KALISPELL 51°F 10°C
LIGHT RAIN

One Dollar

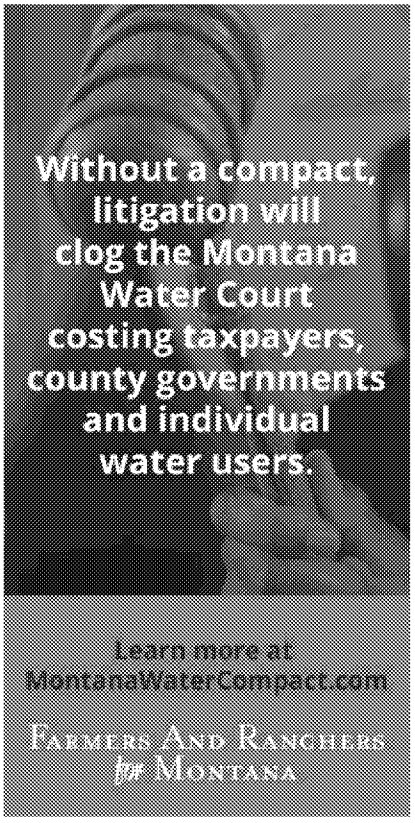
Here is the place that cranked out more aluminum per worker than any other smelter in America

BY DAVE SKINNER // MAR 25, 2015 // CLOSING RANGE, OPINION

It's finally over. Glencore has no more promises to break. At Columbia Falls Aluminum Company – or Anaconda Aluminum – the pots are dead, forever.

There was a time when everyone in the Flathead had friends working at Anaconda. Through mine, I got onto the potlines for private showings twice – back in the good old days when ambulance chasers didn't rule the universe.

It was awe-full. There was so much juice flowing, you could actually feel the power. Everything had to be kept hot – 1650 degrees hot, 24/7, or the pots would be wrecked. Workers would use shovels to stir the bath and keep things well mixed – and the carbon anode that put the juice to the alumina batch WANTED that shovel, by gosh. Wow.



Much brute force and hard human labor turned hopper cars full of alumina into those pretty ingots that used to be shipped out, eight to a flatcar, from Montana to the world. I'll confess to a cheap little thrill each time I spotted some of "our" aluminum in trains

MASTHEAD

NEWSROOM
EMAIL
news@flatheadbeacon.com
PHONE 406.257.9220
TWITTER @flatheadbeacon

far from home. Even today, I ponder if the can I'm drinking from or the jet plane I see is at least partly Anaconda aluminum – and I know I'm not alone.

On the balance of things, Anaconda Aluminum and Hungry Horse Dam were, and remain, a huge plus for us. Thousands of Montanans worked hard and lived well, earning family-scale wages making aluminum. Hundreds of Flathead businesses got to ride on the critical mass Anaconda's needs gave to our supplier economy. Anaconda paid scads of taxes that supported local government services and quality schools. Nor will I ever forget how, like much of "old" Montana industry, the smelter offered lots of summer jobs that paid for lots of college degrees that turned lots of Flathead collars from blue to white.

It wasn't all perfect. I'm a pro-business Republican, but the aluminum plant is a screaming example of how Big Corporate America, or Big Corporate Transnational, is utterly amoral, with no loyalty to anything except money.

The fluoride problem needed to be dealt with, and it was, but only after a lot of corporate kicking and screaming. When Anaconda collapsed, one dollar enabled hundreds of millions worth of promises not kept, but sent offshore. In my view, the esteemed gentlemen responsible should be in jail, not free to race sailboats and jump fancy horses. Glencore? Their inclination to do the right thing is thus far not evident at all.

So with the past in mind, what's the future?

Rail-served industrial? I'd love to see it, but cheap, reliable Hungry Horse power was the main reason Anaconda Aluminum got built. Today, power is no longer cheap, and perhaps not available at all at any price. Rails or not, Montana is farther away from any possible customers than just about any other rail served large site. Scenery will not seal the deal.

Follow

KELLYN BROWN
EDITOR IN CHIEF
EMAIL
editor@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @kellynjbrown
Follow

TRISTAN SCOTT
SENIOR WRITER
EMAIL
tscott@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @tristanscott
Follow

MOLLY PRIDDY
STAFF WRITER
EMAIL
mpriddy@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @mollypriddy
Follow

DILLON TABISH
STAFF WRITER
EMAIL
dtabish@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @djtabish
Follow

JUSTIN FRANZ
STAFF WRITER
EMAIL
jfranz@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @jfranz88
Follow

GREG LINDSTROM
MEDIA DIRECTOR
EMAIL
greg@flatheadbeacon.com
TWITTER @gl_photo
Follow

ED_002345B_00016547-00002

Then there's the matter of remediation. Superfund status means that all "responsible parties:" ARCO (now Tesoro); Brack Duker and Jerome Broussard; and Glencore AG, will be on the hook for cleanup costs – as they darn well should be.

But Superfund's track record isn't the greatest. Superfund takes forever, costs too much, and leaves vacant, sterile places with nothing left to indicate what was before. It may well be necessary to find a hole someplace else for the carbon, but if it's not necessary, it shouldn't happen.

As for tearing down buildings – large enclosed spaces like CFAC are rare in Montana, and horrifyingly expensive to build new. Sound structures with potential need to be kept, cleaned and cleared so they can be of use again, or at least cleaned enough to scrap later without needing isolation suits.

I mean, here is the place that cranked out more aluminum per worker than any other smelter in America. Is that something to just wipe away, to bury, to forget?

After the mess is cleaned up, I hope we are ready, specifically with some form of public-private Real Estate Investment Trust to take ownership of the Anaconda/CFAC property, which Glencore will sell to us – for one dollar.

ED_002345B_00016547-00003

Comments Community Login

Recommend Sort by Newest

Join the discussion…

Rhett the Butler • 20 hours ago

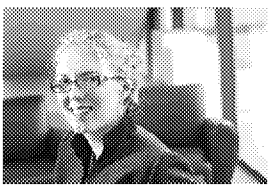
C'mon Dave, let 'em have a return on their investment. Double their money and give 'em 2 dollars.

• Reply • Share ›

fourweight • a day ago

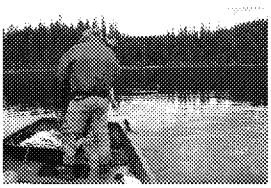
Holy Smokes - Davey says something worth noting for once. Yes - corporate America is amoral and that's why next time Dave rails against enviro law or protections (meant to protect the public from just this sort of disaster), or starts to beg for more tax breaks for more big corps to do this all again.....just remember this column where he finally admits what every Koch Brother corp in the world wants....max profits+ leave the public with the clean up bill and the cancer. For goodness sake, lets stop this foolishness

MORE FROM THE BEACON



Looking For Life Beyond Our Own

Lanny McDonald Named Chairman of Hockey Hall of Fame



Renewed Lake Trout Suppression Efforts Underway

NEWS & FEATURES | SPORTS | OUTDOORS | ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT | OPINION | PHOTOS | EVENTS | ABOUT US | CLASSIFIEDS

Advertise | Subscribe | Advertiser Tear Sheets | Email & RSS Feeds | Contact Us

© 2015 Flathead Beacon, All Rights Reserved. Use of this site is subject to the Flathead Beacon's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.

Flathead Beacon • 17 Main Street • Kalispell • Montana • 59901 • USA • (406) 257-9220