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The Atlantic Monthly | April 2001

The Profits of Doom

One of the most polluted cities in America learns to capitalize on its contamination

BY WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

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Butte, Montana, lives on its toxic waste. It is a filthy brick city of 33,000, built on a steep hill among the remains of dead copper mines. Montanans elsewhere call it "Butte, America" in a disparaging way, as if it were somehow a separate and alien place. One can see why by hiking up the hill, past Butte's decrepit central district, past mines and union halls and a bar called Pisser's, through proletarian neighborhoods of bungalows nestled among waste heaps laced with lead and arsenic, to the [Granite Mountain overlook](#), a memorial to 168 miners killed in 1917 in an underground fire.

Out across the horizon of snow-capped mountains lies the celebrated Montana of natural beauty, where a record number of visitors vacationed in recent years, even as the residents' incomes floated in the forty-sixth position among the fifty states. Montanans proudly call their home "The Last Great Place," though the slogan can sound wistful and forlorn. Caught in a two-tiered economy with little industry left to sustain them, they are remaking the fashionable western half of the state into an exaggeration of

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"**A Toxic Ghost Town**" (July 1989)
Ten years later, scientists are still assessing the damage from Love Canal. By Michael H. Brown

"**Love Canal and the Poisoning of America**" (December 1979)
A documentation of the miseries and losses induced by the infamous Love Canal dump in Niagara Falls, New York. By Michael H. Brown

Elsewhere on the Web
Links to related material on other Web sites.

Only in Butte
A monthly online magazine about Butte, Montana, featuring photographs and articles about local

attractions, city history, and travel recommendations.

Butte Local Development Corporation

A Web site advertising Butte as an optimal relocation site for businesses. Includes information about housing, taxes, local culture, schools, and more. Hosted by the Montana Information Technology Council.

The Berkeley Pit Education Committee Web Page

The Web site of a Butte community organization that offers news and information about the Berkeley Pit and efforts to protect local water resources from its contamination.

Mining Reclamation Web Site

A site, hosted by Montana State University at Bozeman, describing mining reclamation projects around the Clark Fork River Basin.

Clark Fork Coalition

"We are a non-profit organization working to protect and restore water quality throughout the Clark Fork River basin." The site outlines the river's history, describes cleanup efforts, lists educational events, and offers an e-mail newsletter.

Silver Bow Creek/Butte

A section of the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund Web site describing Silver Bow Creek, the contamination and health threat problems it presents, and environmental treatment efforts currently underway.

itself, so that even the individualists there—the guides, the survivalists, the cowboy poets—now learn at the movies how to dress and talk. Or so I've been told in Butte.

Butte's residents speak frankly about themselves as well. They say that their city is fractious and that its survival remains in doubt. Eighty years ago it had a population three times as large as today's, predominantly of Irish Catholics, but also of Serbs, Scandinavians, Italians, Chinese, and French. The immigrants, who formed labor unions that were willing to fight, infused Butte with an old-fashioned left-wing sensibility that remains a part of its character to this day. The workers' enemy was also their patron—the voracious Anaconda Mining Company, which was founded in 1891 and soon absorbed Butte's independent mines. Over the years, Anaconda sent perhaps 2,500 local men to their deaths underground in pursuit of copper ore, but it employed a far greater number of people and gave Butte its life. Because the company was so important to the community, when Anaconda said it needed to begin open-pit mining, in 1955, it was allowed to consume long-standing neighborhoods with barely an objection.

Quarrying was the way of the future, and it was safer than tunneling. But it required less labor, which weakened the unions and meant that layoffs, once cyclical, became permanent. It was also physically destructive: over the years the open pit, known as the Berkeley, grew into a crater 1.5 miles across and 1,800 feet deep—a

From the archives:

The Environment
A collection of *Atlantic* articles on environmental issues.

giant hole in the heart of town. In 1977 Anaconda Mining was near death, and the oil company [ARCO](#) bought it up. ARCO was flush with cash at the time and wanted to diversify and experiment with hard-rock mining. Within a few years the experiment began to fail. In the early 1980s ARCO closed the remaining shafts and turned off the pumps that had kept the mines from flooding. It then shut down the Berkeley Pit.

The sight from Granite Mountain today is of an industrial battlefield with smoke still hanging in the air. The city spills into the flats of the valley below with a sprawl of new houses and a shopping strip that extends to the airport. But the soul of Butte remains on the hill, in the tattered and cosmopolitan center—a red-brick commercial district, scarred by vacant lots and shuttered storefronts, but resilient and defiantly urban. This is the core that refuses to die. The streets are steep and unadorned, and eerily empty at night even in the summer. In the winter they are swept by the full force of mountain winds and snows. On the east side the central district falls precipitously into the Berkeley Pit; on the west side it melds with an old neighborhood of brick houses, most in need of repair, where the engineers and mine bosses once lived. Higher on the hill stand the miners' modest wooden houses, snaking upward in bands among the wood-and-steel hulks of the abandoned mine yards. A dozen main shafts are straddled by black steel elevator derricks, called gallows frames, which dominate the city's skyline. From them the miners were lowered as much as a mile into a labyrinth of now

unreachable destinations—the most heavily mined ground in the world. It is said that the hill contains 7,000 miles of wood-framed horizontal tunnels and untold numbers of vertical shafts. Most of the shafts are closed over and forgotten, but every year a few of them suddenly open up—sometimes in people's back yards or basements. No one knows why dogs fall in and children do not.

Butte has bigger problems anyway. This hill, once called the richest on earth, is known now as one of the dirtiest in America. Its soils and waters are filled with lead and other toxic metals, and the creek called the Silver Bow, which flows at its base, was until recently so contaminated by runoff that it was poisoned at least 140 miles downstream, creating a plume of death that reached into the picturesque Clark Fork River and on toward the Columbia.

In 1983 the Environmental Protection Agency declared that Butte was a high-priority Superfund site—and by the way, that ARCO would have to pay for most of the cleanup. ARCO was taken by surprise. The Superfund laws had been passed in 1980, decades after most of the mess had been made and three years after ARCO bought Anaconda's liabilities. The retroactive application of the laws, though apparently constitutional, seemed unfair. Nonetheless, when threatened with triple damages by the EPA, ARCO did not go to court, as other companies have, but began grudgingly to cooperate. Eighteen years later it remains entangled in what has grown into one of the largest Superfund sites in the United States. The

costs of the cleanup have been huge. The site is especially complex because it remains inhabited. The health consequences of the pollution have been only partially studied, but they are widely assumed to be serious—lead poisoning in particular is a concern.

Meanwhile, in Butte's vast underground the shafts and tunnels, full of residual heavy metals and arsenic, have flooded—and the tainted waters have risen within the hill to a level precariously close to that of the rivers and stream-beds on the surface.

Now for the paradox: The mine waters would already be spilling into the Silver Bow, further poisoning it and the rivers downstream, were it not for the existence in the middle of town of the Berkeley Pit, which by serving as a giant sump has delayed the day of reckoning. Five million gallons a day drain into the pit and mix with oxygen to form one of the most contaminated bodies of water in the world—a brown lake of metal-laden sulfuric acid, currently 900 feet deep and steadily rising. The lake is expected to reach the critical level (about 1,100 feet) in another twenty years, at which time—if left alone—it will bleed into the aquifer and poison springs and wells, with catastrophic consequences.

That is unlikely to happen, of course, because Butte is in America, which has the wealth to clean itself up. If Congress lets ARCO off by loosening the Superfund laws (as industry believes it should), then the necessary treatment plant will be built by the EPA instead. One way or the other, the problem will be contained.

Nonetheless, the image of an acid lake is compellingly apocalyptic, and it has come to symbolize Butte's unhappy fate. Much has been made of a flock of migrating geese that landed and died in the poisons of the Berkeley Pit. Butte has been displayed in the press as a moral lesson in environmental self-destruction. Repeatedly it has been called a ghost town, in anticipation of its necessary end.

But Butte defies such easy dismissals. Indeed, its toxic wastes, however abhorrent, may prove in some way to be the city's salvation. There are those who believe that pollution may just possibly provide an important new economic base that will allow Butte if not to prosper, then to live on with dignity, and perhaps to avoid the clownishness and implicit servility that seems increasingly to color the vacationland of western Montana. If so, a man named Donald Peoples will deserve much of the credit.

Peoples is a third-generation native son, born and raised in Butte. At first he was merely another high school football star, of which Butte has had plenty. He was a hard worker, and smart enough to go off to college. Afterward, in 1962, he dutifully returned to Butte. Several years later he got a job as a football coach at Butte Central, the Catholic high school where both he and his father had played. When we first met, in the summer of 1999, he still wanted to talk about it, even after thirty years. He told me in all sincerity that he would have been content to spend his life coaching at Butte Central. Indeed, at sixty-one, he still looks the part—a tall, wide-shouldered

man with gaunt cheeks, brooding eyes, and an asceticism honed by daily sessions of hard running. But as it happened, Peoples coached for only three years until, in 1972, an old friend of his persuaded him to go to work as a planner and manager for the city administration. He rose quickly within the local government. He became mayor in 1979, when he was thirty-nine, and he remained in office through multiple elections for more than a decade during the final collapse of mining in Butte and the worst years of despair. Many residents now believe that by his public displays of courage he single-handedly kept Butte from falling apart, and that—though he is no longer in government—he is still saving Butte today. History is never that simple, of course. But there are reasons more important than football that some people in Butte call Don Peoples "the coach."

Butte has never had an easy time. It had been slowly losing population since World War I when, suddenly, in the mid-1960s, it slipped into what appeared to be a final decline. A combination of mine-yard closures and the inexorable growth of the Berkeley Pit caused real-estate prices to collapse. People began to flee the hill, abandoning their houses and small businesses by the hundreds. Butte had a powerful patron in another native son, U.S. Senator [Mike Mansfield](#), who in 1968 tried to intervene with a typical Great Society program called Model Cities, which tripled Butte's budget, paid for repaving the streets, created new social programs for the unemployed and the poor, and tried to cut out urban blight as if it

were a cancer—by tearing down more than 300 old buildings and houses. The Model Cities program lasted six years, and it softened Butte's pain. But the cancer kept spreading anyway.

Forces too large to control were to blame. Copper prices had plummeted, and in 1971 Chile expropriated Anaconda's important South American operations. The beleaguered company announced that Butte, with vast amounts of ore still lying in the ground, was Anaconda's last hope; it warned, however, that the Berkeley Pit might have to be expanded westward, across the whole of the city's central district. So bleak was the civic mood that rather than resist such a move, Butte began reflexively to give way: over the next few years, at the height of the Model Cities attempts at urban renewal, a series of fires, most of them thought to be caused by arson, destroyed more than twenty major buildings in the central district, leaving ruined blocks that remain vacant today. The fiercest of the fires exploded in JCPenney in February of 1972, blowing mannequins like corpses onto the streets and destroying thirteen businesses in a single night. Watching the fires became a Butte pastime. In 1974, when the historic Pennsylvania block burned to the ground, more than 8,500 residents gathered to watch the conflagration and in some cases to cheer it on.

That attitude was formalized the same year, by a group of leading citizens who called themselves Butte Forward and drew up plans for a radical solution to the town's decay—the staged demolition of the remaining central district, and the construction of an entirely new town center,

to be built in the flats around bright offices and a shopping mall. For its proponents the plan served two purposes: it would allow Anaconda the room to survive while offering the city itself a completely fresh start. The plan seemed progressive at the time, though in retrospect its supporters, including Don Peoples, agree that it would have been a mistake. Butte was saved from it by a group of shopkeepers from the hill, who ran ads shouting "Wake Up, Butte! Don't Be Pushed Around!" Their leader was Beverly Hayes, a blunt-spoken woman who owned a burger joint called The Doghouse. She mocked the plan as a sellout to Anaconda and protested loudly against it during a series of tumultuous public hearings. In July of 1976, just as federal officials in Washington, D.C., indicated that they would fund Butte's relocation, the city council voted it down. The emotion in Butte afterward was one of unexpected relief: suddenly everyone agreed on the need to save the central district. But then Anaconda died, and ARCO arrived on its ill-fated mission, and people continued to abandon the hill. Butte was still slipping away.

In the last days of 1978, after a bitter firefighters' strike, Butte's mayor left town for a job in Helena, and the city council appointed Don Peoples, then serving as Butte's director of community development and public works, to finish the term. Peoples was an ordinary leader at first. He instituted a program of street and sidewalk repairs, and shored up the façades of some crumbling buildings, but mostly he just rode the city's decline.

Butte hit bottom in 1982, when ARCO shut

down the Berkeley Pit and flooded the mines. Thousands of people packed up and moved on, and unemployment among those who remained rose above 20 percent. Adding to the sense of doom, the EPA began sampling the water and soil on the way to declaring the city a Superfund site—a designation from which no reputation could be expected to recover.

Continued

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