

HISTORICAL ESSAY: A Reprint from 1994 on the USFS Land Acquisition

“Who needs a soap opera when you have Monte Cristo?” That comment has been made a number of times over the years, especially in reference to the ongoing saga of the Monte Cristo Resorts, Inc. and its mixed bag of shareholders. It was the burning of the lodge in March 1983 and the resulting massive vandalism when word got out that the area was abandoned that led to the formation of MCPA in the following month. Since that time we have worked with a wide variety of options, offers, and prospective buyers to help MCR unload its unwanted investment. This year the deal finally came about.

After intensive lobbying and even more intense negotiations, the Trust for Public Lands was able to purchase the resort property and then in turn sell it to the U.S. Forest Service. Peter Scholes of the Trust worked unbelievably hard, with one shareholder trying his best to forestall all agreement, and the others generally trying to work something out. In the end, Scholes was successful. John Trimble ends up with a lifetime arrangement to use one cabin and a portion of the former parking lot/railroad yard, and the public owns approximately half the town lots together with a number of mining claims.

These claims border the townsite and also are clustered along Mystery Ridge and the Glacier Basin area. These include the Remnant, Mystery, Pride of the Woods, Washington, Cadet, Side Line, Pride of the Mountains, and Blake Placer. On the Silver Lake side are the Fontenoy Hierosolyma, and Thomas Moore.

In the townsite, virtually all of the lots along Dumas Street in the main business and residential part of the town still are privately owned. The Forest Service takes over most of the lots from Dumas Street westward to 76 Creek, along with the cabins and ruins in the parking lot area which lie in the Junction Placer No. 2 claim and technically are not part of the platted townsite. (The town was laid out and platted in 1893 in portions of Junction Placers Nos. 1, 2, and 3.)

A second large block of claims also was purchased by the River Network of Portland, Oregon through negotiations between Phil Wallin and the owner, Mark Wagner. Wagner had purchased almost a dozen claims, up the 76 Gulch, from the Hancock Life Insurance Company as a speculation. He had done this previously at Goat Lake and made a profit by threatening to clearcut these properties inside the Henry M. Jackson Wilderness Area. Knowing how he worked, MCPA refused to ally itself with his pressure tactics and instead sought to have the properties become public land. As a result, the Ibex Nos. 1 and 2, Emma Moore, Uncle Sam, 74 and 77 lodes, Monte Cristo, Summit, Congress, and parts of the Glacier and Junction Placer No. 3 are part of the national forest. Had we known of the Hancock property being for sale, we might have saved a large amount of taxpayer money by trying to purchase and resell it ourselves, but instead we had to deal with what again was a profitable speculation.

We owe a great deal of thanks to the efforts of M.C.P.A. President Sharon Holmes [Henry], Senator Patty Murray, Representative Al Swift, former Darrington

District Ranger Fred Harnisch, and many other members and supporters for their assistance in bringing about these sales.

As the government purchased them with Land and Water Conservation Fund monies, the lands cannot be logged or mined, and thus will be protected. This also eliminates the two largest blocks of possible mineral lands and greatly reduces the odds for future commercial mining. The Forest Service also made no attempt to force any private land owner to sell. Thus Monte Cristo remains an historic blend of public and private holdings.

David Cameron