

The Crown Jewel Comes Home

By Jodie Canfield, Elkhorn Coordinator

The Crown Jewel of the Elkhorn Mountains is now a public treasure since the Helena National Forest purchased Crow Creek Falls in 2004. Until then, this spectacular waterfall sat in the middle of a 20-acre patented mining claim.

In 1895, Crow Creek Falls was just another pretty place. The local paper, *The Townsend Messenger*, published an article entitled "One Day's Ramble" by "Little Joe." In this article, Little Joe describes the falls: "The falls are not over twelve feet across and take the plunge from a granite cradle in a perpendicular fall of about fifty feet. Ten feet from the bottom a villainous looking rock protrudes a brawny arm into the falling water, showing into the sunlight a million sparkling gems."

The Elkhorn Forest Reserve was permanently withdrawn (by Presidential proclamation) from the public domain in 1905. Because of the 1872 Mining Law, three individuals were able to patent the falls in 1924, essentially carving out a 20-acre private mining claim they called the Hawkeye Placer. Some locals estimate that the dozer work that made the trail drivable from Tin Cup Creek to the bench above Crow Creek was done in the late thirties; road construction essentially ended in the early forties when mining activities were stopped by fuel shortages due to WWII. But the road never reached Crow Creek Falls itself. In 1978, the Helena National Forest made a decision to close the area and the road to motorized vehicles; the old road became part of the non-motorized trail system (Trail #135).

In 1981, the owner of the claim illegally reopened the old roadbed and in 1983 extended the road to the falls. Ignoring a series of citations, convictions and a restraining order, he eventually drove equipment into the claim, for which he was arrested, but was released on his own recognizance. He went back to the claim and diverted the falls via a head gate at the top of the falls, and a hole, blasted through the adjacent rock, took the water through a wooden flume to the bottom of the property where it dumped back into the streambed. This diversion, along with a pump, allowed him to dredge the streambed below the falls.

The legacy of this mining was abandoned heavy equipment, camp trailers, and other debris. With time, people again visited the falls, no longer posted against trespassers, to see the water falling majestically over rock, and shook their heads at the littered remains of an unsuccessful mining venture.

What happened next changed the fate of Crow Creek Falls forever. Mitch Godfrey, an investment

banker living in the Townsend area, was fishing Crow Creek when he came upon the ravaged falls property. He mentioned his chagrin to Ernie Nunn, retired Helena Forest Supervisor and owner of the Silos Bar and Restaurant. Ernie introduced Mitch to Butch Marita, a retired Forest Service Regional Forester and part time Townsend resident. Butch was also a board member of a group called the American Land Conservancy, a non-profit group specializing in conservation solutions to



threatened land and water. Together with John Flynn, and Lynn Robson they formed the core of the Crow Creek Falls Citizen's Group, whose goal was to clean up the falls and turn it over to the Forest Service.

On a hot summer day in 2001, an assemblage of horses and riders, including Harriet Burgess, President of the American Land Conservancy (ALC) in San Francisco, rode to Crow Creek Falls across the ridges and creeks of the Elkhorn Mountains from Eagle Guard Station. Both the members of the Citizen's Group and the Forest Service employees on that fateful ride hoped that Harriet might fall in love with the Elkhorn Mountains and its most renowned waterfall.

It turned out that Harriet did love waterfalls, and in under a year (relatively lightening speed considering the history of Crow Creek Falls) ALC

purchased the Hawkeye Placer, and its crown jewel, Crow Creek Falls for \$150,000 on April 15, 2002.

ALC applied for a road use permit from the Forest Service to use motorized equipment to access the property and remove the equipment. When the call to clean up Crow Creek Falls was out, many groups and people came forward to help. Dick Juntunen (private consultant), the Montana Mining Association, Graymont Western US Inc. of Townsend, Montana Power and Equipment, Quarry Services, and Broadwater County contributed the equipment and labor, estimated at over \$40,000, needed to reclaim the property.

Getting heavy equipment out of the falls was no light undertaking. The final quarter mile to the falls consists of a 35% grade on a shale-strewn slope. Working up and down this grade took both intestinal fortitude as well as temporary insanity. Dick Juntunen, John Hinthier (Graymont) and Steve Heitschmidt (Graymont) provided much of the brain and brawn for this risky operation.

By nightfall, two of the three pieces of old equipment sat in a meadow, and the following day they were loaded onto lowboys and driven out. The remainder of the operation included cutting up and burying the crane and reshaping the disturbed ground. Forest Service employees helped clean up garbage and remove contaminated soil. It took only two weeks to free Crow Creek Falls from its past and to transform a junkyard to a site with a future of family picnics. For their clean-up efforts, the Crow Creek Falls Citizen's Group and other volunteers received the 2003 Wildlife Conservation Award from the Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society.

The Crow Creek Falls Group submitted a proposal for \$150,000 to the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust for purchase of the parcel. The Trust granted \$75,000 and the Northern Region of the Forest Service was able to match the \$75,000 with lands funds. Finally, in the summer of 2004, the Helena National Forest purchased Crow Creek Falls from the American Land Conservancy.

So as the story ends, people visit the falls not only to witness the water falling majestically over the rock, but also to turn in a full circle and smile at the adjacent scenery on their public lands.

For a more complete history of Crow Creek Falls, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/elkhorns/elkrecreation/index.shtml> and look for "History of the Crow Creek Falls" and check out "Crow Creek Falls Essay."