

A River Runs Next to It

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With a snap of the leash and a jingle of tags I lurch forward, an unwilling accomplice in pursuit of a squirrel. Boris, my large dog of mixed heritage, is eager for exercise and pulls me along at a rapid clip. The squirrel chatters at us from the safety of a cottonwood as we continue down the hill toward the river. Several rock doves whirl up out of their resting place and into the warmth of a spring day in Missoula, Montana.

The view that unfolds as we reach the bottom of the hill is a familiar one. A large brick building sits at the center of a nearly empty parking lot. Although it is not vacant, especially since the national headquarters of the Boone and Crockett Club took up residence there a year ago, this building hints at a grander past. Faded curtains in a window along its side allow me to look into a cavernous room with ornate chandeliers, all dimmed. More rock doves evacuate perches on the eaves of the building, prattling in their unique pigeon tongue.

The Clark Fork River comes into view just around the corner of the building. At this time of year it runs high and fast, draining a winter's worth of snow melt out of the surrounding mountains. The water is a murky and uninviting brown. Though Boris would like nothing better than to charge in for a swim, I maintain a firm grip on the leash and lead him onto the trail that runs alongside the river. Today I want to walk.

The gravel path extends from east to west at the river's southern edge. I head east, feeling the warmth of the sun on my back as it begins a slow descent. More

familiar sites unfold. No more than 100 yards past the brick building, the Higgins Street bridge spans the river. On the north side of this bridge is "downtown" Missoula, a curious mixture of old and new architecture, none of it coming close to scraping the sky. The tallest building is the Wilma Theater, bordering the river and atop which even more rock doves roost. The Wilma's owner, a truly eccentric man with a fondness for pigeons, fed those birds on the top of his building for years. After his death last fall, the new owners eliminated the feeding ritual and caused Missoula's pigeon population to fan out in search of new sources of sustenance. A few loyal birds remain on the rooftop, malnourished and no doubt wondering what happened to their friend.

But enough about pigeons and downtown. Boris and I proceed under the bridge, by now oblivious to the graffiti that covers the metal girds. In the distance, the Hellgate Canyon splits the ring of low mountains that surround the Missoula Valley. On the left is Mount Jumbo, its west and south-facing slopes mostly treeless and yellow-brown, but showing hints of green for a few weeks during the spring. Mount Sentinel flanks the canyon's right side. While its north-facing areas are thickly dotted with Douglas fir and Ponderosa pine, Sentinel's broad, west-facing slope is open. A switchback trail leads uphill to a phenomenon I have seen only in the West-- a huge, whitewashed concrete "M" like a brand on the mountainside. As I get closer, I will be able to see the steady stream of hikers making their pilgrimage to this proud indication of the presence of the University of Montana below. Not to be outdone, the students of Loyola Sacred Heart High School have added an "L" to the side of Mount Jumbo. The eye certainly can not help but come to rest on these landmarks.

There are not many trees at this spot along the river bank. (The small stand of cottonwoods to which the squirrel retreated a few moments ago is next to the irrigation ditch running parallel to and about 50 yards from the river.) A single, spindly mountain ash receives Boris's momentary attention and I look at the small green plaque that

provides its Latin name and indicates that The Nature Conservancy is responsible for its existence. Not only are there few trees, the vegetation just up from the water is almost exclusively the same bristly grass-like plant that I know to be spotted knapweed.

On the opposite side of the path, and in front of the irrigation ditch, are a soccer field, a running track, and a rectangular area where a man kneels on the ground, spade in hand. (Houses and apartments overlook this scene about 100 yards to the south.) This person is part of an effort to restore indigenous plant species in order to give back to the river bank some of its original character. After two years of kneeling, spading and planting, the fruits of his labors are beginning to show. He'll have his work cut out for him, though. Spotted knapweed is a particularly aggressive species. People gather to pull it up every year but it just keeps coming back. With this in mind, I steer Boris away from the restoration, lest he trample the plants or carry knapweed seeds in on his paws.

The sight of this man's efforts prompts several questions. What *is* the "original character" of this river bank? What did it look like? What is its history? To answer such questions requires the parameters of a time frame. To go back too far would put Missoula under water, as part of a huge glacial lake. For this reason, I will consider the arrival of the Europeans as a starting point. This river bank has undoubtedly undergone a significant transformation in the time since Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, for whom the river is named, first explored what is now Montana at the beginning of the last century. Nearly all of what I have described has appeared since then: buildings, bridge, pigeons, irrigation ditch, whitewashed letters, soccer field, running track and knapweed, not to mention the gravel path that facilitates my walk.

It was Lewis, without Clark, who first traveled through the Missoula Valley. On their return from the Pacific in 1806, the two explorers agreed to travel in separate

parties. Lewis's party followed the Bitterroot River to the Clark Fork in July, 1806. After a night of combating "musketos" in camp, the party proceeded up the Clark Fork, "through a part of the extensive plain in which we were encamped" (Koelbel, 1972: 5-6). This "extensive plain" is now the city of Missoula. From there the group continued east through the Hellgate Canyon and upstream to the Blackfoot River (which, incidentally, is the subject of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*).

An Edgar Paxson painting depicting the group's crossing of the Clark Fork (Koelbel, 1972) shows the river bank to be flanked by large trees, possibly cottonwoods. Judging from the freshly cut log at the edge of the water, the rafts that the men used to cross the river could have been constructed on the spot. In the foreground of the painting is a sizable buck, the reward of a successful hunt. What appear to be more deer look on with interest from the far side of the river. In addition to the white members of Lewis's party, several American Indians on horseback assist in the crossing.

Whatever artistic liberties Paxson took in his painting, he depicted a Clark Fork River bank very different from that along which I walk with my dog today. One of the most obvious changes to the landscape is that of its inhabitants. At the time of Lewis and Clark's expedition, members of both the Salish (Flathead) and Blackfoot tribes lived in the area. Though the stories vary, it is thought that the Hellgate Canyon got its name through a reputation as the place where the Blackfeet attacked the Salish as they passed through the Missoula Valley on the way to their hunting grounds (Cheney, 1983). A photograph in Lenora Koelbel's history of Missoula shows tipis on the valley floor with Mount Jumbo, Mount Sentinel (no "L" or "M") and the Hellgate Canyon in the background. Her caption reads: "Indian teepees in the Missoula Valley were a familiar sight until the late [1850's] when houses replaced the fields carpeted with the Bitterroot plant" (1972: 3). With the majority of Salish and Blackfeet living on reservations north

of Missoula, American Indians (not to mention tipis) are by no means a "familiar sight" today.

Koelbel's mention of "fields carpeted with the Bitterroot plant" indicates another transformation. The bitterroot is Montana's state flower. Growing close to the ground with numerous bright pink petals, this plant is beautiful and unmistakable. Though it may have carpeted the Missoula Valley at one time, I had, until recently, only seen it growing on the side of Mount Jumbo. Now, with the restoration of that one small area of river bank, more bitterroots serve as reminders of the past. Spotted knapweed, which seems to cover almost every square inch of ground that is neither gravel, asphalt, nor the green grass of the playing fields, serves as another. In terms of flora, the hegemony of this Eurasian invader species may be as great as that of the people who brought it with them.

People of European descent began to populate the Missoula Valley in the 1860's. Until 1869, "the only way a person could cross [the] Clark Fork River was to ford it or use a privately owned ferry" (Koelbel, 1972: 41). The majority of early Missoula buildings were constructed on the north side of the river, where the downtown area is located today. In 1873, the first version of the Higgins Street bridge was constructed. A photograph shows it to be a wooden and precarious-looking bridge with little resemblance to the solid steel structure that exists today. A sign above this original bridge insinuates its uncertain condition and reads: "25 dollars fine for riding or driving over this bridge faster than a walk" (Koelbel, 1972: 41). Rickety or not, this bridge would have allowed more people to inhabit both sides of the river.

While bridges undoubtedly facilitated the travel of European immigrants within the Missoula Valley, the coming of the railroad prompted an influx of greater numbers of outside people. A Chamber of Commerce pamphlet published near the turn of the century commented on the way into Missoula: "It is entered from the east by way of

Hell Gate Canyon, through which passes the main line of the Northern Pacific Railroad, trailing the banks of the beautiful Missoula [Clark Fork] river, which empties into the majestic Columbia, assuming different names as it wends its way on its westward course" (1904: 3). As part of a conspicuous attempt to lure more people from the East, the pamphlet boasts of the fact that Missoula was the division headquarters for the Northern Pacific. It reads: "The magnitude of the business will be better understood when it is known that the monthly pay roll of the employes, including the shops, approximate \$65,000, most all of which is distributed at home" (1904: 9).

Whatever its importance to the early growth of Missoula's population, the railroad is perhaps the most significant factor in what I observe on my walk. The gravel path I follow is not merely a walking trail; it is the former course of the railroad. Although the tracks and ties are gone, part of a "Rails to Trails" program, the memory of the railroad lingers, most notably in the large brick building that was once a passenger depot. I am not certain when the tracks were removed. My friend Nancy, a Missoula native, recalls hearing the train rumble past her house well into the 1970s. Freight trains continue to run through other parts of town, but the town of Whitefish, Montana is now the closest place to catch a passenger train.

Now headed back toward home with Boris, I cannot help but consider one last change in the character of the river bank. In Edgar Paxson's painting of Meriwether Lewis's Clark Fork River crossing, deer stood along the water's edge. In addition to deer, elk, grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, beavers and other animals are known to have once lived in and around the Missoula Valley. Now, most of these animals have moved far away from the valley floor. A few deer roam the slopes of Mount Sentinel, a small herd of elk lives in remote corners of Mount Jumbo, and an occasional mountain lion menaces a child in someone's backyard, but as Missoulians came by rail and over bridges to spread themselves along both sides of

the Clark Fork, non-human animals were pushed to the margins. Wolves and grizzly bears have almost been pushed out of the larger picture entirely. On the river bank today, the only non-human animals to be found are squirrels, a sporadic beaver, and countless dogs. Though bird species are much more numerous, the success of the rock doves reminds me that, contrary to what many people here would like to believe, Missoula is a fairly large city. Only those birds and animals that can tolerate (or thrive on) people pressure continue to make their home here. It seems an ironic and strangely appropriate close to this reflection on the changes in the Missoula river bank landscape that the closest place for me to view a grizzly bear today is at the Boone and Crockett Club, now located in the former railroad depot, where a stuffed specimen graces the office.