strip mining industry should not be allowed to pass the cost of reclamation on to the consumer but should internalize it. He also insists the stripper should bear the burden of proof that reclamation will be done.



"STRIP MINING IS LIKE TAKING SEVEN OR EIGHT STIFF DRINKS. YOU ARE RIDING HIGH AS LONG AS THE COAL LASTS, BUT THE HANGOVER COMES WHEN THE COAL IS GONE AND THE JOBS ARE GONE AND THE BITTER TRUTH OF THE MORNING AFTER LEAVES A BARREN LANDSCAPE AND A MOUTH FULL OF ASHES." —Congressman Ken Hechler (D-W. VA.)

Several bills are already hot conversation pieces in congressional halls. They vary from complete bans on surface mining to legislation written and sponsored by the mining industry to give itself a boost.

It's commonly known that to curb a public outcry like the one against strip mining, the target of the legislation (the stripper, in this case) actually writes and then supports legislation that "on the surface" seems to meet the demands of the populace. When it passes and the dragon's fire cools, exploiters go back to business as usual." Some

See page 26 for more
on Montana coal

of this type of legislation has been introduced but hopefully, for the good of Montana, will not succeed.

However, other legislation that would virtually eliminate the stripper and all his ugly doings is also before Congress. Such is the case with bills sponsored by anti-strip mining Congressman Ken Hechler (D-W. Va.) and by a leading conservationist in the Senate, Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.)

The intent of Hechler's bill is pure and simple —to end surface mining altogether and to reclaim all land now lying topsy-turvy after the stripper has uprooted the bowels of the earth.

Noting that strip mining is "environmental warfare on our own country," conservationist Nelson has written a similar but more detailed bill.

"Strip mining's permanent destruction of the values of the land has not only been a crime against the environment but an incredible economic waste," Nelson claims. "It levies a cost against the future far beyond any short-term profit that has been gained."

Another bill, sponsored by Senator Lee Metcalf (D-Mont), would implement a tough severance tax on the coal industry.

The U.S. House of Representatives did, according to Congressman John Melcher (D-Mont), pass "a strong national strip mining reclamation law." But Congress adjourned before the Senate could act on it, although it did approve a resolution asking for a temporary moratorium on federal coal leasing within Montana.

A ban on federal coal leasing doesn't really slow down the stripper, only muddles up his future plans a bit. Although estimates vary and depend on the extent of the mining, there are already enough federal coal leases to strip mine eastern Montana for 50 years at the present rate and less, if mining increases.

(In view of legislation sure to appear in Montana's legislature and in Congress, it's vital to realize the difference between a "moratorium on leasing" and a "moratorium on mining.")

But regardless of what legislation survives the congressional storm, Montanans can only hope it will aid their efforts and put a leash on the stripper

what do we have to lose?

The stripper is here—ripping up the prairie for his prize. The industrialist is coming—to produce the power and the pollution. And the profit and power are going—not to Montanans.

When development comes, something must go. So, in most cases, the electricity and coal will go—across state borders to urban America. But what else will Montanans yield to the strip miner, the power companies and air conditioners of Megalopolis?

Ask yourself that as you scan the next few pages. And then ask: Is this important to me? Important enough to retire a convenient, but unnecessary, electric appliance? Important enough to cherish it as part of my heritage? Important enough to join the battle to save it—even if I've never been there or never plan to go there?

Why not? After all, what do you have to lose? 

The prairie, photo by Gus Wolfe.