

Frenchtown Project

Thomas A. Latousek
Bureau of Reclamation
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The Frenchtown Project

The Frenchtown Project of west-central Montana near Missoula never garnered the headlines that did other Reclamation projects built during the Depression-era such as Boulder Canyon (Hoover) and Grand Coulee. In fact, Reclamation's Commissioner described the Frenchtown Project in 1936 as "its smallest (project) at the time."¹ Yet the Frenchtown Project's lack of stature hardly diminished its importance in the minds of local Montana farmers who depended on it, for the project was integral to the success of residents of the Missoula Valley. Most had long struggled to make ends meet, constrained as they were by dry farming methods that limited them in the varieties of crops they could grow. They usually had no choice but to grow wheat - a crop produced in such volume at the time that it could pay no more than "bottom of the barrel" prices.

Former state senator and local resident Edward Donlan realized his neighbors' dilemma and how water could help solve it. He forced the decision-makers in Washington to listen to the needs of his admittedly small but dogged constituency back in Montana. Undoubtedly, it was this single figure's behind-the-scenes maneuverings, contacts, and knowledge of the workings of the political system that got the Frenchtown Project built. Indeed, in an era of colossal reclamation projects, it took such a brand of singlemindedness to get smaller but necessary projects such as Frenchtown's started at all.

Project Location

The Frenchtown Project works are located along the Clark Fork River, also known locally as the Missoula River, in west-central Montana. The Missoula Basin features high

1. Letter from Commissioner John C. Page to Secretary Harold Ickes, 7 March 1938, RG 115, Frenchtown Project Correspondence File (1930-45), Box 603.

mountain peaks such as the Bitterroot Range to the west which shield area lands and create a "rain shadow" which blocks eastbound Pacific Ocean moisture. The result of this meteorological phenomena is a milder and drier climate than would typically besiege these northern Rocky Mountain climes. The area averages 14.5 inches of precipitation per year and has a growing season approximately 165 days long.² Project farm lands stand at elevations ranging from 3,010 to 3,110 feet.

Occupying a long, narrow portion of Missoula County to the northwest of the city of Missoula, the project area is part of the Pacific Ocean, or Columbia River drainage basin. Project lands straddle the north and east bank of the Clark Fork here. This large Columbia tributary runs roughly northwest in this region and has an average annual flow of 4.4 million acre-feet (a-f). The river drains over 9,000 square miles of land.³

The topography of the area varies from low and rolling closer to the river, to steep, rocky, and rugged as you proceed away from it. Project beneficiaries are typically located within one or two miles of the Clark Fork. The primary features of the Frenchtown Project are the Frenchtown Diversion Dam and the Main Canal and laterals (storage is unnecessary due to ample supplies). The diversion dam works are about six miles downstream from the city of Missoula on a side channel of the Clark Fork, while the Main Canal originates at the diversion dam and runs roughly parallel to the main river channel, covering a linear distance of about twelve miles, which is also to say the canal lies from six to eighteen miles to Missoula's northwest. The small towns of Frenchtown and Huson are also located within this area.

Historic Setting

Prehistoric Setting

2. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Project Annual History, 1935-36*, 10.

3. Water and Power Resources Service, *Project Data*, (Denver: Government Printing Office, 1981), 479.

The Missoula Valley, and to a greater extent the Bitterroot Valley to the south, was the ancestral home of the easternmost of Salish Indian tribes, the Flathead. The Flathead were related to the Spokane and the Pend d'Oreille, who inhabited regions primarily to the west and north. The Flathead were more nomadic than their relatives who subsisted mainly on fish. The plains to the Missoula Valley's east were home to great herds of buffalo and were often the subject of Flathead hunting sojourns. After the 1600s such trips brought them into conflict with Native American tribes such as the fierce Blackfeet, who had migrated west from the Great Lakes area. Often the Blackfeet would lay in ambush as the Flathead rode east through Hellgate Canyon, a narrow passageway from the Missoula Valley to the plains. Today, Indian petroglyphs color the canyon walls.

Centuries of warfare had depleted Flathead numbers by the time white men arrived in the area in the early 1800s. It also drove the Flathead into alliances with the Anglos for protection against their hostile neighbors.

Historic Setting

Unbeknownst to the Flathead living in the Missoula Valley, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 brought much of what would be the future state of Montana into the jurisdiction of the United States. Ownership of lands west of the continental divide, such as the Frenchtown Project region (the continental divide lies eighty miles to the east), however, was in question. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, the leaders of the expedition sent by President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 to investigate the huge expanse of land bought from France, were the first white men to visit the area, with Lewis crossing the Bitterroot Valley to the south of present-day Missoula upon his return in 1806.

David Thompson followed Lewis and Clark in 1808-10, exploring the Columbia River

Basin, including the Clark Fork River, for Canada's Northwest Company. His extensive surveying and mapping of the area soon brought trappers and other mountain men. Abundant native grasses and freshwater were the valley's draw and the reason why, in 1838, early traveler W. A. Ferris would observe "the large bands of horses galloping in the vicinity."⁴ The Roman Catholic Church, too, came to the basin in 1840, with Jesuit priest Father Pierre Jean DeSmet establishing St. Mary's Mission in order to answer the call of the resident Flatheads who requested the white man's "good medicine," which they mistakenly hoped would ward off the Blackfeet.⁵ For the next ten years mission priests converted Flatheads and taught them farming methods until 1850 when the mission was disbanded. In 1855, however, a reservation treaty was signed and the Flatheads were moved to their own lands to the north of Missoula and Frenchtown.

When two former mountain men, Baptiste Ducharme and Louis Brun, built homes on the Clark Fork River northwest of Missoula in 1858, they effectively founded one of the first American settlements in Montana Territory, French Town (later to become Frenchtown).⁶ Also at this time the American military built Mullan Road, a military trail leading from Fort Benton in Montana through the Frenchtown area to Walla Walla in Washington Territory. A trading post sprang up nearby to serve the trail, as well. These activities, along with the natural bounty of the area, soon enticed the founding fathers' fellow French-Canadians to follow and live in the Frenchtown vicinity, establishing it as the first permanent agricultural settlement in Montana.⁷

These Missoula Valley pioneers practiced primarily dry-farming agriculture on small-scale farms, but it was not long before irrigation systems were developed to tap the sizeable

4. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 2.

5. George Weisel, ed. *Men and Trade on the Northwest Frontier as Shown by the Fort Owen Ledger*, Bozeman, Montana: Montana State University, 1955. xvii.

6. Reclamation, *Annual Project History, 1936-62*, 2; Weisel, 195.

7. Weisel, xviii.

spring run-off that resulted from the Montana high country's mountain snowmelt. As early as 1880 the area south of Missoula on the Bitterroot River formed an irrigation district to build Orchard Homes Canal. In Frenchtown, in 1901, the private Grass Valley Ditch Company dug an irrigation ditch to water up to 4,000 acres north and east of Frenchtown. Still, most local farmers did not benefit from these water projects. Many clamored for a larger-scale project that would free them from the constraints of dry-farming. Prominent Frenchtown lumberman and former Montana state legislator, Edward Donlan, was foremost among them.

Authorization

While both Reclamation and local engineers studied the Missoula Valley for its irrigation potential as early as 1918, no substantive headway was made until the early 1930s when a local constituency led by Donlan, Ralph Scheffer of Huson, and Pierre Loiselle of Frenchtown, focused its efforts on bringing a large-scale water project to their lands. The first of several investigations into the issue took place in 1918 when consulting engineer D.C. Henny dismissed any plans to irrigate the Frenchtown-Huson area due to prohibitive costs. The first Reclamation feasibility analysis took place one year later when Frank Crowe, manager of the nearby Flathead Project, proposed an enlargement of the aforementioned Grass Valley ditch that could irrigate 8,000 acres in the Frenchtown-Huson area at an estimated cost of \$313,443, or \$39.18 an acre.⁸ The present Grass Valley ditch, pointed out Crowe in his feasibility report, was inadequate and local farmers "were desirous of having the Government take it over."⁹ Although it appeared that the community was in favor of the plan, no progress was made on it at the time.

Other local consulting engineers such as W. B. Saunders (in 1923), R. J. Hale (1930), and

8. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 4.

9. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, *Report of the Possibilities of Irrigation of the Lands Between Missoula and Huson, Montana*, 1920, 4.

Reclamation's G. J. Hagens (1930) performed investigations that also recommended diversions of the Clark Fork River but at a lesser cost than Crowe had proposed. However, concerted local support was not behind any of these prior efforts. But when New Deal programs with funds to spend on public works such as Frenchtown's came into effect in the Depression years, project proponent Edward Donlan saw an opportunity. In September of 1932 Donlan filed on 200 second-feet of Clark Fork River flow, making available for any potential irrigation system a sufficient amount of water. He then went to Washington, D.C. to seek funds from the Public Works Administration, as well as meet with Reclamation Commissioner Elwood Mead to discuss the possibility of that agency's participation in a water development project for Frenchtown.¹⁰

Mead saw enough merit in Donlan's proposal to send Reclamation Superintendent H. A. Parker to Frenchtown to investigate further (he had been supervising construction of the Shoshone Project in Powell, Wyoming). Parker's report essentially supported prior investigations that recommended expansion of the Grass Valley Ditch. His plan, though, pointed out that diverting the Clark Fork flow about 2.5 miles downstream from the ditch's present diversion point would allow new lands to be brought under irrigation. Parker's plan also incorporated the added expense of having to provide for the Grass Valley Ditch owners' water rights, which, it was understood, would call for additional capacity for their use at no additional cost to them. And they also would not come into the still-unformed local water district. Despite this expense, Parker deemed Frenchtown's prospective project feasible. Depending on a total irrigated acreage that would begin at about 6,000 acres and ultimately reach 7,500, Parker estimated project costs at from \$29.33 to \$36.66 an acre, a figure he believed easily repayable by

10. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 5.

project lands.¹¹

While supportive investigations of proposed water developments in the Frenchtown area had certainly been performed in the past, prospects were different this time. Funds were available. The country was in the midst of a deep, economic depression and the Federal Government supported reclamation projects that might help prop up down-on-the-heels regions such as those in the Rocky Mountain West. The planned Frenchtown development would allow many farmers currently dry farming wheat - a crop of which there was a huge surplus and, hence, unprofitable to produce - to switch to more profitable crops such as sugar beets, small fruits, potatoes, or alfalfa. Irrigation-produced alfalfa, in particular, would help the area's resurgent cattle industry by providing it with a drought-proof supply of feed.

Edward Donlan, the former state legislator, had already worked assiduously behind the scenes as the proposed project's "point man," receiving most of the unofficial backing he would need to get the development off the ground. The project's construction was assured when Commissioner Mead wrote Fred Schnepfe, Director of Federal Projects for the Federal Emergency Administration (FEA) of Public Works, in December, 1933, stating to the man with the "pursestrings" to the project that "it (the project) is meritorious. It is small in area and low in cost."¹² Schnepfe agreed, allotting \$180,000 of FEA Public Works funds to Frenchtown's irrigation project. The Frenchtown Irrigation District (FID) was formed in 1934, with Donlan, Scheffer, and Loiselle serving as president, treasurer, and secretary, respectively. In November, 1934, the FID gave Donlan permission to negotiate a repayment contract with Reclamation. A contract was signed in July, 1935, and official authorization of the Frenchtown Project occurred

11. Parker - Reclamation, *Report and Estimate of the Frenchtown Irrigation Project*, 1933, 4, 16.

12. Letter from Mead to Schnepfe, 22 December 1933, RG 115, Frenchtown Project General Correspondence (Straights), Box 585, 37-F-15.

September 21, 1935.

Construction History

Construction of the Frenchtown Project proved to be more difficult and more expensive than initial estimates. The \$180,000 project repayment contract eventually grew to over \$295,000 because of increased labor and material costs and the unexpectedly high costs of settling condemnation suits for the project's rights-of-way. Contractors and Reclamation managers accused one another of incompetency and inefficiency. Delays on all sides bogged down the project.

Work on the project can be divided into three areas: the diversion dam and headworks, which was awarded to Bates and Hale for \$82,800; the main canal, construction of which was given to Nick Burggraf, Inc. for \$19,796; and the twenty-one miles of laterals and sublateral canals dug by the Ralph Davis Company, whose bid of \$47,312 won the contract.

Notice to proceed with the Frenchtown Project's construction was given to canal builder Burggraf on October 15, 1935, but operations were suspended several times due to failure of Reclamation to obtain required right-of-way. Landowners that were not members of the FID proved to be particularly expensive obstacles to the project, for many both refused to donate right-of-way or to accept the appraised value for their land. Court-appointed commissioners often reassessed these lands at double and triple prior valuations. As Reclamation and FID officials slowly purchased the necessary tracts at inflated prices, project costs escalated and new repayment contracts were drawn up. In the winter of 1935-36, a revised project repayment contract for \$240,000 was signed.

Meanwhile, construction plodded on. Burggraf's excavation delays due to land condemnation proceedings, in turn, slowed down Bates and Hale's diversion dam construction.

Poor weather, too, hampered building activity. Although Burggraf was given a 120-day extension on his canal-building, from late May to early September, 1936, the canal was completed, but after the revised deadline. The series of delays had caused Burggraf to lose money so the contractor filed claims for damages, maintaining that costs over and above those planned were a direct result of governmental delay in procuring land, as well as by the actions of Reclamation-hired "checkers," or rodmen, who helped operators in determining grades and slopes from cross-section stakes. Burggraf's claim stated that these employees were "incompetent and inexperienced" and cost them \$5,000 in losses. Project Engineer J. W. Taylor responded that the contractor's delays were due to their own inexperience, inefficiency, and poor equipment. Taylor noted further that Burggraf was "claiming damages to offset his loss on the contract as he submitted a claim for an amount equal to the difference between his costs and the amount he had received in payment on contract earnings."¹³ Burggraf's claim for lost funds was eventually denied by the Comptroller.

The Main Canal dug by Burggraf stretched for 17 miles, with 21 miles of additional laterals. The Main Canal was built to hold 172 cubic-feet-second (cfs). It has a bottom width ranging from 6 feet where the canal is concrete-lined to 12 feet elsewhere and has a depth from 3.7 feet in the concrete canal to 4.4 feet in non-lined areas. The canal is entirely gravity-driven, with the first 9.5 miles of the main canal traversing fairly level land with little slope. After this point, the canal is located along a side hill with transverse slopes varying up to approximately 3:1.¹⁴

Other features of the Frenchtown Project also experienced problems. After brief delays

13. Letter, Burggraff to Taylor, "Claim for Damages," 2 June 1936, 8131 (Straights); J. W. Taylor, "Statement of J. W. Taylor," 26 July 1937, 8074 (Straights).

14. *Project Data*, 479.

from having to move the diversion dam works site 500 feet further downstream, Bates and Hale began construction of the planned 13-foot high, 489-foot long diversion dam containing over 12,000 cubic yards of earthfill in April, 1936.¹⁵ They soon encountered several difficulties which caused delays including high water, lack of, or late-arriving materials from the Federal Government, labor shortages, and philosophical differences with Reclamation officials. In fact, in Bates & Hale's claim for losses the contractor wrote "one of the outstanding handicaps on this work was the incompetency of the (Reclamation) engineering forces. The contractor stated that the engineers were unable to make decisions or interpret plans correctly, were rude, and interfered with the workers "by dictating to the men and occupying their time in conversations that both were irrelevant and consumed a great deal of time."¹⁶ At one point, Bates & Hale asked that a Reclamation engineer be removed from the project, but nothing was ever done in response. Bates & Hale, though, did win their claim due to losses that were the result of delays in receiving materials that were the responsibility of the government, particularly a reinforced steel dragline needed for damsite excavation.

Bates & Hale completed the diversion dam works on October 14, 1936. During construction they were able to facilitate the flow of water from the river into a side channel by excavating a new side channel to the intake channel itself and by constructing three small earthfill dykes along the side channel between the intake channel and diversion dam. The outlet works were built for a capacity of 172 cfs and consist of two 4-feet by 4-feet cast iron slide gates manually operated by 9:0 gear gate hoists. The amount of flow passing through the gate is controlled by a radial gate set in the sluiceway and by adjustment of gate openings.¹⁷

15. *Ibid.*

16. Bates & Hale, "Report on Frenchtown Project, Montana, September, 1936," RG 115, Box 585 (Straights), 37-F-15, 4.

17. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 9.

The Ralph Davis Company was the contractor for earth works and structures on the laterals. A total of 21 miles of laterals distribute water to project lands on ten diverging canals from the main canal and these in turn have sublaterals. Davis constructed and placed structures on this distribution system including concrete turnouts, weirs, checks, culverts, drops, timber bridges, semicircular metal flumes with wooden foundations, corrugated metal pipe, road crossings, and culverts. Davis began his project work in June, 1936, and terminated it in November of the same year without much delay except for a carpenter strike in September. Davis avoided major delays in construction by deciding to hire new workers without using the required United States Employment Service. Since the project would be completed before an official review could take place, this decision was allowed by Commissioner Page. The Ralph Davis Company was able to finish their job by November 20, 1936.¹⁸

The Missoula Basin landscape upon which the Frenchtown Project was built did provide some difficulties in terms of water conveyance. The topography of the area is such that the land does not lie in any general direction or slope but in many directions with higher knobs, lower creek valleys, and soft folds. Reclamation Engineer L. H. Mitchell stated that every farmer's head ditches required heavy filling across low areas so that water could be received. In fact, after supervising construction of over 46,000 linear feet of ditches, Mitchell believed twice that number would still have to be built before conveyance would be sufficient across project lands. Mitchell pointed out afterward that he had been on every Reclamation project but one and that the expenditure to the farmer of putting water on lands in the Frenchtown Project was greater than any he had seen. Costs ran from \$50 to \$75 an acre on lands with better soils where mechanical leveling was possible. On lands with shallow soil, leveling was prohibitive. Several

18. Letter from J. W. Taylor to Chief Engineer, 27 October 1936, RG115, 31M Labor Provisions (Straights).

long metal flumes were required to convey water across deep depressions in the landscape.¹⁹

After government workers installed 21 additional metal flumes and a drainage inlet in early Spring, 1937, all that remained was to open the gates. On May 13, 1937, the first Frenchtown Project water was available for irrigation. An initial diversion of 50 cfs was released in order to test project structures, but apparently local beneficiaries were too anxious or excited to wait, for Reclamation's H. G. Woodward wrote that day that "a prominent (local, non-Reclamation) official took it upon himself to hurry things up and increased the flow to about 95 cfs."²⁰ This action caused much damage downstream, as the excessive water washed out a Northern Pacific Railroad culvert, causing the erosion of an estimated 250 cubic yards of earth for up to 275 feet below the culvert. Repairs as a result of the local's "over enthusiasm" took five days and included expenditures that the FID could ill afford.

Post-Construction History

Difficulties continued to plague this "smallest of Reclamation projects." As costs rose ever higher, two more amendatory repayment contracts had to be signed between the FID and Reclamation, bringing the total project cost to \$295,000 by Fall, 1937. The project's price tag ballooned as a result of more right-of-way purchases, drainage and structure improvements, and agricultural irrigation education for local farmers. Because of all of these unplanned alterations, no funds were left to locally operate the Frenchtown system. Consequently, although water was turned into project lands in 1937, Reclamation continued to operate the project works. Many local farmers continued to be dissatisfied, for several were still unable to get water on their lands because of poor grading and insufficient structures. Since only ten percent of Frenchtown area

19. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 15.

20. Reclamation, Letter from H. G. Woodward to Chief Engineer, 26 May 1937, RG 115 (Straights), Box 583, 37-F-15, NARA-Denver.

farmers had had any prior experience with irrigation methods, Reclamation's Mitchell trained a local man to advise Frenchtown farmers. It was hoped that a more efficient use of project water would result. The Frenchtown Irrigation District assumed control of the project on January 1, 1939, with three employees running the system - Thomas Scheffer, Manager of the ditch and two assistant ditchriders.

The FID had to amend its repayment contract with Reclamation in 1952, when the District's payment schedule was revised in order to reduce large balloon payments that were soon due.²¹ Unfortunately, the Frenchtown Project had been budgeted to cover up to 7500 acres with the resultant increase in revenues helping pay for the project. But due to project problems, many irrigation district members either withdrew or procured water from elsewhere, leaving the FID with less funds than projected to pay for the project. Since the project seldom covered more than 4500 acres over its lifetime, the FID perennially struggled to meet its financial obligations, especially in the earlier years. The FID finally paid off construction costs in 1991.²²

By the early 1940s, however, operation of the Frenchtown Project grew less troublesome except for the average meddlesome rodent burrowing into earthworks, noxious water weeds that needed to be culled every few years, and flumes in need of wooden foundation repair. A few pocket gophers and muskrats were responsible for some canal breaks, with one in 1961 requiring shut down of the main canal for one week. The FID tried trapping, poisoning, and other methods to eradicate the rodents but most methods proved only temporarily successful. Chemicals such as Xylene were applied to aquatic weeds overwhelming the lower canals in particular. In more recent years, environmentalists and fishermen concerned with the effects of such chemical use

21. HR 5630, 82nd Congress, 2nd Session, RE: Repayment contracts for Frenchtown Irrigation Project - "Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Irrigation and Reclamation," RG115, Box 406, 28 January 1952.

22. Memorandum Paul Rachetto to Asst. Commissioner - Resource Management, 4 October 1991, Bureau of Reclamation, Central Files, PN 440, Denver Federal Center, Lakewood, Colorado.

have required that the FID announce each application of weed-killing chemicals (they now use Magnacide).²³ Every few years some canals were also scraped clean by bulldozers.²⁴

Heavy rains in May, 1948, resulted in flooding in the Missoula Valley that recorded an increase in Clark Fork River flow of from 16,800 cfs to 52,000 cfs. This huge volume of water flooded project lands but did little damage to Frenchtown Project works because debris blocked the inlet to the diversion dam's side channel, preventing the full force of the flood from hitting the dam. Damage to lower portions of the project works were prevented when workers temporarily cut a canal bank in order to divert water back into the river.²⁵

Settlement of the Project

The objective of the Frenchtown Project was not to entice settlement in the area but rather to expedite the region's attempt to convert from a wheat-based agriculture, which was depressed economically in the 1920s and '30s, to more diverse farming that would not only support the cattle industry (in the form of growing forage for it), but would also grow sugar beets, potatoes, and peas.

It was hoped that the project would open peripheral lands to agricultural use, but this would not be the case, for although project plans believed 7500 acres could ultimately be supported, no more than 5200 acres was ever brought under the project umbrella (4000 acres under irrigation is the norm today). Some farmers had their own water sources, others thought that Frenchtown Project water was too expensive. In any case, the project did help the Frenchtown area become more economically stable.

The subdivision of project lands has, in contemporary times, become the FID's major

23. Telephone Interview with Grace Cline, Secretary - Frenchtown Irrigation District, August 9, 1995.

24. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 50.

25. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1936-1962*, 53.

issue. Conflicts over the transfer of water rights are commonplace. Part-time farming has increased from 7 out of 37 water users doing so in 1946, to 29 out of 41 in 1982. In 1995, there were six full-time farmers on project lands.²⁶ Many project lands residents are newcomers to the Missoula Valley or work during the day at nearby paper or lumber mills or in Missoula and expect maintenance of the project's ditches and works to be done by the District when, in fact, it used to be a matter of "neighbors helping neighbors."²⁷ While the peak amount of acreage under irrigation was 5127 acres in 1946, it decreased to 3,439 by 1977. The popularity of the Missoula Valley for those looking for the Montana mountain lifestyle and a natural, small-town quality of life, has caused a decrease in the agricultural use of Frenchtown area lands. Ranchettes, or hobby farms, smaller parcels of land of thirty acres or less, are becoming popular in the area. Often landowners can receive more for their land if they subdivide it and sell it as non-farming land. Such demographic change is increasing in west-central Montana as more people discover the region's beauty and relocate there. The future of cattle and irrigation farming in such an environment is uncertain.

Uses of Project Water

Frenchtown Project water was used only for agricultural purposes. No storage was necessary, as the area received enough precipitation even in drought years to provide for project beneficiaries. Hence, there was no reservoir and no recreation. Locals received their drinking water from wells.

The project's goal, that of converting Frenchtown's formerly wheat-based agriculture to one that was more diversified and reliable, was certainly reached if one looks at crop records

26. Telephone Interview with Grace Cline, Secretary - Frenchtown Irrigation District, 9 August 1995; Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1983-84*, 3.

27. Reclamation, *Frenchtown Annual Project History, 1975-76*, 4.

from the project's inception through the 1960s. Sugar beet production on Frenchtown Project lands from the 1940s to the 1960s averaged over 100 tons total per year, with highs of 225 tons being raised in 1950 and 1961. These crops were sent to the sugar beet processing plant in Missoula. But by the 1970s, sugar beets diminished in importance and alfalfa and other forage for the cattle industry became predominant. The number of cattle on project lands has tripled since 1938. And by the 1980s, all project customers were using sprinkler irrigation.

Conclusion

The Frenchtown Project is a reclamation project which Montana's changing times may soon render obsolete. Demographic changes have turned much of these once prime intramountain agricultural lands, in fact, the first to feel the plough in all of Montana, into ranchettes - small, non-farming parcels on which an agricultural water supply is not usually needed. The new residents of Frenchtown Project lands are typically there not to farm, but to escape the cities, to fish, to hike, to raft, and to generally enjoy the quality of life offered in the idyllic Missoula River Valley. In doing so, their method of land use has indirectly raised the price of land in the area to such an extent that farming here has often become unprofitable. Only six full-time farmers remain. The same phenomenon has occurred upriver at Reclamation's Missoula Valley, or Big Flat Project, also on its last legs.

Described in the 1930s as Reclamation's "smallest (project) at the time," the Frenchtown Project has never wavered from its provincial nature in which "neighbors help neighbors." The fact that it was ever built is testament to the efforts of a single individual, Edward Donlan, who believed in a big future for his beautiful valley. His legacy will have lasted over fifty years in 1997, providing an area which receives an average of only fourteen inches of precipitation annually the opportunity to diversify and stabilize its agricultural-based economy. For a half-

century, farmer in the Missoula Valley, without receiving any attention or accolades, merely sent their irrigation-produced forage out to cattle ranchers year after year. Now the rest of the country has taken notice of the splendorous landscape of which those in the Frenchtown area had long known. And with the new found attention, an agricultural legacy first set down in Montana by Jesuit priests and Flathead Indians in the 1840's slowly disappeared.

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