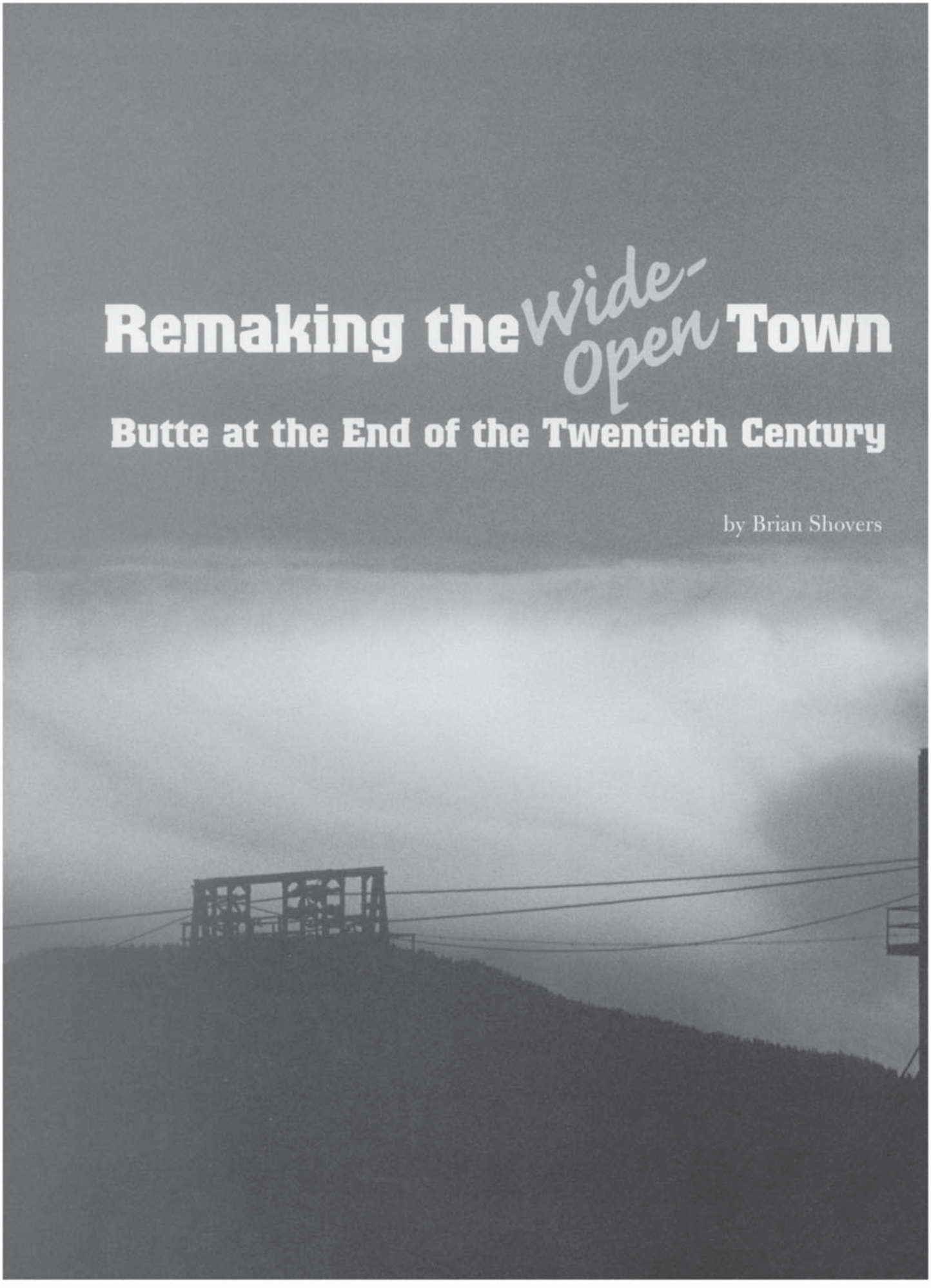


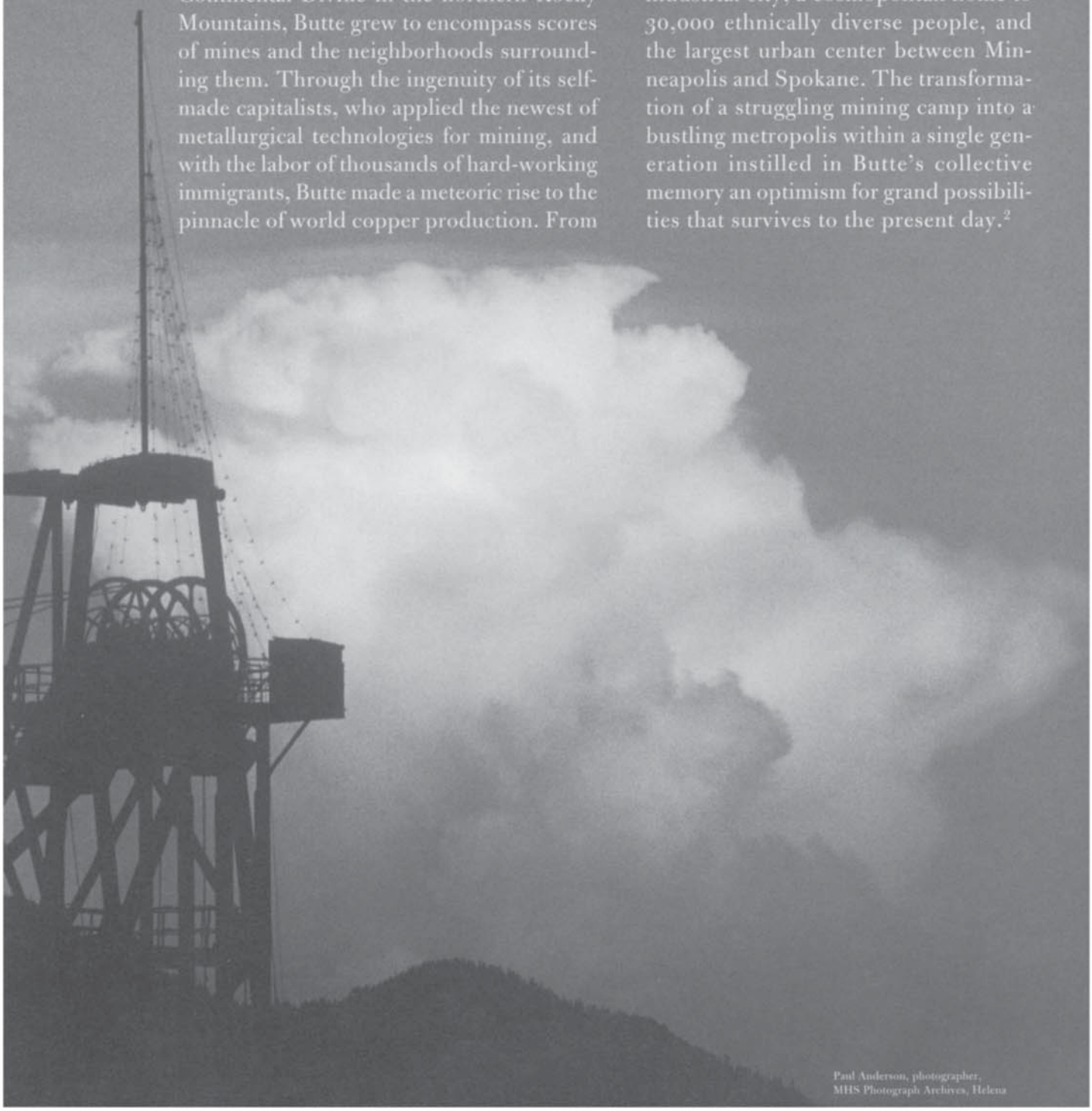
Remaking the *Wide-Open* Town

Butte at the End of the Twentieth Century

by Brian Shovers

In August 1885 the *West Shore*, a West Coast magazine, proclaimed Butte "the largest, busiest and richest mining camp in the world." History does not record who coined the phrase the "Richest Hill on Earth," but such hyperbole long ago became conventional wisdom in Butte, the economic heart of Montana for almost a century.[1]

The city of Butte overlooks the Silver Bow Valley. Situated on a hillside beneath the Continental Divide in the northern Rocky Mountains, Butte grew to encompass scores of mines and the neighborhoods surrounding them. Through the ingenuity of its self-made capitalists, who applied the newest of metallurgical technologies for mining, and with the labor of thousands of hard-working immigrants, Butte made a meteoric rise to the pinnacle of world copper production. From a district measuring just two miles across, Butte led the world in mining copper between 1887 and 1916, producing more than 5.4 billion pounds of the red metal, one-sixth of all the copper then mined in the world. Growth and development had been stunning. Just eighteen years after Marcus Daly's 1882 discovery of a rich vein of copper ore, Butte had become a typical American industrial city, a cosmopolitan home to 30,000 ethnically diverse people, and the largest urban center between Minneapolis and Spokane. The transformation of a struggling mining camp into a bustling metropolis within a single generation instilled in Butte's collective memory an optimism for grand possibilities that survives to the present day.[2]



Paul Anderson, photographer,
MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Despite its glorious past, Butte, like the eastern industrial centers of Scranton and Akron, struggles to maintain its rich cultural heritage and survive in a postindustrial world. For Butte, the process of de-industrialization began early. The crash of copper prices in 1920 brought massive layoffs, demise of the miners' union, and an end to the closed shop. Economic decline continued in the post–World War I decade. By the early years of the Great Depression, Butte's work force diminished by 84 percent, and by 1932 20 percent of Silver Bow County's population was on relief. Hard times provoked the strike of 1934, the resolution of which marked a major victory for miners, who resumed work with return of the closed shop and what would be a relatively steady increase in wages and benefits that continued into the 1960s.[3] Against a changing corporate backdrop, such gains were won. Beginning in the 1930s, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM) began relying more heavily on its Latin American properties, especially those in Chile. Over time, Butte's significance to ACM and worldwide corporate copper production diminished markedly.

Beginning in the 1970s, a series of dramatic events forced Butte to remake its economic and political identity. As it did so, it struggled also to preserve its soul. Two events in particular were pivotal. First, there was the controversial decision by the Butte City Council in summer 1976 to defy the Anaconda Company (formerly ACM) and not abandon its traditional downtown to the ever-growing Berkeley Pit. Second, there was the shutdown of all mining activity seven years later in 1983, when oil giant Atlantic Richfield Company

(Previous pages) Atop Butte Hill silhouetted headframes serve as sentinels to the industrial glory days of earlier times. Today, Butte struggles to make its way in a postindustrial world.

Robust copper production from the city's underground mines translated into prosperity and a thriving downtown, captured in this scene (below, circa 1950) of Butte's North Main Street. By the late 1960s, however, the burgeoning Berkeley Pit (right, late 1950s) began to threaten Butte's historic downtown district and with it community identity.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

World Museum of Mining, Butte

A series of dramatic fires destroyed some twenty major buildings in Butte's historic commercial district in the 1970s, including the J. C. Penney fire (right) of February 1972. Before firefighters could extinguish it, the inferno had destroyed twelve other businesses.

(ARCO), which had bought out the Anaconda Company six years earlier, closed the mines. Both of these events and the community's response to them are crucial to understanding Butte's efforts at remaking itself in the late twentieth century.

A century of mineral extraction shaped Butte's economy and culture, but during the last thirty-five years five phenomena have converged to forever alter assumptions about Butte's traditional livelihood and challenge the city's very survival. First, underground mining began giving way to open-pit mining in the mid-1950s. Then, a series of fires in the heart of Butte's business district during the 1970s demoralized the city psychologically. The fires and the expanding Berkeley Pit fed an extended and wrenching debate over abandoning the city's historic business district. Simultaneously, a new civic leadership emerged, propelled by consolidation of local government and a massive infusion of federal monies. Finally, there was the demise of copper mining in the early 1980s. Butte's longevity as a major mineral-producing center defies all modern hard-rock history, but suspension of mining operations in July 1983 tested the city's bravado as no other single event ever had.

The Anaconda Company began open-pit mining in Butte in 1955, a decision prompted by the presence of lower grade ores and high labor costs. Unlike underground mining, which could coexist peacefully with the homes, businesses, and neighborhoods on the surface, Anaconda's new open pit mine, called the Berkeley Pit, consumed everything in its path.[4] Constructed in the heart of the mining district, the Berkeley Pit was located along the hill just a mile east of the Butte business district, which included the miners' suburbs of Meaderville and McQueen, then occupied by enclaves of Italians, Slavs, and Austrians.[5] By the early 1960s Meaderville and McQueen residents had to be relocated to make way for the ever-expanding Berkeley Pit. Residents of Meaderville, a community settled by miners and smeltermen during the 1880s, had little choice but to accept ACM's offer of $1,500 for their houses, which had been built on land leased from the company. Residents of nearby McQueen were more fortunate, although in the end they, too, had to relocate. McQueen residents, who owned the land their houses occupied, relocated to a neighborhood on the flats south of the Clyde E. Weed Concentrator (a facility used to concentrate copper ore), but only after the company offered them generous buyouts.[6] Still the pit grew. By the early 1970s its edge had been extended to within a half mile of Main Street. There were social and economic consequences as well. Butte's underground miners, replaced by truck and shovel operators, were being laid off in substantial numbers.

In addition to the oncoming Berkeley Pit, Butte's business district faced other problems. Through the early 1970s arson, faulty wiring, and fires of unknown origin claimed a number of the city's landmark historic structures. The fires scored Butte's urban landscape and traumatized the city. Moreover, businesses were on the decline. As the underground mines closed, Anaconda's work force shrank. Uptown merchants felt the pinch, and many succumbed to loss of business as customers either disappeared or turned to a robust

1. Michael P. Malone, *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864–1906* (1981; reprint, Helena, Mont., 1995), 31.

2. "Anaconda Copper," *Fortune*, 14 (December 1936), 87-93; *The New Anaconda* (New York, 1916), 1; Malone, *Battle for Butte*, 3-56.

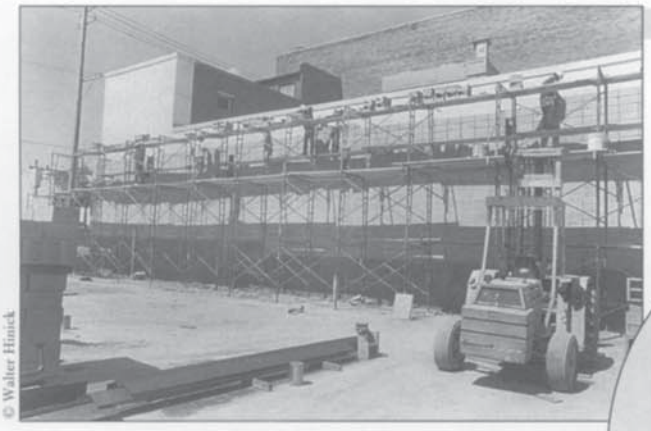
3. Janet Ore, "Labor and the New Deal in Butte, Montana: The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers' Strike of 1934" (master's thesis, Washington State University, 1987), 21-25.

4. Rick Foote, interview with Teresa Jordan, January 7, 1987, Butte, Montana (hereafter Foote interview). This interview is part of series of interviews Jordan conducted between 1985 and 1987, Teresa Jordan Oral History Collection, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana; *Anaconda Company Annual Report 1955* (New York, 1956), 8-9.

5. *Montana Standard*, July 15, 1956, July 29, 1973.

6. Angelo Petroni, telephone interview with author, January 31, 1997.

7. *Central Business District Development Program, Butte, Montana, Final Report, Phase I* (Columbia, Md., 1976), 11-15.



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Having neglected its civic infrastructure for decades, Butte began witnessing wholesale abandonment of its uptown area in the 1960s. Beginning in 1969, however, Mayor Mike Micone (left), with the help of Montana Senator Mike Mansfield (bottom left), initiated counter measures through the Model Cities program. Among its benefits was a new public safety building, shown at far left under construction in 1975.

shopping district rising on both sides of the new interstate highway and along Harrison Avenue in the valley. Soon, a quarter of the commercial space in Butte's historic business district stood vacant and vulnerable to vandalism and arson.[7]

Between 1972 and 1975 fires destroyed more than twenty major buildings in Butte's historic commercial district. A blaze that started at the J. C. Penney store on February 28, 1972, consumed twelve other businesses in a fiery conflagration that took nearly twenty-four hours to extinguish. In July 1973, fire claimed the Medical Arts Building, an eighty-year-old architectural landmark at the corner of Park and Main, and on an October evening in 1974 more than 8,500 residents gathered to watch in horror as fire consumed the historic Pennsylvania Block.[8]

By 1975 more than thirty businesses had fled Butte's historic commercial district for Harrison Avenue and the Butte Plaza Mall in the valley. Fire and a crumbling infrastructure precipitated the exodus. Even in times of prosperity neither local government nor the Anaconda Company had made public streets, sidewalks, sewers, water lines, and parks a priority. One historian has linked this disregard for the public environment to the nature of transient wealth in a mining city and an underlying uncertainty about the future. Faced with the constant threats of deadly occupational accidents, strikes, and layoffs, Butte miners lived for the moment, investing only in what they could take with them—their memories and experiences. Collectively, they traded civic amenities for a night on the town or a new automobile.[9]

Despite such disadvantages, Mayor Mike Micone, a local businessman and political newcomer, committed himself to saving uptown Butte. Beginning in 1969, Micone tried to arrest the flight off Butte Hill by infusing enormous amounts of federal money into the historic business district through the Model Cities program. He was able to do so because Butte had been chosen—largely because of the influence of Montana Senator Mike Mansfield—as one of 150 American cities to receive federal grants for urban renewal. Over the next five years Butte leveraged $8.5 million into $22 million in federal grants that allowed for street repairs, building demolition, a local development corporation, a seniors' housing project, and construction of a public safety building—all within the historic business district.[10]

Model Cities also helped fund administrative training for a cadre of bureaucrats and led to political restructuring that empowered Butte's citizenry. Federal grant guidelines demanded creation of neighborhood councils, which encouraged citizen participation in local decision-making for the first time.[11] Specifically, Model Cities funded a so-called Governmental Research Study that spawned a successful effort at city-county consolidation in 1976, a reform voters had rejected three times since the end of World War II.

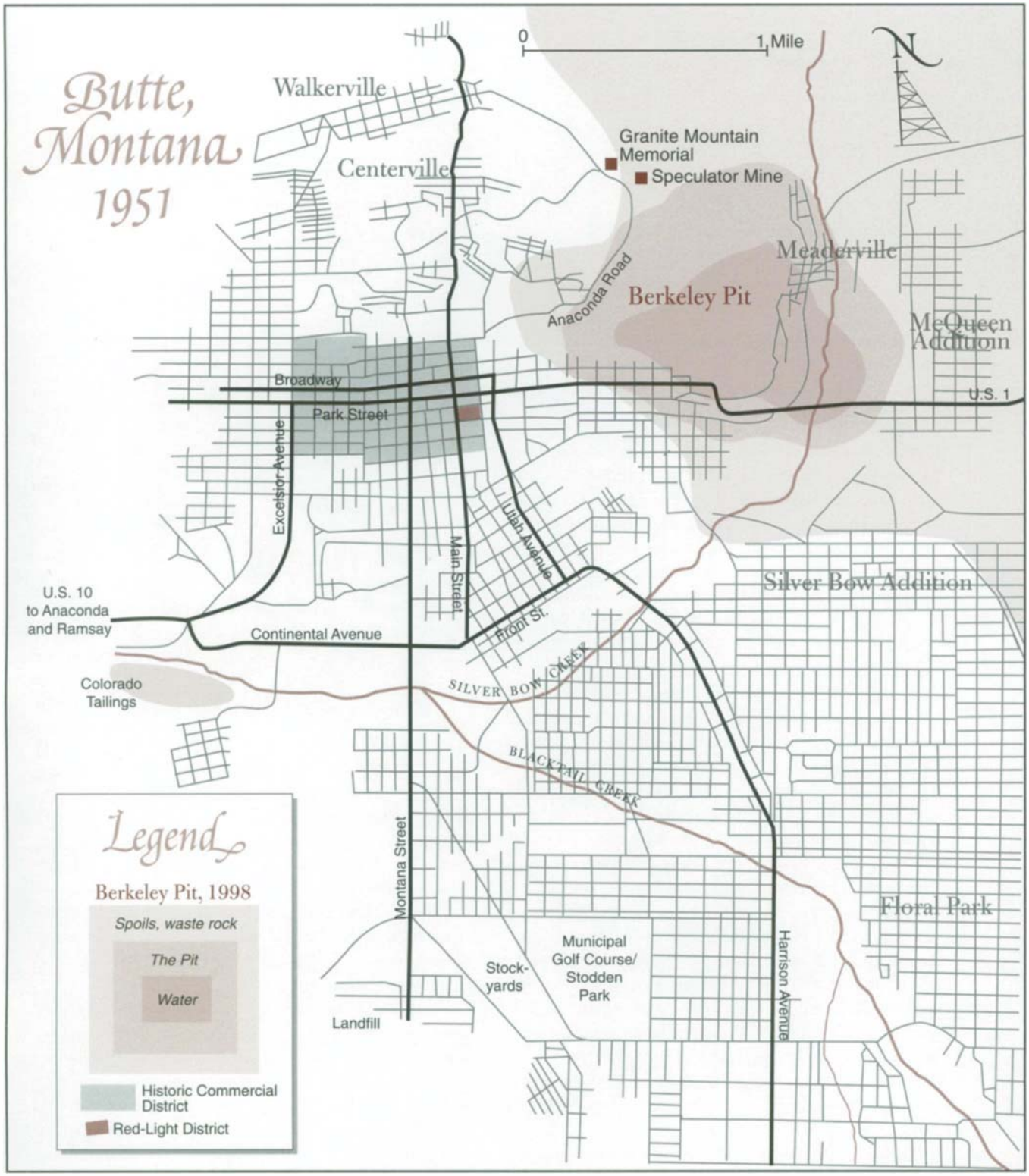
8. *Montana Standard*, February 29, 1972, July 29, 1973, October 15, 1974.

9. Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914–1941* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), 225. Butte has made infrastructure a priority only twice—and in both instances through the largesse of the federal government—under the administrations of progressive Republican Charles Hauswirth (1935–1941) and Mayor Mike Micone in the 1970s. During the late 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) paved Butte's streets, laid storm sewers and sidewalks, and created neighborhood parks and playgrounds.

10. Foote interview; Mike Micone, interview with Teresa Jordan, January 5, 1987, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Montana (hereafter Micone interview).

11. Foote interview.

12. Micone interview.



The map above suggests the extent of mining's impact and the Berkeley Pit. Shaded areas indicate the size of the pit, which by the 1970s had extended to within a few blocks of the historical commercial district (also shaded); the surface area of water in the pit; and the larger area affected by mining activity. Butte's historic red-light district is also shown (see article beginning on p. 4).

Paul Anderson, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Aerial view (above) shows the Anaconda Company's Berkeley Pit in operation in the 1970s. Today, with underground pumps shut down, the pit is filling with acid water at the rate of two and a half million gallons a day.

Below, Meaderville's Top Hat bar (circa 1950) offers foreground to the headframe of the Leonard Mine. Both bar and mine, and Meaderville itself, succumbed to the expanding Berkeley Pit.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

With consolidation, local government was streamlined, patronage cut, and government costs reduced in proportion to Butte's steadily diminishing tax revenues.[12]

Even with a massive infusion of federal dollars, however, Butte faced growing uncertainty about the future. Continuous rumors about Anaconda Company plans to expand the Berkeley Pit west into the business district fueled the apprehension. The rumors were confirmed on December 15, 1975, when Mayor Micone received a letter from L. C. Powell, president of Anaconda's Montana Mining Division, which laid out plans for continued mining in Butte. In his letter Powell explained Butte's dilemma from the Anaconda Company's perspective: the future of Butte and the central business district depended upon mining, and Anaconda's continued presence depended upon minerals located beneath the business district. The only viable solution, Powell said, was to relocate the business district into the valley below.[13]

That same year the local government, with the aid of a federal Model Cities grant worth $250,000, hired American City Corporation of Columbia, Maryland, to study the feasibility of relocating the central business district off the hill to make way for an expanded Berkeley Pit. To oversee the study and recommend a course of action, the city council created Butte Forward, Inc., a committee composed of business people and representatives from the Montana Power Company (MPC) and the Anaconda Company.[14]

Fulfilling its mission, Butte Forward submitted a detailed report early in 1976 recommending that the business district be relocated. With the report in hand, all the council had to do was choose a feasible site for a new business district. By March, however, the council was embroiled in debate over a building site and how to pay for relocation, estimated to cost $50 million. The Anaconda Company had pledged $11 million, and the council looked to the federal government for the remaining $39 million. But the imminent retirement from the United States Senate of Butte's longtime emissary Mike Mansfield made such federal benevolence doubtful.

Proposed sites for a new town, meanwhile, created additional dissension among council members. One faction favored a site adjacent to the stockyards and city landfill; another wanted to examine the feasibility of using Stodden Park, Butte's only large recreational park, for a new city center. Neither faction commanded a majority and, as spring passed into summer, council

13. *Central Business District Report*, 8-9.
14. Ibid., 1-4; Micone interview.
15. *Montana Standard*, March 5, 6, 10, June 24, July 3, 8, 1976.
16. Ibid., July 12, 22, November 5, December 1, 9, 1976.
17. Foote interview.
18. Ibid.
19. Draft of "Goals and Policies: Heritage Resources Management Plan, Part IV," July 1987, p. 1-11, Butte-Silver Bow Historic Preservation Office, Butte, Montana; Cort Freeman, Montana Power Company, telephone interview with author, August 29, 1995.
20. Don Peoples, interview with Teresa Jordan, January 14, 1987 (hereafter Peoples interview); *Montana Standard*, December 1, 1976; December 9, 1976.

wrangling spilled over into the business community, with one group of uptown merchants mounting a petition drive to submit relocation to a public referendum. On July 7 the city council voted 8 to 5 in favor of relocating the business district, but because of a move by Alderman Rick Griffith the matter was reconsidered on July 21.[15]

Two weeks later and a few years short of Butte's centennial celebration, the city council did an about face. After two years of study and dozens of hours of divisive debate, and in defiance of Mayor Micone and the Anaconda Company, the city council voted against relocating the uptown business district. The council's decision on July 21, 1976, was momentous, possibly the most important in its one-hundred-year history. Reading the newspaper accounts on the events surrounding Butte Forward and relocation, and considering Butte's century-long history of economic subservience to the mining industry, one is hard-pressed to explain the council's decision.[16] Rick Foote, former editor of the *Montana Standard*, claimed it was a "psychic decision," based on the recent loss of Meaderville and McQueen to the expanding Berkeley Pit and on the legacy of the fires that left blocks of buildings in uptown Butte burned and boarded up. Each fire, Foote said, "left the community psychologically shaken for months afterwards."[17]

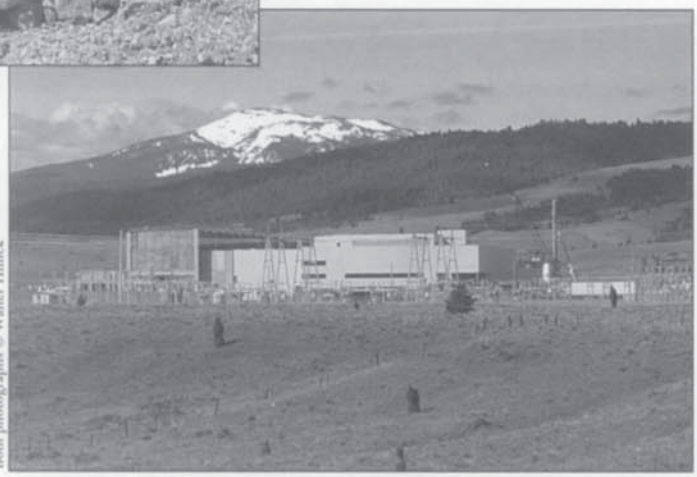
The council had rejected relocating the business district as a viable alternative for city rejuvenation. It was a bold decision. In defying relocation Butte not only reaffirmed its historic identity, a persona forged by the rigors and spawned by the culture of underground mining, but demonstrated a growing maturity as well. As a community, it had drawn the line on how much it might sacrifice in the name of a paycheck. As proof of Butte's "coming of age," support came immediately from those aligned with the relocation camp, most importantly Mayor Micone and the Montana Power Company.[18]

Shortly after the council's decision, Montana Power took the lead in plans to revitalize the historic business district. The locally based utility company acquired several historic commercial structures near its corporate headquarters uptown and refurbished them. MPC was aided in the effort by building facade grants offered by the Urban Revitalization Agency, an entity created by local government in 1979 and financed with the newly established uptown Tax Increment Financing District. Montana Power was stridently loyal to Butte, and part of the city's survival during the economically turbulent 1970s and 1980s can be attributed to that loyalty. During the 1980s MPC diversified into coal mining and communications with subsidiaries Western Energy and Entech, further increasing employment opportunities within the heart of the historic commercial district. In 1997 Montana Power remained Butte's largest employer with about one thousand employees.[19]

Micone retired from the chief executive's office at the end of 1978. To assure that his efforts to remake Butte would continue, the city council appointed former Model Cities administrator and Public Works director Don Peoples to replace him. The Peoples's administration began with sidewalk and street repair, but civic improvement efforts soon blossomed into a major program of building facade improvement in the historic business district and use of Community Development Block Grants to help preserve historic neighborhoods. In addition to urban

With rejection of the Anaconda Company's proposal to relocate the historic downtown in July 1976, community leaders redoubled efforts to diversify Butte's economy and revitalize the district. Don Peoples (above, 1989), who replaced Mike Micone as mayor in 1978, continued such policies, attracting a high-altitude Olympic speed-skating rink in 1987.

Both photographs © Walter Hinick



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Despite a slow decline, mining sustained Butte's economy until 1983, when ARCO, new owner of the Anaconda Company, closed Butte's mines seemingly for good. Stunned but undaunted, community leaders sought to attract new enterprise. Payoffs have included Advanced Silicon Materials, Inc., which opened its processing plant (below) in 1998 at Ramsay, ten miles west of Butte, and Dennis Washington's Montana Resources, Inc., which purchased ARCO's mining interests and resumed mining (left) in 1986, albeit on a smaller, nonunion scale.

revitalization, Peoples aggressively promoted business development and diversification.[20]

The programs seemed to be working. The Peoples administration had been in office for four years and had a program to restore confidence in the historic business district firmly in place when, in 1983, the community was jolted by the unanticipated. On July 1, 1983, the Anaconda Company closed its mines. Depletion of a nonrenewable resource and the economic realities of the world marketplace had combined to produce the inevitable but unexpected, and after months-long labor negotiations that had deadlocked over union work rules and falling copper prices, the company suspended all mining operations for the first time since 1921. More than 700 jobs were lost immediately, shrinking the town's annual payroll by $30 million.[21] The psychological impact was stunning.

Erosion of Butte's mining economy had actually been occurring for decades. Mining still accounted for 32 percent of the Silver Bow County economy in 1960, but by 1970 the service economy had surpassed mining for the first time ever. Between 1981 and 1987 the Butte economy would actually lose a total of 4,500 jobs, many linked indirectly to mining. Some of the 700 Anaconda Company employees laid off had never known another employer and were too old to find comparable work at mid-life. Understandably, the shutdown caused widespread apprehension about the future, although a number of younger miners perceived it as an opportunity to start over. Still others remained confident that it was merely a temporary suspension, not an end to mining.[22]

Closure of the mines in 1983 marked the end of Butte's existence as a wide-open town sustained by a single industry. But it marked a turning point for the community as well. The same year, the corridor between Butte and Anaconda was identified as the nation's largest Superfund site. In addition, a new historic awareness, prompted by an architectural survey of the National Landmark District, was emerging, and a plan to transform Butte's historic resources into an interpretive park system was in development. The efforts to remake Butte that began with the shutdown can be seen in local attempts at economic diversification, infrastructure repair, and the environmental restoration that followed.

While the shutdown shocked the community, it also precipitated action. Within months of the shutdown Chief Executive Don Peoples organized a public brainstorming session of seventeen community panels to envision a new economic future for Butte. Within a year, Butte established a "business incubator," an effort by local government to foster business development by providing technical assistance and support services.

21. *Montana Standard*, June 30, 1983.

22. "A Ten Year Overview of the Butte-Silver Bow Economy," June 1991, p. 3, Community Development Services of Montana, Butte, Montana; *Montana Standard*, June 30, 1983.

23. Peoples interview; Foote interview; "Ten Year Overview," 10.

24. Peoples interview; Foote interview; "Ten Year Overview," 6; *Montana Standard*, December 12, 1985.

Over the next five years Butte entrepreneurs and the Local Development Corporation (LDC) devised a number of new schemes to diversify the economy, ranging from a major grain terminal and growing microbes for hazardous waste remediation to building a high-altitude Olympic speed-skating rink. Local government helped procure grants, loans, and contracts for some of these enterprises. These were early efforts towards economic diversification, and although none of them significantly altered the 13 percent local unemployment rate, each demonstrated the community's resolve to explore new avenues of creating jobs.[23]

In late 1986 the local government and former Anaconda managers arranged for mining to resume in Butte by bringing together Montana construction magnate Dennis Washington and ARCO, operator of the Anaconda Company from 1977 to 1983. Enticed by major tax concessions from the state of Montana and energy discounts from MPC, Washington purchased the beleaguered mining company. He created a new, nonunion enterprise, Montana Resources, Inc. (MRI), which has employed about 300 people since 1986. MRI, which extracts copper-molybdenum from the East Continental Pit, has sustained Butte's historic economic enterprise and helped jump start an anemic local economy.[24]

Because of Washington and MRI, mining continues to factor in the local economy, but its significance is minor compared to the role it played in every previous decade of the twentieth century. Jobs with federal, state, and local governments, meanwhile, have grown in significance and contribute more than 1,000 workers to the labor force. Less visible but increasingly significant are the 200 to 300 people working in environmental and energy-related technologies.[25] No one expects positions in these fields to replace the thousands of jobs related to the mining industry that have been lost since 1983, but efforts to attract new industries are ongoing.

Twice during 1995, for example, the Local Development Corporation took extraordinary steps to lure out-of-state jobs to Butte. Like dozens of once prosperous industrial cities across the nation, Butte offered generous financial and tax incentives to businesses willing to relocate. In early 1995 the Montana Legislature approved a $16 million loan to Butte-Silver Bow local government for infrastructure improvements needed by high-tech firm Micron, Inc., as an incentive for Micron to locate a large microchip manufacturing installation in Butte. Plant owners promised to create 3,500 high-paying jobs. When after months of planning Micron announced that it would build its new plant instead in Payson, Utah, Butte was undeterred.[26] The local development corporation arranged an agreement with Luigino, a Duluth, Minnesota, manufacturer of frozen foods, to bring 600 jobs to Butte in exchange for $15 million in local, state, and federal loans and tax breaks. Butte-Silver Bow spent more than $130,000 to bring the Minnesota firm to Montana, only to discover that Luigino would in fact build in Hibbing, Minnesota—the owner's original choice prior to a temporary legal altercation with the Hibbing local development corporation over tax and loan incentives.[27]

In both cases significant financial inducements offered by state and local governments had failed to land the hundreds of manufacturing jobs sought, but in February 1996 the efforts of 1995 appeared to pay off. On February 14, 1996, Advanced Silicon Materials, Inc. (ASiMI), a Japanese-owned silicon processing company, announced that it would site a $500 million manufacturing plant south of Ramsay, just ten miles west of Butte. Local economic development officials put together a $35 million to $40 million incentive package, and Montana Power agreed to provide ASiMI with competitive electrical and gas rates. Evan Barrett, executive director of the Butte LDC, described the ASiMI deal "as a springboard into a 21st century economy." Jack Lynch, by then Butte-Silver Bow chief executive, touted the project as a major boost to diversification that would create 265 permanent jobs as well as 500 spin-off jobs in trade, service, and transportation.[28] To date, the construction phase of the project has employed some 900 workers, and when the plant opens in early 1998 it will provide 165 full-time positions. Such deals offer generous tax incentives to outside corporations, and whether they will have long-term benefit to the local economy remains to be seen.

Economic diversification remains critical to remaking Butte, but community leaders know that it cannot be accomplished without attention to infrastructure repair. Butte prospered for most of its one-hundred-year history, for example, with little regard for a modern water system. The Anaconda Company, which owned and operated the municipal water system, had as its primary concern a reliable source for industrial use. When Dennis Washington's Montana Resources bought the Anaconda Company holdings in 1986, it inherited a decrepit system in need of

25. Pam Haxby-Cote, Butte Local Development Corporation, telephone interview with author, July 26, 1995; "Ten Year Overview," 6.
26. *Montana Standard*, February 14, 1995.
27. Ibid., April 18, July 6, October 28, 1995.
28. Ibid., February 15, 16, 25, 1996.

constant repair and crippled by periodic "boil orders," issued first in 1989 by the Montana Department of Health and Environmental Sciences and finally by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in April 1991. The boil orders were prompted by high levels of suspended solids, or turbidity, which interfered with disinfecting the drinking water. The Butte Water Company's filtration system had actually failed to pass muster since the early 1970s and had operated under a turbidity exemption from the EPA until 1991, when both state and federal health officials demanded repair of the antiquated system. That action came after 28,000 Butte residents, frustrated by years of inaction and periodic boil orders, filed a class action lawsuit against the Butte Water Company in 1990 for failing to provide safe drinking water.[29]

In May 1991, the Montana Public Service Commission ordered Washington to sell the water company because of the company's failure to obtain financing to fix the ailing system. Late that year, Washington and the Montana Energy Research and Development Institute (MERDI)—a local private-for-profit technical company—struck a deal to transfer ownership and responsibility for rebuilding the water system to a local company. In December 1991, the Butte–Silver Bow Council of Commissioners created a municipal water company, Silver Bow Water, Inc., and empowered it to issue $25 million in bonds to rebuild the water system. On December 28, 1994, three years later to the day and within days of a federal deadline, the new Silver Bow Water system went on line, providing Butte residents with reliable, potable water for the first time in years.[30]

Edwin G. Koch, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Municipal water supplies, whose quality had been suspect for years thanks to a decrepit system, became a critical issue in the early 1990s for Butte citizens, Montana Resources, and the Butte Water Company, whose offices are shown above in the 1970s.

The class action lawsuit filed by Butte citizens against Dennis Washington and the Butte Water Company, meanwhile, remained unresolved until December 1996. Its conclusion could have far-reaching consequences for future economic development and environmental remediation along Silver Bow Creek. The settlement transfers ownership of the Silver Lake Water System, an elaborate water supply system originally constructed by the Anaconda Company, from Washington's Montana Resources to the local government and provides a $2.5 million cash settlement earmarked for much needed improvements in the utility's delivery system. The settlement could help attract industry to Silver Bow County because it makes available an enormous volume of fresh water, theoretically some sixty million gallons a day, collected in an integrated system of lakes and transported through miles of canals and pipelines between Georgetown Lake and Butte. The settlement also calls for ASiMI and ARCO to contribute $12 million for repair of dams, canals, pipelines, and pump stations in exchange for four million gallons of water a day to the new silicon facility at Ramsay. ARCO is guaranteed to receive up to forty million gallons of fresh water a day to release into the Clark Fork River as part of the company's reclamation and remediation efforts. Butte–Silver Bow also has promised to ask the state of Montana to acknowledge ARCO's financial con-

29. Ibid., April 24, 25, 1991.

30. Ibid., May 8, November 6, December 28, 1991, December 29, 1994.

31. Ibid., October 8, 13, 20, 25, December 12, 20, 1996. ACM originally constructed the Silver Lake system to supply water to its milling and smelting operations in Anaconda and later to the company's Clyde E. Weed Concentrator in Butte.

32. Facsimile, EPA Region 8 Office, Helena, Montana, to author, August 1, 1995; Sarah Weinstock (EPA), telephone interview with author, October 4, 1995.

33. Sam Worcester, Metallurgical Department, Montana College of Mineral Science & Technology, telephone interview with author, August 14, 1996; Edwin Dobb, "Pennies from Hell," *Harper's Magazine*, 293 (October 1996), 40, 49.

34. Mine Waste Technology Program, *Annual Report 1995* (Butte, Mont., 1995), 2-33; *Montana Standard*, June 20, 24, 1993, March 8, 1995.

35. *Montana Standard*, May 24, 1995, May 15, 1997.

36. Dobb, "Pennies from Hell," 41, 52-53; *Montana Standard*, May 23, 1996.

37. *Montana Standard*, July 6, August 13, September 15, 1995.

38. Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome* (New Haven, Conn., 1943), 85.

tributions to rebuilding the municipal water system when the state assesses damages against ARCO for historical damage to the Silver Bow Creek aquifer.[31] Settlement of the class action suit ushers in a new era because it provides the Butte community with a reliable source of potable water, a commodity necessary to both domestic and industrial life.

Perhaps the most formidable obstacle blocking Butte's efforts at remaking itself is the environmental legacy of more than a century of copper mining. In 1983 the EPA identified Silver Bow Creek and the upper Clark Fork drainage into which it flows as the nation's largest Superfund site. The designation made Butte center stage for an ongoing debate over how to cleanup soils and water contaminated with heavy metals. During the past twelve years the EPA has invested about $12 million and ARCO, which inherited the Anaconda Company's environmental liabilities, an additional $300 million on research and removal of toxins in the Upper Clark Fork Basin. Such expenditures have been a boon to the regional economy.[32]

Although cleanup is proceeding, serious environmental issues remain. The daily flow of some two and one-half million gallons of acid water from the Butte underground into the Berkeley Pit remains the most daunting challenge, affecting not only the town's environment but its economic future. To date, the Butte community, with an optimism not unlike that of those who promoted the area's enormous mineral prospects a century ago, has perceived the problem as a tremendous opportunity. Since 1983 a number of entrepreneurs have promised technological and economically viable solutions to the growing volume of acidic water. To date, however, the only proven procedure involves a lime precipitation process that produces toxic sludge that must then be placed in a permanent repository. A treatment plant using this technique would need to operate in perpetuity.[33] The results of a four-year, $15 million Department of Energy mine waste research program called the Resource Recovery Project are not yet compiled, but to date there have been no economically viable technologies developed for mining the metals in the pit water. In 1993 a Canadian firm, Metanetix Corporation, invested $13 million to develop a technique to extract heavy metals from the pit water. While successful at extracting ferric sulfate, a valuable

The Colorado Tailings, shown below during the 1980s, is but one example of the need to clean up the effects of more than a century's worth of copper mining. Designation of the Butte-Missoula corridor as the nation's largest Superfund site created both substantial challenges and perhaps real opportunities for a new economy.

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by-product, the company was unable to remove copper and zinc as hoped and left Butte in 1995.[34]

Water is not the only problem. Waste rock is another. While a number of local technology firms grapple with the problems created by historic copper mining, Montana Resources generates 50,000 tons of waste rock daily with its continuing mining operations, assuring the need for additional environmental cleanup even if science discovers a cost-effective means for treating the Berkeley Pit's acid water. In negotiating with ARCO for cleaning up mine tailings located in and along Silver Bow Creek, local government has asked the parties involved—ARCO, EPA, and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality—to consider future land use in designing a cleanup plan. The request suggests that removal of tailings ought to be linked to revegetation and creation of a greenway along Silver Bow Creek between Butte and Anaconda and points to the local government's interest in broadening the economic base beyond mining and striking out on a new path.[35]

While the Butte local government remains a major player in the multilayered negotiations over cleanup of contaminated soils and water, much larger forces manipulate the process from afar. In April 1996 Republican John Chaffee of Rhode Island introduced a bill in the United States Senate reauthorizing the Superfund law, a law passed by Congress in 1980 designed to require the cleanup of toxic waste sites by those retroactively responsible for environmental damages. The effect of Chaffee's bill would be to eliminate all sites contaminated prior to December 11, 1980, which in turn would absolve ARCO of responsibility for cleaning up any sites not previously agreed to. The impact of such legislation for Butte–Silver Bow would be disastrous. The cost of cleanup, estimated in excess of $600 million, would have to be shared alone by citizens of the upper Clark Fork drainage and the state of Montana. Election-year politics prevented a vote on Chaffee's bill in 1996, and the issue has remained so contentious in the 105th Congress (1997–1998) that reauthorization seems unlikely. Whatever the outcome, the proposed legislation illustrates the fragility of long-range plans for environmental cleanup in Butte.[36]

As environmentally disastrous as a century of mining has been, a new industry has emerged from the ruins of its predecessor. In the thirteen years since Butte's identification as a Superfund site, environmental cleanup has produced hundreds of jobs and plays an increasingly prominent role in efforts to diversify the local economy. Old mine waste dumps have been removed and soils revegetated, some mine shafts have been capped with concrete plugs, and storm runoff has been diverted from sources of pollution. All these efforts have created jobs for heavy-equipment operators and engineers. In addition, technological companies, employing small groups of chemists, environmental engineers, and microbiologists, continue to research economically viable remedies for contaminated soils and water.[37]

Paul Anderson, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

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Reclamation has taken many forms, including capping and reseeding that these crewmen (left) administered to areas of waste rock on the Butte Hill in 1985. Among the reasons for Butte's resilience in the face of wrenching economic change has been the sense of community infused by activities such as this ethnic dinner (above) in the late 1970s.

Even with massive infusions of public and private money for research and cleanup, however, uncertainty still haunts both the Butte environment and the town's economic future. What is certain is Butte's persistence during the last twenty years in the face of daunting obstacles. It has proven resilient as a community, but why? One explanation would seem to be its character. Butte's identity was forged in large part by the fabulous possibilities of its mineral wealth, by the rigors of underground mining, the ethnic diversity of its labor force, its urban sense of place, and by decades of tension and conflict with the Anaconda Company. Its image as what Joseph Kinsey Howard once termed Montana's "black heart"—a gritty, ethnic, blue-collar enclave amidst Montana's more homogeneous populous of ranchers and farmers—has acted as a bonding agent among its residents, differentiating them from inhabitants of Missoula, Bozeman, and Billings, and other, more rural Montana places.[38] In addition, the enormous wealth of the mining district and the good times that flowed from that wealth produced a loyalty among its recipients, many of whom eventually sought greener pastures elsewhere but maintained an intense, almost familial loyalty to the place over time. Moreover, the Berkeley Pit and scarred hillside that overlook the city comprise an ever-present reminder of the sacrifice Butte's people and landscape have made to the nation's industrial achievements and to two world wars fought and won with Butte copper.

For a century, hard-rock mining dominated the Butte economy, employing thousands of blue-collar workers and giving them a middle-class wage with which to build a relatively stable community. Even in the face of frequent strikes and periodic recessions, the one thing Butte's people could count on was the presence of the Anaconda Company. In 1983, however, all the rules changed. No longer the wide-open town once glorified by boosters and despised by journalists, Butte was forced to begin dealing with the environmental legacy of a century of copper mining and smelting. For a quarter century now, Butte has struggled to make the transition from its industrial past to the service economy of the twenty-first century. While local geology directed Butte's path in its first century, the next century will most likely be guided by forces beyond the Butte Hill and Montana's borders. Nonetheless, what sustains the community as it makes the difficult transition may well be the aura of its mythical past.

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As the caption for this Associated Press wire photo said in 1986, even as Anaconda Minerals Company bulldozers worked to clean up the former Emma Mine, Butte dreamed of attracting the National Mining Hall of Fame to the community. The city continues to draw its hope for the future from its pride in the past.