



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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ABOUT THE PRESENTATION



For decades steam-boats were the only practical route to the Flathead Valley. Photo taken at Polson in 1889.

There are plenty of stories about Flathead Lake, and Bigfork resident Butch Larcombe has collected the better tales over the years.

There is the Navy pilot who buzzed his girlfriend's lakeshore home in 1960, only to crash in the deepest part of the lake. The wreckage remained untouched for nearly a half century. But in 2006 a private effort located remains and a deployed parachute. It may be that pilot error was not the cause. Engine failure or a collision with geese may have brought the plane down.



Is Nesse really proof of the Flathead Lake Monster?

And there is "Nesse," an 181-pound sturgeon now on display in the Polson Museum. The huge fish

JULY MEETING

Monday, July 15, 2024

"Historic Tales of Flathead Lake"

Presenter: Butch Larcombe of Bigfork

Where: Second floor of the Northwest Montana History Museum, 124 2nd Ave. East, Kalispell

Time: Gab 'n' Greet, raffle sales and book signings start at 6:00 p.m. Soft drinks, beer and wine available.

Historic Presentation: Program begins at 7:00 p.m.

No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early. Call (406)-309-0938 with any questions.

was caught in 1955 in a contest to discover whether the species is responsible for reports of a "Flathead Lake Monster" sighted as early as 1889. But the controversy continues over whether Nesse actually came from Flathead Lake.

Repeated attempts to swim Flathead Lake's 27.3 mile length failed until Paul Stelter finally succeeded in 1986. His feat wasn't duplicated until 2005.

Unique characters include Thain White, an amateur historian who hauled a Somers tugboat up to his museum overlooking the lake. He also spirited a plaque honoring the Nez Perce onto the Big Hole battlefield – as a counterpoint to the monuments dedicated to the Army soldiers.

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The building of Kerr Dam on tribal land, and the politics behind the 204-foot-high structure is another saga.

Native American pictographs are located all around the lake. Painted Rocks can be easily viewed by boat, but some other locations are secret, Larcombe notes.

Getting around Flathead Lake by road was a struggle for years. Logs had to be dragged behind wagons descending a steep hill near Lakeside, and the east side road was built by prisoners.

About the Presenter

Butch Larcombe is a lifelong Montana resident who has always been interested in the state's people, history, geography and economy.

His family published a weekly newspaper in Malta, Montana, for more than 50 years. He followed the family tradition, and worked as a newspaper reporter and editor for



the *Missoulian*, *Great Falls Tribune* and *Helena Independent Record*. He also served as editor and general manager of *Montana Magazine* for six years and worked in corporate communications for NorthWestern Energy from 2012 to 2019.

He is author of *Montana Disasters: True Stories of Treasure State Tragedies and Triumphs*, published in December 2021 by Farcountry Press. *Golden Kilowatts: Water Power and the Early Growth of Montana* was released in 2021.

His latest book, *Historic Tales of Flathead Lake*, was published just three weeks ago.

Larcombe lives near Bigfork with his wife, Jane, and a dog named Harry.

FROM THE SADDLEBAG

By Edward “Eddy” Byrne



Our annual field trip was a great success last month. We visited the Miracle of America Museum in Polson and received a personal tour by the founder, Gil Mangels who is a wealth of knowledge and a great storyteller. Next we traveled down Highway 93 to Charlo to tour Ninepipes Early Montana History where, once again, we were treated to an overview by the founders, Bud and Laurel Cheff. They also met with us at the end of the tour and provided a forum interlaced with history and stories. The day was most enjoyable and informative.

As a follow-up, Miracle of America is having their annual Live History Days Celebration this month (July 20-21 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day). I highly recommend taking a drive down to Polson and partake in the festivities.

Changing gears, we just celebrated the 4th of July. This year was filled with a myriad of events across the valley including parades in Kalispell and Bigfork along with multiple public fireworks that culminated in a great show following the Range Riders baseball game on the 5th.

On a personal note, I reflect every Independence Day on the 56 signers of the Declaration of independence and the prices they paid. Including the nine who died fighting in the Revolution along with the five who were captured by the British and charged as traitors and tortured before they died. Two lost sons in the fighting.

In addition the British were very thorough in seizing their properties and/or destroying their homes and livelihood.

One of the most significant outcomes was not one of the 56 signers ever recanted the oath they took by signing the Declaration when they pledged “their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor”.

Many of these men sacrificed their fortunes and

lives. None lost their honor.

The Board meets from 6:00-6:30 p.m. before the 7 p.m. presentation at the museum. All members are welcome to attend to observe the meeting. Also, anyone interested in becoming more involved with the group is encouraged to show up early and volunteer your time and services.

Once again, to volunteer or if you have any questions, recommendations, or concerns, please get in touch with me at 406-871-6001 or Email to edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

Last month's trip to the Mission Valley allowed me to fill in a big gap in my series of articles on area museums. The Miracle of America Museum in Polson also saves the best for last. How many museums have two jets, two helicopters, a tug boat, a replica soda fountain, garages full of steam-powered threshers and rare cars, and more.



Gil Mangels takes the Westerners around his museum.

We were able to talk to owner Gil Mangels, who told us how he happened to end up with a jet fighter. It was declared surplus, and already had its wings cut off. He cobbled the wings back on, supporting them with metal pillars, he explained.

But his true love is motorcycles. Those are displayed inside the main building, along with gun collections, military vehicles and much more.

Mention of the museum often results in raised eyebrows over its displays with obvious political messages. But Mangels said it all fits in his "miracle" theme, in which he promotes pride in America.

We also got to visit with Bud and Laurel Cheff at the Ninepipes museum. He had insights from growing up on the reservation. For example, the Mission Valley was originally peopled by the Pend d'Oreille, until the Flatheads were forced out of the Bitterroot Valley and onto the Reservation. Both are part of the Salish nation.

We also learned that tribal men could not marry until they received a feather for an act of bravery against the enemy.

Both museums are worth an all-day exploration. Wandering the grounds of the Miracle of America Museum brings all kinds of hidden discoveries, while Ninepipes has a recorded narrative by Chef and walls of one-of-a-kind photographs.

FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **August 19:** "Montana Highway Tales – Curious characters and peculiar attractions" by Jon Axline

GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

Northwest Montana Westerners' meetings are held on the third Monday of the month, except the months of December and January, at the Northwest Montana History Museum at 124 Second Avenue East, Kalispell, Montana.

Meetings begin with a Gab 'n' Greet session from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. for a chance to get acquainted. Local history authors will have their books for sale.

The presentation starts at 7 p.m. and is free for members and youths 16 and under. Non-members pay \$5.

Historic books are raffled off as a fund raiser. Soft drinks, beer and wine will be on sale by museum staff.

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TRIVA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Scott Tanner dug up the Flathead High School year book to answer last month's question – What was the significance of the broadcast of the 1927 Northwestern Montana Basketball Tournament in Kalispell?

It was the valley's first radio broadcast.

The Glacier Park Radio Club began pushing for a local radio station in 1925. After initially being turned down, the club learned one of the period's last licenses would be issued if the station was on the air by February 1927.

Unable to fund the \$5,000 for a commercial station, the club instead put together a home-built version. Licensed as KGEZ and financed by a community fund-raising effort, the 100-watt station operated out of donated space on the top of the Elks' Temple on 1st Street East.

Everything was live – Sunday church services, weather reports and educational talks. An estimated 400 entertainers, from 10 years old to 90, performed during the weekly musical program in the first year.

The tournament broadcast preceded the official licensing on March 31, 1927. According to Tanner's research, the play-by-play was provided by USDA County Agent Robert McKee, Kalispell attorney Torrance MacDonald and high school teacher John Kegler.


This Month's Trivia Question

Built in 1883 the 30-foot sailboat *Swan* was the first commercial boat to ply Flathead Lake. However the craft took a reported week to literally sail between Somers and Dooley's landing on the Flathead River. It is unclear if this was one way, or a round trip.

The trivia question is – What happened to the *Swan*?

Submit your answer to the editor at richardahull@charter.net and we will print the names of all those who get it right.

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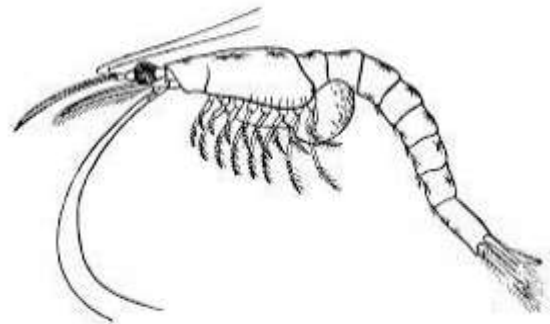
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THE CREATURE THAT ATE FLATHEAD LAKE

By Rick Hull

It was a classic case of “At the time it seemed like a good idea.”

The chain of events started in 1968, when state fish managers planted Mysis in the Flathead Lake drainage. The freshwater shrimp, less than an inch long, had a history of dramatic success in British Columbia's Kootenay Lake. Not only had kokanee salmon numbers jumped, but the fish had grown larger, with some reaching world-record size.



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The local introduction used Mysis taken from Waterton Lake at the north edge of Glacier National Park. The shrimp were planted in Ashley, Whitefish and Swan lakes.

They didn't stay put, and Mysis were first found in Flathead Lake in 1981.

In 1985 the annual kokanee catch by anglers was estimated at 100,000 tons – a trend that extended back to the 1920s.

In 1987 the catch was zero.

By now fish and wildlife managers throughout the West were in a panic. Not only had fish populations collapsed after the introduction of Mysis, but Lake Tahoe's celebrated water clarity had been damaged and bald eagles were no longer gathering by the hundreds in Glacier National Park.

It was the law of unintended consequences, with the impact cascading through the ecosystem like a line of falling dominoes. Biologists call it a “trophic cascade.”

It took years to figure out how and why.



Kokanee Salmon

As its name implies, *Mysis relicta* is a relic of the Ice Age. Left behind as the vast lakes bordering the continental ice cap vanished, it inhabits deeper lakes in the eastern and central U.S. and Canada. It is also known as the opossum shrimp, since it nurtures up to 40 eggs in a marsupial-style pouch.

Sensitive to bright light, Mysis rest on the lake bottom in water over 100 feet deep. After dark they move towards the surface, feeding on algae, zooplankton and whatever else they can find.

This nocturnal habit is the first strike against kokanee, which graze during the day and are not bottom feeders. The success in Kootenay Lake was a fluke – upwelling water currents brought the mysis within reach of the kokanee.

Mysis also compete directly against kokanee for food. Though kokanee are caught by trolling with lures, they actually feed on zooplankton nearly too small to see. Seventy percent of their diet is the tiny *Daphnia*, a nearly transparent crustacean. *Daphnia* are commonly known as water fleas for their hopping swimming motion.

Daphnia feed on algae. With Mysis gobbling up *Daphnia*, algae multiplied and water quality declined.

Kokanee also found themselves losing out to other fish. Kokanee had been introduced to Flathead Lake by mistake in 1914, somehow mixed in with other salmon species that were deliberately, but unsuccessfully, planted.

Other foreign species were planted in the Flathead drainage at the same time as part of an early philosophy that focused entirely on better fishing. Among the introductions were lake trout and Lake Superior whitefish. Lake trout, in particular, have no problems pursuing Mysis in their deep-water refuges. Lake trout populations exploded and kokanee were among their prey.

In another fallout from the cascade effect, the lake trout snatched up young bull trout and cutthroat trout as they migrated into the lake after upstream spawning. One result was the bull trout being listed as a threatened species in the United States. Lake trout are also good at invading rivers, like the

Stillwater and Middle Fork, and sneaking into upstream drainages, like Swan Lake.

Another unintended consequence involved bald eagles. At four years of age, kokanee swim upstream to spawn and die. Flathead Lake's kokanee pioneered spawning sites in the Flathead River system, especially in McDonald Creek in Glacier National Park.

Bald eagles discovered the bonanza, and eventually as many as 500 gathered in the fall to feed off the dying fish. Anglers also took advantage of the kokanee migration, accounting for about half of the annual take. Since the salmon do not eat on their terminal journey upstream to spawn, they were snagged with treble hooks.

Both the eagle gathering and river fishing ended when the kokanee vanished.

Fish managers tried repeatedly to restore the kokanee. In one effort, a barge was rented, and hatchery fish planted mid-lake in hope of avoiding shoreline predators. Nothing worked.

In 1980 a moratorium was declared across the United States on further Mysis introductions.

Problems continued. In 2015, the kokanee population in Kootenay Lake abruptly collapsed, followed by a similar drop in rainbow trout. The speculation was the closing of a shoreline fertilizer plant, and corresponding reduction in nutrients, as the cause.

There has been some recent success battling the Mysis plague through brute force and money. Essentially it involves attacking the predators directly. In Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille, a \$15 bounty was placed on lake trout and on a large variety of rainbow trout known as Gerrad. The bounty and gill netting cost \$1 million, but restored both kokanee and rainbow.

Canadian officials are using a similar effort, with monthly \$1,000 rewards for bull trout and Gerrad. Nearly 3 million kokanee eggs were stocked in tradition spawning grounds, and nutrients added to the lake. Kokanee have returned to pre-2015 numbers.

On Flathead Lake, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have sponsored "Mack Days" since 2011. Anglers try to catch as many lake trout (also known as Mackinaw) for prizes currently totaling \$225,000. This spring a total of 35,089 lake trout were removed from the lake during the contest. Kolton Turner of Kalispell was the winner with 2,283 fish, averaging 100 a day over 18 days.

Mysis, especially the ocean variety, are sold to commercial aquariums and tropical fish hobbyists as fish food. There have been proposals to net Mysis from problem lakes. In an ironic move, Mysis could be then used to feed fish in state and federal hatcheries.

A trial netting in Lake Tahoe discovered Mysis are packed with omega 3. So they could soon be joining the fish oil supplements on the shelf at Costco.

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