

“It’s Not a Ghost Town ‘til the Last Dog Leaves”

The Ghosts of Tradition in a Montana Mining Camp

Darcy Minter

Marysville, Montana, sits four miles below the crest of the Continental Divide just west of the state capital in Helena. It is a mountain village of fifty or so homes amidst the debris of a once-thriving gold camp. In the late nineteenth century, this village housed about 5,000 residents; now its numbers total 76. This is the way of mining camps; they rise and fall with the presence of ore. Today, many of them have completely vanished, others are simply deserted and are called ghost towns. Though it has been branded a ghost town by the tourism industry, on the surface, Marysville defies this classification. It is a living community whose residents share a powerful connection to their place shaped by a long history there and an intimate relationship with the land and its natural resources. Its residents resent being labeled a ghost town. As one informant remarked, “It’s not a ghost town until the last dog leaves.” And yet, *I* found Marysville to be a town *alive* with ghosts, a community where the places and the people of the past are visible to its residents and present in their stories and behaviors. Marysville redefines the popular notion of what a ghost town is: it is a vital community where the living coexist with the spirits of the past.

To the touristic imagination, the town’s dilapidated buildings, empty lots, vestiges of mining cabins, and crumbling mills articulate an anonymous past. To outsiders, it is obvious that someone struck it rich here, a town emerged to service the miners and then receded when the mine played out, leaving its scars in the creekbeds and hillsides. For Marysville’s long-time and returning

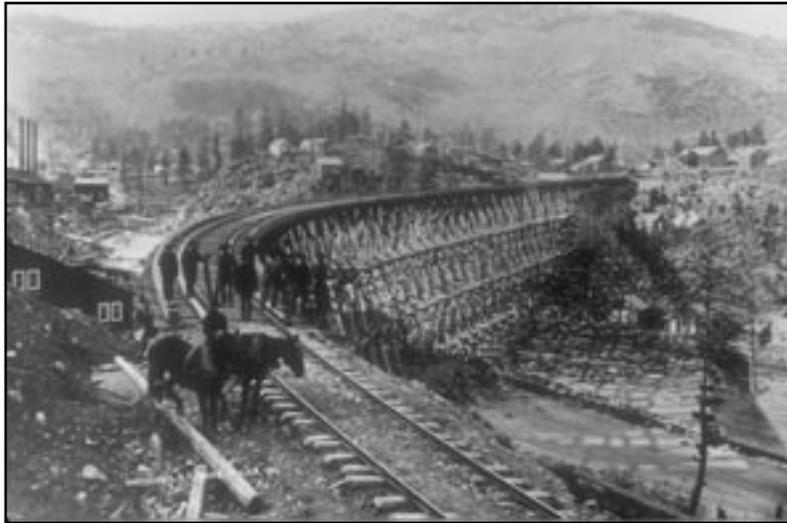


Marysville in the 21st century. Photograph by Darcy Minter.

residents, this same physical landscape holds layers of additional meaning; it recalls the people who left their imprint here and evokes stories of what was once a thriving community, infatuated with gold and the possibilities it offered.

Kent Ryden calls this the invisible landscape. “It is as though there is an unseen layer of usage, memory and significance—an invisible landscape, if you will, of imaginative landmarks—superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map” (Ryden, 40).

Ruth O’Connell, who lived in Marysville with her husband’s family in the 1950s, took me on a tour of the town. She pointed out places that were long gone, kept alive only through stories, maps, and memories. As we passed remembered places, Ruth recalled them to me: *This is where the BonTon Hotel and the Drumlummon Hotel used to be. This used to be the O’Connell Bar. This is where Kate*



Marysville railroad bridge, Northern Pacific Railway, Marysville, MT, 1887. Photograph by Rutler. Courtesy Montana Historical Society (PAC 949-185).

Sullivan had her candy store. Here is where the turntable was where the train turned around. Here is where the livery stable sat, and the red light district was over there.

Earl Fred returned to Marysville to live more than twenty years ago after a long absence. He remembers what the place looked like when he was growing up there in the 1930s and 1940s. “I used to sit on the rock piles over there by the cabins and watch the trains come in because they came in right underneath where our home was. I watched the engines turn around down at the turntable. At that time . . . every place you looked there was a house in these hills, practically on top of each other. But as you can see there’s nothing left.” These missing landmarks are as much a part of Marysville to Ruth and Earl as what remains there.

A knowledge of the invisible landscape is an indicator

of sense of place, that distinctive feeling for or attachment to a place that evolves through intimate experience of it. The sense of place, explains Ryden, “results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines” (Ryden, 38). Sense of place also arises from a familiarity with the history of a geographic area. It comes from an understanding of what occurred there and an affection for the people who came before. It is this affection that Ruth and Earl feel when they look upon the invisible landscape.

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan stresses the importance of history in shaping the sense of place felt by aboriginal tribes. He says, “Landscape is personal and tribal history made visible. The native’s identity—his place in the total scheme of things—is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterholes he can see and touch. He finds recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of the immortal beings from whom he himself descended, and whom he reveres. The whole countryside is his family tree” (Tuan, 157–58).

The Marysville family tree is composed largely of miners. As members of an industry of transients, miners seldom put down roots. Towns came and went with the presence of ore, and so did their residents. Current inhabitants of Marysville do not share in the rootlessness of the mining lifestyle, but they have certainly been affected by it. It has created in them a need for stability, to be a part of a continuum of history, and to carry on the legacy left to them by the miners who preceded them there. Marysville is a community that is literally surrounded by and holding fast to a past defined by impermanence.

Most of the people I interviewed grew up in Marysville in the decades before the major mine finally closed down in the 1950s. They are children and grandchildren of miners, but most of them never were miners themselves. They left the village after high school to attend college, join the service, or earn a living and raise a family, and they have returned in the last twenty years to live out the rest of their lives. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they were able to choose their place, and they chose to return to the place where they grew up. In exploring the attachment to homeland, Yi-Fu Tuan considers the nomadic lifestyles of hoboes, migrant workers, and merchant seamen and asks, “What are the consequences of rootlessness? Do they long for a permanent place, and if so, how is this longing expressed?” (Tuan, 158). In Marysville it is expressed in a nostalgic attachment to a place and its history, vocalized through stories and performed through participation in traditional mining activities. It is as if the descendants of the miners that moved on have reclaimed the place and are keeping its vision alive.

When asked why she remained in Marysville when most other residents left, eighty-seven-year-old Ann Korting responded: “We wouldn’t have wanted to live any place else.” Korting is the former Marysville schoolteacher, and the daughter and wife of miners. She has lived in Marysville her entire life. Jim Wilhoit and Earl Fred are both Marysville returnees. Earl explains: “I’ve been all over the United States and other places and I never found any place I’d rather settle than Marysville. . . . This is where my roots were and all my family was here.” Jim adds, “There’s something about the place, but if you lived here for a while it seems like you always come back.”



Drumlummon Mine, Marysville, MT, no date. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Montana Historical Society (PAC 949-189).

That something that brings people back to Marysville is difficult to define, but it is made clearer through an exploration of vernacular expression, of the local lore that is a vehicle for communicating the consciousness of a community or a culture. In Marysville, personal and traditional narratives help reveal the distinct relationship to place experienced by these descendants of miners.

Kent Ryden calls folk narrative

a vital and powerful means by which knowledge of the invisible landscape is communicated, expressed, and maintained. In fact, the sense of place—the sense of dwelling in the invisible landscape—is in large part a creation of folklore



Horse-drawn wagon, winter scene near Marysville, MT, going to John Larson's mine, no date. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Montana Historical Society (PAC 957-907).

and is expressed most eloquently through folklore. It is through traditional narratives, both personal and communal, that the human meanings with which the landscape is imbued are given form, perpetuated, and shared; the meaning of a place for the people who live there is best captured by the stories that they tell about it, about the elements that comprise it, and about the events that took place within its bounds (Ryden, 45).

Stories of Marysville's history paint a picture of a typical gold-mining camp, one of the richest in the West. Everyone has a tale about Irishman Tommy Cruse who first found gold here

in 1876. As a placer miner downstream on Silver Creek, Cruse figured there had to be a "mother lode" in the mountains upstream that was responsible for the gold being recovered along the creek bed. Considered crazy by his fellow miners, Cruse persevered and eventually became a multi-millionaire. Figures vary, but during about thirty years of production at the end of the nineteenth century, approximately \$30 million in gold and silver was recovered from Cruse's Drumlummon Mine (named for the parish in Ireland where he was born), and another \$20 million was recovered from twelve additional mines in an area that is approximately twelve square miles (Walker, 1-2).

The town of Marysville, which Tommy Cruse named for its first female resident, Mary Ralston, was by far the largest mining camp in the area, and in the 1890s it supported sixty businesses, including twenty-seven bars, seven hotels, and three newspapers. The town was serviced by two railroads—neither of which exists today. Rocks were extracted and pounded twenty-four hours a day in three mills with 120 stamps. All this started with the efforts of one man.

According to Earl Fred, "Tommy Cruse was flat broke. He borrowed money from everybody in the country to do his work trying to find gold. . . . The last money that was ever loaned to Tommy Cruse was [from] a gal that lived there [Silver City], a Mrs. Brown. And she said, 'Tommy, this is the last of it. I'm not loaning you no more money.' And he took that last little loan that he got and just then, it just happened he found this [the Drumlummon vein] and became a multi-millionaire."

The idea that anyone can strike it rich with luck and perseverance is one that still persists in Marysville. It was not that long ago that a man like Tommy Cruse, who was flat broke

and considered crazy, could become a millionaire by digging a hole in the ground. Miners were single-minded and tenacious in their quest for gold. Ruth O'Connell tells a story of a miner who tunneled underneath the town of Marysville in pursuit of a vein. "Dan [Sullivan] ran a tunnel from their house and meandered under the town and it was not unusual to waken in the night to hear his 'bussy' [sic] drilling. He changed shifts just as if he were working in the mines—one week days, one week swing, etc. It was always a puzzle to us as to what right he felt he had to mine this way, but I guess no one ever questioned it."

Despite their tenacity and the millions of dollars in gold that were extracted from the mountains, "They never did find the mother lode," explains Earl Fred. My other informants all agree that there is more gold left in those mountains than was ever recovered. Speaking of the Drumlummon Mine, Ruth O'Connell claims: "My husband was the last one to ever work there inside," says Ruth O'Connell, "and he always maintained that there was more ore left than they ever removed."

They say what gold is left in the Drumlummon cannot be removed because the mountain will collapse. It is essentially hollow; miles of internal tunnels are stabilized by large columns of rock marbled with veins of gold and silver, says Frank Warburton, one of the youngest to ever mine the Drumlummon. He now lives in Kalispell, Montana, but frequently returns to Marysville to visit his childhood home.

According to Frank, the miners would tunnel "so far and then they'd leave part of the lead. If they took the lead, the ground would come down. So they'd leave that solid ground there and go around it and just a keep a going. . . . There's all kind of pillars left

with solid gold in them. Except you'd be dead if you tried to take one out. We're talking six-foot-wide leads of gold. That's why we keep going back. We're still trying to live back then."

Marysville residents keep going back to the hills to try and recover what was never found. Motivated by tales of quick prosperity and the universal assumption that gold still awaits them in the rocks, these modern-day prospectors maintain the traditions of their mining culture. This is their legacy. Earl Fred and Jim Wilhoit have built wooden boxes behind the seats of their ATVs so they can bring back gold and silver when they find it as well as other mementos from the abandoned mines. Says Earl: "We've got a lot of active miners like us. We mine it every day we go out. We're still looking for rocks. . . . I carry a pan and a miner's pick. I'm always looking. [Jim's] always looking. And you find little stuff now and then. . . . Once you've got it in your blood you don't get it out. All you've got to do is find that one nugget and you're hooked."

Prospecting in Marysville is not limited to the old-timers in the community; newcomers can catch gold fever too. Oftentimes, they forego picks and shovels in favor of expensive metal detectors. But for the descendants of Marysville miners, the prospector impulse is their inheritance. They were raised with it. It's in their blood and it's central to their identity. Though most of them have never worked in a mine, their identity is bound to history, to the land, and to mining. Feeling connected to the history of a place contributes to a strong sense of self in that place, says Kent Ryden: "if we feel that our present selves are inextricably bound to our pasts—that our lives have historical continuity, that we are the products of our past experiences—and if we tie memory to the landscape, then in contemplating place we contemplate ourselves"



Marysville, MT, July 4, 1904. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Montana Historical Society (PAC 949-193).

(Ryden, 39–40).

“People look back for various reasons,” says Yi-Fu Tuan, “but shared by all is the need to acquire a sense of self and of identity. . . . To strengthen our sense of self the past needs to be rescued and made accessible [and] various devices exist to shore up the crumbling landscapes of the past” (Tuan, 186).

These Marysville residents are actively reconstructing their past by continuing the prospecting traditions of their mining ancestors. As such, they are placing themselves in the continuum of history, creating stability and permanence out of a past that was insecure and transitory. In effect, they are changing the paradigm of mining culture by maintaining its traditions *in place*.

However, they are still not satisfied with the present. They

yearn to return to an earlier time. Mining was a dangerous—sometimes deadly—pursuit. There were few luxuries or modern conveniences, and winters could be brutal, yet Marysville residents carry the belief that life, despite its hardships, was better then. “Everybody was in the same shape and nobody thought anything about it,” explains Earl. “Everybody was happy. We had a great time. We made our own fun. It was good clean fun. I wish we could have lived 100 years ago. I would have loved to have lived in those early, early days. . . . Because that’s what I enjoy—doing what those guys did without tools. No luxuries.”

Frank adds, “We try to make it that way by going out looking for bottles or gold. We’re trying to relive it.”

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, “whenever a person (young or old) feels that the world is changing too rapidly, his characteristic response is to evoke an idealized and stable past” (Tuan, 188). These residents are feeling insecure about Marysville’s present and future. Their place is threatened by government officials who want to pave the six miles of dirt road that lead to the village and also dig up the creek bed to retrieve the environmental waste they say remains there. Real estate developers are buying what land does not still belong to mining corporations and planning subdivisions there. Newcomers are hoping the nearby ski hill will be purchased and expanded—a psychic friend told Ruth O’Connell that Marysville would be like Park City, Utah, one day.

Afraid of losing their place, residents are clinging to it with even more resolve. They are trying to slow time and recreate the past by idealizing it and carrying on its traditions. As long as that time lives in people’s memories, stories, and customs, the past will survive in the present. Barre Toelken states that “the long-range

tendency of tradition is to continue articulating the values of the culture: the mountain cabin is not lost if even the best exemplar of the type burns down, for the plan is in the culture, not in the item” (Toelken, 15).

Marysville’s mines and most of its buildings may be gone, but the plan is alive in the culture. It lives through the residents who have inherited the stories and the impulse to search for gold. These residents share a powerful connection to their place shaped by personal experience and by their close identification with the miners who came before them. Though they long to live in the past, they—unlike their predecessors—have found their place in the present and staked their claim there.

When one considers the popular notion of a western ghost town, Hollywood images prevail: an empty main street lined with vacant storefronts, tumbleweeds, and silence. Marysville has its share of abandoned buildings, but it also has people whose vision of this ghost town’s past is alive and well. It is their vision that makes Marysville a ghost town, not the fact that it is included in the state’s tour books. Its people keep its ghosts alive—they dwell in the invisible landscape apparent only to those whose lives are historically and intimately connected to the place.

Earl Fred, Jim Wilhoit, and Frank Warburton tell of a gentleman who, in the 1930s, built several miles of the Marysville road with only a pick and a shovel. On one of their recent prospecting trips down the gulch, they found his old mining cabin and the tools he might have used to build the road. In recalling the incident, Frank remarked: “He was sitting right there on the stump too, wasn’t he? We couldn’t see him, but he was sitting there watching us.”

“I’m sure he was,” replied Earl.

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