

# Gold Creek

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In 1989, no one could have convinced me I'd ever want to see the Gold Creek drainage again. Then, it was a devastated wasteland hammered by the worst examples of rapacious logging driven by corporate greed. Further, it was a personal Golgotha, ground zero of an explosion in my own career as a journalist. To put it bluntly, it was the place that got me fired. Yet thirty-three years on here I stand, happy to see it.

The story of how this all came to be isn't just mine, but winds deeply in American history and the conquest of the West. Gold Creek is a watershed formed by a tributary of Montana's Big Blackfoot River, the river that runs through Norman Maclean's novella (1976) and the film based on it. Every sentient soul who lives where I live knows this river as the liquid narrative thread of our ecological history.

In the late 19th century, as railroad and copper barons began divvying up the proceeds of conquest, the United States adopted a number of steps to encourage exploitation. Railroad companies got vast land grants as an inducement to build lines and settlers got homesteads on timbered lands. The railroad lands in western Montana accrued eventually to a single corporation, the Plum Creek Timber Company, and the settlers' lands claimed under the Timber and Stone Act quickly transferred to the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, which needed the timber for railroad ties, mine post and beams and fuel for smelters. Those latter lands then passed to a timber giant, Champion International. Together the two corporations wound up owning 688,000 hectares in Western Montana, an area larger than the state of Delaware. In the mid 1980s, both corporations quietly abandoned sustained yield forestry to liquidate, to strip their own assets.

I was a newspaper reporter then in Missoula, and got wind of it. A photographer and I spent weeks driving the two-track logging roads of the Gold Creek drainage, a place where those industrial lands were heavily concentrated. We documented the outrage, clearcut by clearcut, every tree ripped from steep mountain slopes using some of the most abusive and cheapest possible logging methods, such as skidding logs straight downslope with bulldozers, thereby leaving trenches ready to erode to gaping gashes with

spring runoff. The corporations were free to do so under a commercial logic similar to that which allowed plantation owners to beat their slaves to death in the pre-Civil War South.

I wrote a series of stories for my newspaper that created such pressure on my bosses that they pulled me off the beat. So I quit the paper, retooled my career and went to work as an independent environmental author. What I had learned about corporate logging and corporate journalism made me crave independence. That work took me far and wide, around the world, a long ways from Gold Creek. Meanwhile, Champion International and the Plum Creek Timber Company did indeed cut and run, despite their denials right up to the end. They sold off their land at fire sale prices commensurate with the damage they had done.

Be grateful now that some people see catastrophe as opportunity. Champion almost immediately sold all of its land to Plum Creek, but shortly thereafter, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) began dealing with Plum Creek – ultimately buying outright more than 200,000 hectares of ravaged timber lands spread throughout western Montana. About 7,000 hectares of that was in the Gold Creek drainage, which altogether covers about 17,000 hectares. So far, TNC has restored and transferred almost 6,000 hectares to public ownership, either the Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with another 2,000 hectares treated and transferred in the nearby Twin Creek Drainage. All of it is a giant project in restoration ecology now at work for almost two decades. As TNC finishes its work, it has been and will continue to transfer lands to BLM, to add to the considerable spread of public lands surrounding a massive landscape that includes the Rattlesnake Wilderness, Mission Mountain Wilderness and just to the east, the storied Bob Marshall Wilderness. It all hangs together, and a river does indeed run through it.

But unlike all those other places, the Gold Creek drainage has been considerably trampled by humanity, and that's the issue daunting TNC's land managers: how one restores on this scale in the wake of such devastation.

They got some help in this from a couple of long-dead homesteaders named Primm. It's not quite true I turned my back on Gold Creek when I left my newspaper job. I returned the following year on a tip from a friend. An elk hunter who had been exploring the drainage, he got lost, and stumbled onto a miracle. I followed his directions to see for myself, and I found it, there, smack in the middle of the clearcuts, up an abandoned logging road – a hallucinatory vision that transported me back a couple of centuries. Its salient feature was a stand of monarch ponderosa pine hundreds of years old, trees I could not reach around, towering sentinels over a series of meadows, willows, sedges, riparian splendour. Under the trees stood a couple of log buildings and a tombstone over the grave of Mahala Primm, the homesteader who had died and was buried here in 1977. Her husband had died earlier, and heirs sold the land to Champion, but the timber corporation for whatever reason never logged it, probably because the old-growth trees were too big to fit their mills.

The sight of this sylvan wonder on a sunny June day in no way invokes the chaos of wildfire, the sweeping walls of flame that have become the norm in

the Northern Rockies. Appearances notwithstanding, this is all about fire, even here. This past summer, I held a series of conversations with three of TNC's land managers, Chris Bryant, Michael Schaedel and Steven Kloetzel. Their training and backgrounds are mostly in forestry and this place was forest, but we mostly talked about restoring fire, not forests. And in this matter, the Primm property is their model (Figure 1).

Bryant told me a couple of stories. First, in 2003 one of the area's frequent and large wildfires swept through the drainage, which may contradict one's notion that clearcuts leave nothing to burn. The industrial timber lands were re-seeded chockablock with trees all the same species and age, by the time of the fire a decade or two old. Those plantations burned like bombs – a searing, uncontrollable fire that more or less sterilized everything in its path. As this was happening, a TNC contractor was camped in a canvas wall tent on the Primm property, and the same fire swept that place. The contractor returned to find his tent still standing. Only the guy ropes had burned. The monarch ponderosa barely noticed the fire's intrusion. They'd been there and done that before.

The explanation for this is more revealing. Schaedel tells me that TNC's staff happened to find an old-line Champion forester who had known the Primms well. In certain times of year, he would help them set fire to their land, just as the native people who came before had done for centuries before. Fire was the technology that nurtured what we today regard as sylvan wonder.

“What's missing? Our cultural relationship with fire. We have no real cultural relationship with fire,” says Bryant.

There are two crucial points embedded in this quote, and of course the physical act of restoring fire to the land is one of these. And yes, fire comes of its own accord now with global warming, but that's a problem too; catastrophic sweeps of fire that can destroy in a single afternoon years of the best laid plans



**Figure 1.** A fire burning on the Primm property (photo copyright Jeremy Roberts/Conservation Media).

of ecologists and foresters. Both a long history of fire suppression and plantations have loaded the landscape with fuel so that it's now a tightly coiled spring ready to release. The trick is to undo the spring's tension bits at a time: to deliberately burn some and leave some, thin some, create breaks, take advantage of previous fires, steer the landscape toward diversity, disorder, chaos even, to let it become what it wants to become, even when fire comes. Restoration here is not imposing a forester's blueprint on the land. The land managers are really just trying to come up with a rough outline. Fire chooses the verbs and nouns, the reveal and reversal that fills in the narrative.

This is where the notion of restoration of human culture to accept fire underscored almost all of the conversations with the TNC people.

Bryant has stressed throughout that his staff early on worked to establish strong relationships with the nearby reservation, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the people who inhabited this landscape pre-conquest and still manage vast tracts of forest, part of the Mission Mountain Wilderness and now the National Bison Range. TNC has directly engaged tribal leaders and experts, and asked them what they wanted to see on the land, and yes, they said fire. But there is a more revealing story.

Not far from Primms' meadow, there is another, but with a less fortunate history. In spring, during runoff, it was often invaded by an odd subset of humanity called here "mudders," people who wield hot-rodged four-wheel drive vehicles to torture the land for their amusement. Even Champion's managers could not stomach this and so bulldozed a berm to keep the mudders out. When tribal leaders saw this spot decades later, their response was: Where are the camas?

Travel back roads and hiking trails long enough in Montana in spring, and you will be treated to a mesmerizing mirage, a vision ahead in a clearing of a deep blue expanse that appears for all the world like a shimmering surface of a lake where there never was one before. This is a camas bloom, the pale blue flower of a plant (*Camassia*) with a root that was an important food source for Salish people, still highly regarded.

The berm to keep out the mudders had created a ditch that drained the meadow. Camas need wetlands. The tribal people's observation told TNC there is more restoration to be done.

There is, however, looming in this whole story an even more important bit of cultural restoration. Any US environmentalist with a grasp of the politics would undoubtedly cringe at my earlier mention of BLM's role in this project. The bureau has a terrible reputation and deservedly so, known aptly as the Bureau of Logging and Mining. Yet everyone I talked to about this work had nothing but praise for the Bureau's role here, and much of that work proceeded during the Trump Administration, when the BLM was headed by William Perry Pendley, a man openly hostile to public lands and environmental restoration. This is not as contradictory as it sounds, a pretty well-known phenomenon of US federal agencies. They tend to be responsive to local sentiment and cultural pressure. More than any other place I know of, the Blackfoot River drainage has for generations harboured and nurtured a respect for the landscape, centuries'

worth of deep respect tracing back through the Salish and characters like Norman Maclean and Bob Marshall (one of the founders of the Wilderness Society). This is the necessary foundation of restoration. It builds only over generations and patient work through a process the TNC managers call “bad coffee and shoe leather,” but it builds.

There’s an odd little sidebar buried in this story that I need to disclose, both for journalistic honesty but also because it illustrates this larger point. Back in my newspaper days, I met a young environmentalist who was new to Montana, but letting the land and the people of this place shape her values and aspirations. We were married shortly thereafter and she embarked on a career that engaged through thirty years of bad coffee and shoe leather many of these very acres and these very people working to restore the wild of western Montana. One thing led to another, and in 2021, President Biden appointed Tracy Stone-Manning director of the BLM, so she now heads the bureau that oversees 247 million acres, ten per cent of the land area of the United States. She brings to the job the values and skills forged in this very landscape. This is another way restoration scales.

## Reference

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