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A BRIEF HISTORY of MACKAY

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The birth of Mackay in 1901 would come about as a result of a number of factors. As the 20th century broke, the Big Lost River valley was only sparsely settled, a number of homesteads dotting the landscape from Willow Creek summit and the upper valley down to the stage and freight stop at Kennedy's Corner where it opened out onto the snake river plain. By far the most the active and important settlement in the valley in 1900 was the town of Houston located on the river's south side some 4 miles downriver from what is now Mackay. It boasted a population of over 400, its importance primarily due its location near the significant mining operations going in the Alder Creek mining district of the White knob range.

One of the biggest of these mining operations belonged to the White Knob Mining co. with claims on the side of the mountains to the southwest. In 1901, under the supervision of mining engineer Wayne Darlington and financed by millionaire John Mackay of Nevada Comstock Lode fame, the company had started some very ambitious mining developments there on the "Mine Hill". These included construction of a 12-mile electric mountain railway system to transport ore down the mountain and a 600-ton smelter facility at the bottom to process it. To service his energetic enterprise, Mr. Darlington convinced the Oregon Shortline Railroad to construct a spur line from Blackfoot across the desert and up the valley, the tracks to end across the river from the smelter. But that wasn't all. His grand operation would employ hundreds and hundreds of men, some with families, so he planned a town, a company town, to be located where the tracks would end. Not at Houston, but on the opposite side of the river and some 3-4 miles up river. This new village would be named "**Mackay**" in honor of the enterprise's major investor. By the time the last rails were laid in September of that year the area of the new town had been platted, and even the roads graded and named. Darlington, a man given to detail, had planned for parks, schools and even a water system from springs on the hill. On October 14, 1901 a village governing body had been formed, and the town was officially incorporated.

Of course the birth of Mackay meant the ultimate demise of Houston and almost immediately there was an exodus of businesses and residents from Houston to the new village. Many buildings and dwellings were moved the few miles across the river including, among the first, a church parsonage and a drug store. Among the first buildings hastily erected on new town lots were the print shop and newspaper office of the Mackay Telegraph and law offices of attorney Nathan Clark. Of course, every arriving train brought scores of interested businessmen and entrepreneurs all with an eye to settlement or opening a business. Expansion of the new town was furious in those first years of existence and lots sold like hot cakes. Construction of many business buildings, as well as hotels and lodging houses, took place almost immediately but were soon followed by the erection of churches, schools and other public buildings. As the village swelled with an influx of workers and those looking to settle, the town may have had its greatest population, to several thousand. Right

(2)

from the onset there was a shortage of family dwellings. It would be the mining company, with much interest in the success of the new village, which alleviated the housing shortage by contracting the construction of 24 single-family homes.

In the years to follow, the railhead town would establish itself as a very significant community, growing not only as mining operations on the hill flourished and continued to expand, but also as result of valley settlement and the growth of farming and ranching; growth from an agricultural industry that was expedited with the promise of year round water provided by the building of a dam and irrigation system.

THAT DAMN DAM!

An integral part of any history of Mackay and of the lost river valley was the construction of the Mackay dam and reservoir and an irrigation system designed to supply water to a large Carey Act reclamation project near Arco. From the earliest, the prospect of storing river water for irrigation had been contemplated and in 1908 dam construction was begun at the "Narrows" about 4 miles above Mackay. The project was a controversial one from the onset, the town folk of Mackay fearing the result of a dam failure. Flaws in dam design and construction resulted in suspension of construction. It was only after significant changes in design and a new contractor that the dam was completed and water stored in 1918. Even with the completion of the canal and water delivery system in the 20's, relations between water users and dam owners only seemed to worsen as many farms and ranches dried up between the dam and Arco. This led to extreme measures, even blowing up of the dam and canal diversions in 1933. It wasn't until 1935 when the dam and system were purchased by water users that some degree of peace and control over water would reign among farmers and ranchers in the valley; an occasion celebrated for the last 65 years every September with the annual free BBQ. Through the years, Mackay has benefited greatly as result of the dam. From the earliest days of impoundment to the present, the area has been a recreational and fisherman's Mecca, in addition to the pluses of irrigation and flood control.

From the very beginning Mackay distinguished itself as the most progressive of small towns in the entire state. Immediately following its birth it boasted of a modern water supply system with fire hydrants and pressurized water to dwellings in the village. By 1912 the village had a electric power generation plant furnishing electric lights and power to its Main street and its residents, and electrification of the valley by the REA had its start here. By 1909 Mackay had a working telephone exchange with nearly 100 in-town subscribers and expansion to the farm community soon to follow. They could boast of having the area's first movie theater (and the talkies), the first golf course, the valley's first newspaper, the first hospital in the valley, hosting of the first of spectacular Lost River Fairs and home of one of the finest horse racing tracks in this part of Idaho, the first airfield in the valley, home of the finest fishing in the West, and sheepishly the "Moonshine Capital of the Nation". And of course the community could brag of its past mining industry. Year after year it was the biggest producer of copper in the state, and also ranked among the leading areas in sheep and cattle production. Today, the place abounds with evidence of this illustrious history. From the "Mackay mansion" and early home of Dr. Gue, to Main Street's old Strunk building and Perk's Place, to the

(3)

state's largest BBQ oven in the 80-year-old Tourist Park, to the "Mine Hill" above town with its many historic sites and structures, to the existence of the Women's Club of Mackay still meeting after 93 years.

Mackay has managed to survive for 100 years, through two world wars, many droughts, the Great Depression, earthquakes, the loss of the railroad, and, for nearly half a century, an economy based in large on the roller coaster of a mining industry. Its population has varied from several thousand to several hundred, and it continues to hang in there. This beautiful, unique, scenic place continues to lure first-time visitors and old time residents alike. The thousands attending the annual free BBQ each year, a homecoming or reunion for many, testify to this. The only ones to leave are those forced to by economic concerns. "I had to leave to make a living, but my heart is still in Mackay and I'll always love the place", confesses a dental hygienist now residing in Blackfoot.

Today, some 50 years after the end of its mining's heyday and subsequent loss of the railroad, Mackay has survived. This may be a result of a stable ranching and farming industry, its scenic beauty, tourism and its recreational opportunities, residents of the INEEL workforce, or its substantial retired community. But there exists a spirit here that suggests Mackay survives today because of the same perseverance of the area's earliest settlers and homesteaders; a love for the area and community that just refuses to let this place fade away to ghost town status as so many other old mining towns of the West.