

# The Power of Acme's Past

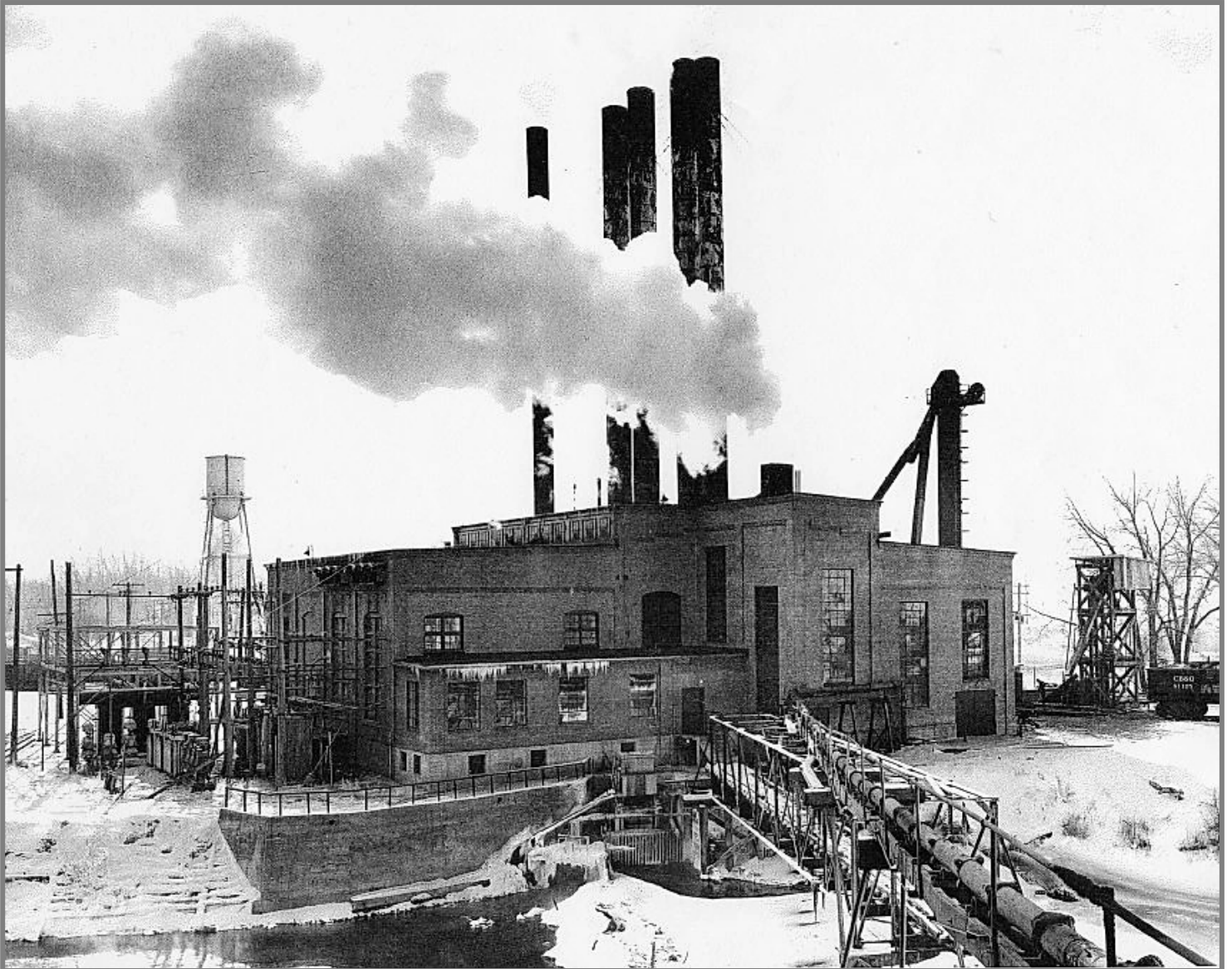


Photo from Ed Zowada Collection, Sheridan County Historical Society & Museum.

## Historical Background and Personal Narratives

Prepared by: Presleigh Hayashida, Robert Joyce, & Sara Kirkpatrick



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## Introduction

In a small field between the Tongue River and Goose Creek stands a piece of Wyoming's history. The Acme coal-fired electric power plant, which closed in 1976, towers above what remains of the town of Acme itself. The power facility is the last building standing in the former town site, a testament to its enduring importance to the history and culture of Wyoming.

This report is part of an ongoing effort to determine the future of the power plant. The plant, located just a few miles south of the Montana border in Sheridan County, is now under the ownership of the Sheridan County Conservation District (SCCD). The building has been deteriorating for decades and is currently unsafe for the public to enter.

However, the importance of the plant and surrounding townsite has not faded from public interest. A broad coalition of invested groups and individuals have been working together and in support of the SCCD to determine the fate of the Acme power plant and this report aims to inform that work.

***"The Acme power plant just never went down. It was the power plant that could."***

***-Bonnie Turner***

## Objectives

Three students from the University of Wyoming, under the sponsorship of the SCCD, conducted a research project in the summer of 2018 in order to achieve the following objectives and to help shape the future of site.

- **Objective 1** - *Advising on area history*: While a significant amount of historical information on the Acme site is available, key components regarding the site's history will be identified to help further inform how historical information can be included in future uses.
- **Objective 2** - *Collect personal narratives*: Many local residents have a strong connection to the Acme site. This deep connection to the site will be recorded by interviewing local residents and documenting their stories.
- **Objective 3** - *Site recommendations*: Objectives 1 and 2 will inform recommendations for the future of the power plant, as well as provide a framework for how to include the public in the future.

## Acme Townsite and Power Plant History

Wyoming has been a major U.S. coal producer for well over 100 years. The Powder River Basin, encompassing most of Northeastern Wyoming (including Sheridan County) and into Montana, still produces 40% of the nation's coal (Energy Information Administration, 2020). Understanding the

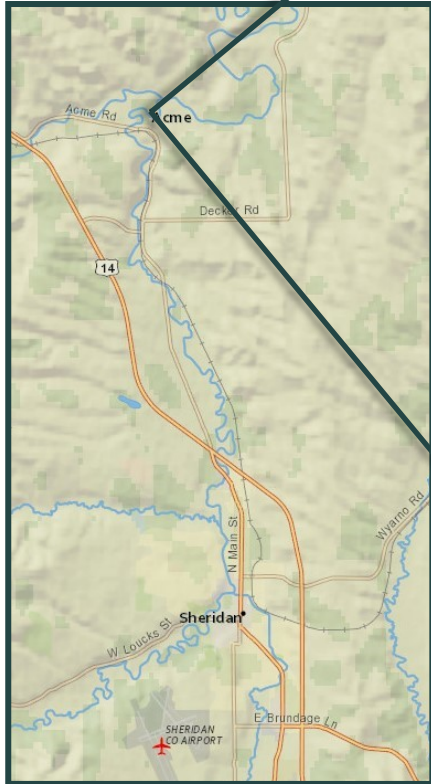


Figure 1: Location of Acme townsite and powerplant, just 12 miles north of the town of Sheridan. Aerial photo shows the Tongue River to the North and Goose creek to the South.

physical and cultural history of the Acme townsite and power plant will better prepare SCCD and other constituents to plan for future potential uses of the building and site.

## Pre-Mining Era (Presettlement-1910)

Prior to European settlement Native American tribes including the Shoshone, Northern Cheyenne, Northern Arapaho, Sioux, and Crow inhabited the country along the eastern slope of the Bighorn Mountains. Abundant resources including wildlife, timber, and fresh water from the Tongue River and Goose Creeks have sustained human life in the area as far back as 10,000 B.C. (Georgen, 2010). Although relatively little archaeological work has been conducted at the specific Acme townsite and power plant site, there have been significant discoveries of Native American artifacts at other locations in the region, including a “buffalo jump” site located 15 miles west of the town of Sheridan and significant artifacts and dwelling sites near the mining town of Decker, MT, just 9 miles northeast of Acme along the Tongue River (U.S. Department of Interior, 1976; Frison, 1967). A cultural resource inventory report for a site just 5 miles north of Acme also found multiple Native American artifacts (Ferguson and Meyer, 2001).



European visitation to the area came as early as 1805, when fur trappers began trading with the Crow. The signing of the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1851 designated the Bighorn Mountains and its foothills as Crow territory. This designation was short lived as conflicts with other tribes destabilized tribal boundaries, later exacerbated through conflicts with the United States Army. The Bozeman Trail, which passed near the Acme site, brought European prospectors on route to gold deposits found in Southwest Montana. By the 1870's Europeans began permanently settling in current day Sheridan. Spurred by the productivity of the coal mines and coupled with the completion of the Burlington Route rail line in 1892, the population in Sheridan County increased from 1,559 in 1900 to 8,408 in 1910 (U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, 1913).

## Power Plant Construction and Operation (1910 - 1976)

Archie Craig purchased the land that would become Acme, Wyoming and opened a coal mine there in 1911. The construction of the coal fired power plant, which provided electricity to the town of Sheridan as well as the mining camps in the area, was completed that same year. Stanley Kuzara's comprehensive book on the history of these mining towns titled, "Black Diamonds of Sheridan" references one early media report about the power plant:

"The Sheridan Electric Company has its big plant located on the New Acme Grounds, deriving its water supply from the Tongue River into which the Goose Creek flows only a few hundred yards away. From this location power is not only supplied to Sheridan and the Sheridan Railway Company but all the adjacent mining camps as well, with the exception of Carneyville...The plant with its wonderful equipment and modern machinery, was a revelation to all for the first time the people knew that Sheridan County can well boast of having one of the largest electrical plants in the entire Northwest." (Kuzara, 1977. p. 113)

A 1912 publication from the Sheridan Chamber of Commerce also highlights the substantial impact the power plant had on the area, stating:

"The Sheridan Electric Lights & power Company's new steam turbine plant on the Tongue River, completed last year at a cost of \$300,000, is one of the most substantial and best equipped plants in the west, as will be attested by any competent engineer. Situated ten miles north of the city, in the vicinity of the coal camps, the plant supplies light and power for Sheridan, the mines and Fort Mackenzie and power for the operation of the city and interurban electric system. The city is served by a 22,000 volt transmission line constructed at a cost of \$33,000." (Sheridan Chamber of Commerce, 1912. p. 19)

The mining camps themselves served as a major draw for people seeking work in the late 19th and early 20th century. Early on, the coal towns of Dietz, Monarch, Carneyville (later renamed Kleenburn), Acme, Kooi, and Model employed over 5,000 people when operating at full capacity, with the most productive mines producing 3,000 tons per day (Sheridan Chamber of Commerce, 1912). People from a large variety of backgrounds and nationalities including Polish, Japanese, Italian and others migrated to these mining towns looking for steady work.

Underground mining operations persisted in Acme until 1940 when the mines were shut down permanently, though other mining operations in the area continued to supply fuel for the plant. The power plant remained in operation until 1976 under the operation of the Montana Dakota Utility Company (MDU).

## Current Period (1976-2020)

Since the closing of the power plant in 1976 the site has had numerous owners. Strip mining operations in the area surrounding Acme continue to this day and coal is still transported via rail lines surrounding Sheridan. The last residents of Acme were forced to vacate the town after the purchase of the Acme town site by Big Horn Coal in 1977, who had condemned many of the buildings. Some of the small homes that once lined the streets of Acme were moved into the town of Sheridan or sold to individual ranches in the area. Today the power plant and water tower are the only substantial structures left at the site.

Recreation has become the new primary use of the Acme town site. While visitors are not allowed into or around the power plant itself, the unique location just upstream from the confluence of the Tongue River and Goose Creek has made the site and surrounding area a popular destination for hunters and anglers, dog walkers, joggers, and others seeking solitude. The area is also a popular destination for history buffs and educators, seeking a glimpse into Wyoming's past. Alongside the power plant, the Acme townsite still retains a few housing foundations, rusted bridges, and the faint traces of main street. Nearby, the Monarch townsite has a few remaining buildings, including a church (which has been converted into a residence), and both sites have impressive water towers. An interpretive trail and audio tour, established in 2012 by the Sheridan Community Land Trust and Wyoming Historic Preservation Work Group, will take travelers through the "Black Diamond Historic Mine Trail" and is just another important part of the historic preservation work that can be found in Sheridan County.

Efforts to reclaim and protect the plant began in 2017 after being acquired by SCCD. In the intervening years between the plants closure in 1976 and its acquisition by the SCCD, the site had

been subject to a variety of uses under a host of different owners. Plans to repurpose the building have come and gone over the years, but for the last two decades the plant site has been used primarily for dumping and salvage. A three-phase site assessment conducted under contract for the Environmental Protection Agency in 2017 concluded that the area in and around the plant had significant amounts of hazardous

materials, including asbestos, lead paint and other potentially harmful chemicals. Cleanup of the site is ongoing and is expected to be completed within a 5 to 10-year timeframe.



Figure 2: Acme powerplant from just upstream on the Tongue River. Photo from Sheridan Community Land Trust

## Historical Summary

The deep-rooted history of Acme and its role in shaping many of the communities and culture that exist in Sheridan and the surrounding areas are but a few reasons why the place is so special. There are many historic places and landmarks in Wyoming and each help tell the story of the state's complex and compelling historical events, but few of these places are so vividly connected to current communities of people who grew up in a place or have passed on their values to the next generation. In this way, the Acme site and the experiences of the people who have a connection to that place are still very much alive.

Institutions like the Sheridan County Museum (now the Museum of the Bighorns) and the impressive collection of historical documents, artifacts, and personal information at Sheridan County Library's Wyoming Reading Room, are a testament to the community's commitment to preserving their history. The Acme site and the building stand alongside these institutions, more than a memory, but a place where those experiences can be relived and remembered.

Acme has a rich history. It is the foundation that has supported the sustained growth of the area's communities for generations. Understanding this history through the personal narratives below helps to give us a more detailed picture of past and to define the significance of the Acme power plant.



## Personal Narratives

Many personal connections to the bygone coal communities in Sheridan County still exist. These connections often stretch over

generations, between families and neighbors, and make up the core foundation of communities in Sheridan, Buffalo, Big Horn and Ranchester. The goal of our research is to capture those connections via personal narratives, told through stories and interviews, and to incorporate those into recommendations for the future of the plant site.

***Three themes emerged from the interview process: Community, Energy, and Environment***

To achieve Objective 2, collect personal narratives, we interviewed individuals who had a direct connection to the Acme townsite or power plant. Previous residents of Monarch were also included, due to its close geographic proximity to Acme. Nearly 20 people were interviewed over the course of three months. The majority of our interview subjects were born in the 1940's and 1950's. This generation spent most of their childhood in Acme, but later relocated when the town was bought out and shut down.

Interview subjects were identified using a snowball sampling technique, where each interview subject was asked to identify at least one other potential interview subject. This sampling method was particularly effective due to the continued closeness of this community. As connections were made with previous residents of Acme or Monarch, other potential subjects were often recommended. The "Memories of Sheridan" and the "Acme, Wyoming" Facebook pages were other great resources for contacting interviewees. Interviews were conducted between June and

August of 2018 and consisted of a standard set of questions (See Appendix). Both individual and group interviews were conducted. A small digital audio recorder was used to capture these interviews for further synthesis and submission to SCCD.

Interview questions were developed in coordination with SCCD. Inspired by Storycorps, a personal narrative format made popular by National

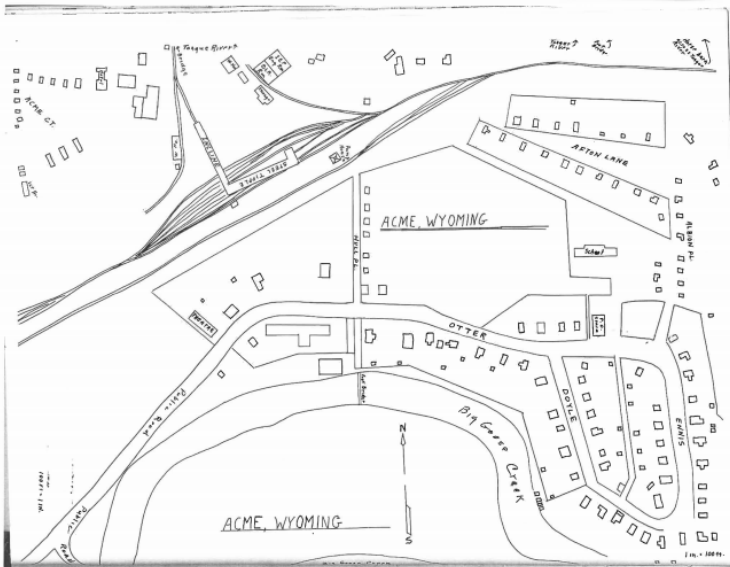


Figure 3. Hand-drawn map of Acme, drawn from memory by a group of former Acme residents. Map can be found in the Wyoming Room of the Sheridan County Library.

Public Radio, these questions asked participants to recall memories of the town of Acme and the power plant. These personal narratives provide a sense of what life in the area was like while the power plant was in operation. The interviews also provided insight on the communities' dispersal after the plant closed. Finally, participants gave recommendations on future uses of the power plant site. Three key themes emerged during the interview process which help categorize the personal narratives: community, energy, and environment.

## Key Themes from Personal Narratives

### Community

A strong sense of community was the first key theme that emerged in the personal narratives of Acme residents. Alongside the rich family heritage preserved in this community, there was a culture of trust and support between neighbors. Bonnie Turner said, "there's a comradery between us that's hard to describe." Although most interviewees had left decades ago, their memories of life in Acme are vibrant. School dances, baseball games, and picnics are just some of the activities that brought this community together.

***"My dad said it was the best growing up he could have."***

***-Sherry Laughton***

The coal miners that lived and worked in this region brought with them a diverse range of heritage and culture. Miners were often immigrants, coming from Poland, Italy, Japan, and elsewhere. Bonnie Turner and other former residents recall hearing the many different languages spoken by Acme residents.

Extended families typically lived together or near one another. Interview participants recalled living near grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The area was filled with large families that typically had several children. These children were raised not only close to their family but also with the help of friendly neighbors.

Interview participants recalled multiple incidents where neighbors helped keep each other safe. Turner recalls, "I jumped on a rusty nail and I was bleeding from my foot over by Sherry's, and her father saw me and picked me up and took me to emergency." Words including safe, trusting, and supportive were used multiple times to describe the community. School was another center of life for Acme residents. Dances and other events were often held at the school. Parents and other members of the community would volunteer to teach Polka lessons, to play the accordion, or to coach football teams.

## Energy

The second theme identified in these personal narratives was the importance of energy within the history of the region. Coal was mined to power trains, generate electricity, and heat homes. The power plant in turn was able to provide electricity to Sheridan and many of the coal camps. The plant even powered the electric tram that ran from Sheridan to the mining towns until 1924. When the coal mines and power plant were built in the early 1900's, they were considered to be modern technology. These key sources of energy helped shape Sheridan County as we know it today.

Throughout history, Wyoming coal has continued to be a major source of energy for the U.S. and abroad. With the arrival of the railroad to Sheridan in 1892, in addition to the high demand for coal, thousands of people looking for work began to flock to coal camps north of Sheridan. Acme and Monarch were two company owned towns that thrived during this time.

The work in the underground mines was often taxing and dangerous. Bill Mentock, a former resident of Monarch, collected all the mining accident reports over the course of the Monarch mine's operation. One tragic example comes from Bonnie Turner, who recounts an injury her father sustained while working in the Monarch mine, "My father was in a mining accident where both of his legs were cut off by a 10-ton motor." Although working in the underground mines was not ideal, these workers played a very real and meaningful role in advancing society. Coal from these mines would go on to power not only Sheridan, but the rest of the country.

The power plant was another critical energy source. It became an institution the community could depend upon. The interview participants recall the workers having 'a real pride' in their work. Mike Kuzara remembers the details behind the power plant's operation. His father worked at the power plant as a machinist up until his death. When the shift workers didn't have anything to do, they would clean the plant. The inside of the building was described to be "pristine" and "beautiful." Mike said "You could drop a sandwich anywhere and you could pick it back up and you wouldn't have anything but your sandwich there."

Along with being well maintained, the plant was dependable in providing power, it had three different backup systems. Once the Acme mine was closed in 1940, the power plant received its coal from a nearby mine in Welch. Mike explains they would keep two train cars full of coal, just in case the coal truck from Welch was unable to make it over to Acme. This is just an example of the careful measures the plant workers took to ensure systems ran smoothly, so no one would be without power.

## Environment

The final theme that developed in these personal narratives was the importance of the natural environment surrounding Acme. The power plant was purposefully built next to the Tongue River, to use the river water for plant operation and to cool hot ash. Yet, the river was not only used for practical purposes, it was the scene of many Acme residents' fondest memories.

Growing up in Acme, the children spent their free time along the river. In the summer they would swim, fish, or float down the river in makeshift canoes. Households in Acme often had gardens, and Charlotte Zowada recalled using the river to care for their plants. During the winter children would ice skate or play hockey on the river. Having the opportunity to recreate in the natural environment surrounding Acme was a key part of the community's culture.

***"We would play on the river quite a bit and explore all the hills around there."***

***-Bill Mentock***

While the rivers were another center of activity for the community, the water came with its own dangers. Reports of drownings, or falling into the icy waters during the winter, were not uncommon. Monarch experienced dangerous levels of flooding from the Tongue River in May of 1944. Both towns experienced ice jams, which also had the potential to cause flooding. Bonnie Turner remembers, "The men in the community blew it up with dynamite so it would flow freely." Acme and Monarch residents learned to survive within Wyoming's untamed natural environment.

## Personal Narrative Summary

The anecdotes and stories provided by some of Acme's previous residents, provide us a unique glimpse into exactly how this place shaped their lives, and the role the place still plays in preserving the memory of their experiences. These personal narratives serve as the centerpiece of this report and can help inform the efforts of each invested group to chart a path for the future of the Acme powerplant and townsite. The experiences shared by the interviewees tell the story of a community built on shared respect, compassion, and interests. In a time when our society's sense of trust and camaraderie seems to be diminishing, it seems all the more important to preserve the story of this historical community and what it can teach us today.

Much like the existing institutions preserving the long and storied history of the area, gatherings like the Monarch Miner's Picnic serve to preserve the culture and community built out of the former coal towns and their residents. In Sheridan, childhood

***The experiences shared by the interviewees tell the story of a community built on shared respect, compassion, and interests.***

friends still get together for afternoons on the porch to relive their experiences in towns like Acme, Kooi, Monarch and others. The Acme Wyoming Facebook page is visited frequently by previous residents and their descendants to share old photographs and stories or to ask questions about the whereabouts of an old neighbor or childhood friend. The relationships cultivated over generations between Acme residents continue to this day and add unique value to current day Sheridan and to the Acme townsite and powerplant.

## Recommendations for the Site - Honoring the Legacy

Recommendations for the Acme power plant are based on the collective narrative histories above and with consideration of the region's strong commitment to historic preservation. Although the towns of Acme, Monarch, Kooi and others, might no longer be physically present on the landscape, the communities that were built there and their contribution to Wyoming's history are not lost. In fact, the opposite is true; significant efforts have been taken to preserve, not just old buildings and historic landmarks, but whole communities of people who made those towns unique. The annual Monarch Picnic is a prime example of how very much alive these communities still are. Former residents of these coal towns, their descendants, and anyone interested in the history of the region gather together in the Bighorn mountains to trade stories, food, music, and camaraderie.



Figure 4: Students interview multiple former residents of Acme.

The synthesis of suggestions from the interviewees is divided into recommendations specifically for the power plant building, and then the broader Acme town site. When asked, "How can the community history be honored with the new reclamation project or what would you like to see done at the site?", responses ranged from placing a simple historical plaque, to the full restoration of the entire townsite as a historical and educational hub for the mining communities of Sheridan County.



## Future Use of the Site

Of the nearly 20 interview subjects who gave their opinion on the future use of the plant, the majority favored keeping the building if possible. However, there was also an understanding of the complex economic and logistical reasons that might keep the building from being reclaimed and restored. Leon Washut, author of *"We Are One Family: Polish Immigration to Sheridan County, Wyoming 1890 - 1920"* and resident of Monarch, WY stated that *"if the building is preservable, that would be preferred but it's understandable if not, it's probably a purely economic decision."*

The more vehement supporters of preserving the building expressed the importance of the physical structure to the generations of history that these mining towns contained. Esther Zowada-Mathews, who grew up in Acme, reflected the future of Acme and the power plant, *"I have children and grandchildren and I'll say 'Well I used to live in Acme' and they all say 'What, like where's Acme?', or people that you talk to, they don't even realize it existed at all, so to have something to remember where we shared all of our experiences... I would like to keep whatever is possible to keep those memories."*

While the SCCD owns only the power plant site, recommendations for the plant often snowballed into suggestions for the whole town site and discussion of ways to honor the mining and migrant culture of this area. Sherry Laughton, another childhood resident of Acme, described the unique way of life there as, *"a melting pot of people who came here from all over and settled here in Wyoming, you know I grew up with Polish friends and Greek friends, and then Italian families, Czechoslovakian friends, Montenegro folks, and we had a life that was a separate life from the town life."* These towns were once full, vibrant places where people danced, explored, and created communities together. From stories of polka dances and drive-in movies, to floating down the Tongue River on chunks of ice, the history is there however few physical monuments remain to convey it.

Laughton also spoke to that lack of remembrance, saying that it was important to *"in some way, re-create the life and honor the people who lived there and died there and had children there"* asking *"how many thousands of children must have been impacted by that mining community?"* Bonnie Turner, who also grew up in Acme, suggested the site be an oasis for people, *"a recreational oasis, a historical oasis, a place where folks, whether they have connections or not, can come there for picnics, can go there for family reunions; there could be a hostel type place connected with the college, where*

***"I have children and grandchildren and I'll say 'Well I used to live in Acme' and they all say 'What, like where's Acme?', or people that you talk to, they don't even realize it existed at all, so to have something to remember where we shared all of our experiences... I would like to keep whatever is possible to keep those memories."***

***- Esther Zowada-Mathews***

*we could bring people and teach them about this country, about what went on there.”* Of the town site, Bonnie also said *“we would love to go out there and have a good polka party, it could be a wedding venue. I would even say that there are those who would like to have their funerals out there, that’s sacred ground folks, it’s been bought and paid for over and over again by the lives of some very worthy folks.”* The idea of what the site could be was extremely exciting to the people we spoke with and while some of the ideas might not be feasible, the energy and enthusiasm exists within the community to restore the power plant and surrounding area to its former glory.

## Acme Town Site - Power Plant Not Restored

If the building cannot be restored enough to allow full entry or access, there is still an opportunity for it to serve as a physical reminder of the history that surrounds Sheridan. Some of the proposed suggestions were turning the building into a historical mural, community garden, artist retreat, or even an open-air outdoor recreation access point. Interviews suggest that if the building is indeed torn down, the community would still like to see some type of memorial dedicated to the mining communities of Sheridan County.

### Commemorative Plaque

Paul Perry, who grew up in Acme, was one of those who suggested a plaque honoring the miners and their families if keeping the building was not feasible. A commemorative plaque should be in clear view for public engagement. The plaque should contain enough information to give the viewer a clear understanding of the history of place and may need to be coupled with a larger information sign.

### Interpretative Signage

Interpretive signage would be an expansion of the suggestion above. Multiple interpretive signs would provide the public with information and would also orient them in the geography of the townsite. Interpretive signs could be placed at the power plant site, the river, foundations of other buildings, and other significant sites in the area to provide the public with a better understanding of the structure of Acme. An information sign exists in the area but is not located near the power plant.

One significant benefit of this approach is the existing infrastructure and programming associated with the *Black Diamond Byway Trail*. The combination audio and driving tour dedicates one of its “stops” to the Acme power plant and townsite, and spends just under 7 minutes detailing the townsite and its significance to the area. The tour is complete with information on the site history, recordings of past residents, and updated information on the powerplant reclamation

efforts. This driving and audio tour could be easily expanded by an extended walking tour of the Acme townsite and power plant area. As the audio tour portion of the *Black Diamond Byway Trail* mentions, "Acme was the most complete and lively of the towns...outliving other Sheridan mining communities, and the mines themselves.", a fact that supports the additional efforts to preserve its history.

## Community Garden

As detailed in the personal narratives above, the town of Acme was much more than a mining town; it was a place where people of all backgrounds lived, worked, and shared experiences. Acme's theater, dance hall, ice cream parlor and other attractions provided Acme and the surroundings communities with a chance to come together and to create and cultivate meaningful lives. A community garden would provide the public with another opportunity to come together and to share experiences in the outdoors away from home.

## Mural

Art and culture were a significant part of life in Acme and live on in the communities in and around Sheridan. Public art is a mainstay of downtown Sheridan, including several statues and murals. A mural painted on any remaining structure at the Acme powerplant site would be an alternative way to depict the story of the place, while fostering the artistic communities that surround it.

## Open Air Recreation

Open air recreation is already a popular use of the former Acme townsite. Hunting and fishing were popular activities when the town was active and remain popular to this day. Public access points along the Tongue river and Goose Creek provide anglers and hunters with the opportunity to connect with the land and water, much like the residents of Acme did in decades past. The area behind the power plant may also make a public access launch for small watercraft.

## Power Plant Restored

Preserving the power plant building is particularly important to the people who lived in this area. If the building is structurally sound, and clean-up economically feasible, the building should stand as a historic memorial to the mining culture that helped shape and develop Sheridan county. The scale of that memorialization will be primarily an economic decision based on what the SCCD and potential outside donors can provide, ranging from educational plaques to full building restoration.

## Museum

The interior and exterior of the power plant could be converted into an interactive museum that tells the story of the coal camps in the area. The Sheridan County Museum (now Museum of the Bighorns) contains a wealth of information on the history of the region, but an on-site museum would provide the public with an opportunity to immediately interact with the landscape. Museum contents might include audio recordings, interactive maps and photographs, artifacts from the power plant and mine or from other historic events in the area. A museum would need to be curated and managed, but does not necessarily need a large staff. An open-air museum could allow the public to come and go as they please, while signs and security cameras could deter vandalism. Careful consideration of museum layout and content will have to be taken with this type of approach.

## Educational Center

An educational center could be created in conjunction with a museum or as a standalone use for the power plant. Programming for an educational center could incorporate both the historic elements of the power plant and the Acme townsite, but also as a space for general learning. Programs could be provided by museum staff, or the space could be used by local schools and colleges for indoor/outdoor learning spaces. The site's rich history, ease of access, and location makes in an ideal candidate for this type of use.

The site also lends itself to citizen science opportunities. Archeology work has been conducted in nearby areas, including some at the site itself, but significant opportunities to expand this work still exist. Artifacts from pre-settlement, European establishment, early coal mining settlements, and more recent decades may still be present in the area. Providing programming for citizen science opportunities, possibly alongside more structured academic work, would continue to excite and include the local community while preserving and enriching the value of the site.

## Artist Retreat

The plant's extensive history and beautiful location would make it a unique placement for an artist's retreat. While not entirely secluded, the building and its history could provide creative inspiration for established and aspiring artists. As stated above, art is a pillar of the Sheridan community and artist retreats like the one at the UCROSS in Sheridan County help cultivate new creations inspired by place, history, and culture.

## Commercial Space

The space may be a desirable location for commercial use. If the power plant is able to be restored, the space could be rented to a willing business or entrepreneur. Some commercial uses suggested during interviews included a wedding venue available to rent, a restaurant and tavern,

or recreational outfitting shop. It is recommended that any commercial use of the space prioritized the preservation of some of the current uses of the area along with any historic elements of the building and townsite.

## State Park

The Wyoming Division of State Parks and Cultural Resources may provide the simplest and most secure option for prolonged historic preservation and associated maintenance and funding. Utilization of the Acme power plant and townsite fits squarely into their mission to “provide memorable recreational, cultural, and educational opportunities and experiences to improve communities and enrich lives.” Acme’s unique combination of historic value and existing recreational infrastructure make it a suitable location for a state park or for designation as a historic site.

## Next Steps

SCCD should also continue to include community voices in their decision-making process. Sheridan County has a strong community dedicated to preserving their history, including a diverse set of local voices will not only help make the best decision for the power plant, but also aligns with community values. Group interviews and community meetings, utilizing and adapting the interview questions from this report, will help get new information to SCCD and to the broader public.

### Next Steps for SCCD:

1. Finish environmental reviews
2. Identify structural integrity of power plant building and surrounding buildings
3. Determine and publicly share cost of environmental clean-up and building restoration
  - a. Share additional estimated costs from recommendations above if applicable
4. Hold another round of public meetings with new information
  - a. Solicit input from:
    - i. Former residents of Acme and surrounding coal communities
    - ii. Sage Community Arts in Sheridan
    - iii. UCROSS Foundation
    - iv. Monarch Miner’s Picnic planning team
    - v. Local schools



- b. Other input to consider
  - i. Alliance for Historic Wyoming
  - ii. Wyoming Historic Preservation Office
  - iii. Wyoming Division of State Parks and Cultural Resources
  - iv. Office of the Wyoming State Archeologist
  - v. University of Wyoming – Anthropology and History departments

5. Continue work to gather and catalog historic information for potential future uses

The SCCD and Acme working group have made impressive strides to create a future for the Acme power plant that is based on community input and that is sensitive to the fact that cultural

***“It’s important for us to focus on the things that draw other people here. For Wyoming, that includes our history, hunting, fishing, our outdoors, so the site should try and do that.”***

***- Mel Maxted***

and historical preservation are important to the local community. The recommendations and suggested next steps in this report are based on the collected data, conversations and interviews, and context from existing historic preservation efforts in the area. No matter what happens to the site, Mel Maxted, an MDU employee with a history working in the area, summed up the significance of these efforts in an interview response, saying that no matter what happens to the building, *“it’s important for us to focus on the things that draw other people here. For Wyoming, that includes our history, hunting, fishing, our outdoors, so the site should try and do that.”*

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

The interview process received pre-approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Wyoming. The IRB approval is required for any University students or staff conducting research that involves human subjects. All interview participants signed a consent form that detailed the procedure and purpose of the study.

#### Biographical questions

1. Name
2. Where and when were you born?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What is your connection to the town of ACME?
  - a. Did you or someone you know live in ACME?
    - i. How long did you/they live in ACME?
    - ii. What is one of your earliest memories about the power plant?
    - iii. What job did you/they hold at the plant?
5. Can you describe what it was like to work at the plant?
  - a. Good working conditions, good bosses? Crappy working conditions?
6. Can you describe what the ACME community was like?
  - a. What kinds of people lived and worked there? Did you know any community members specifically?
7. How did the community come together?
  - a. Memories of celebrations, meals together?
8. Can you describe the natural environment of the ACME site during that time?
9. Was anyone recreating in the area?
10. How did the community change when the plant was shut down?

11. When the people of ACME left, where did they go? Sheridan, Monarch, Montana?
12. How can these community histories be honored with the new reclamation project?

Interview notes with Mel Maxted- MDU employee

- Was owned by Federal Light Traction (trolley owners, needed electricity for the trolley)
- Became Sheridan county electric
- MDU purchased the plant in 1948
- MDU gave it up in 1976 when the EPA started to up focus more on regulations
- Gave it up to Weisman and Sons who stripped out all the useful parts
- 7 Megawatt plant with 2 generators (5 and 2) never generated 7 - most was 5 or 6
- 2 or 3 of the MDU employees lived in Acme
- Huge building used to be around to maintain electric engines
- MDU owned the welsh mine - where the Acme exit is on Kooi road back in the hills to the south
- We've heard that the Acme plant was very advanced for it's time, could you explain a little bit about why?
  - o Generators and the turbines
  - o Hot water steam
  - o Boiler is still there (Rosemarie Perkins charged the boiler, but didn't drain it in winter so it froze and broke one winter)
  - o Steam turbines and generators are so heavy and require turning so it doesn't erode the base/bearings
  - o Starting the plant was a process of 3 or 4 hours
  - o Not often turned off, maybe annual scheduled maintenance



- o When you build an electric system you have to protect the system, had relays and differentials, sensors to ensure it wouldn't ruin the system
- o There's a transformer at the plant (transformer turned plant voltage into transmission voltage 41,600 volts, convert to 7200 volts, then 1220 volts into the house)
- o Employed 10-12, 4 or 5 on each shift to monitor the demand and match generation (the crew was crazy, Earl Buchanan worked out there, people didn't always care for him so they would nail the soap, grease arm rails, play pranks etc. Alex Trevero)
- o Stonewater electric was a hydraulic plant up in the Bighorns
- o Trolley -> needed electricity
- o Transmission line on Decker
- o Probably had more than enough capacity
- The overburden got too thick for the Bighorn Coal Company to keep up with and that's one of the reason why the mine was abandoned
- Whitney Benefits who had the property had some back and forth and sketchy dealings with the leased land, Whitney got a huge settlement (700 million dollars-ish)
- Where did you work?
- MDU employees would hand push the carts across the bridge to hand feed the plant for a little while until the tipple was built
- Truck fed during the weekdays and rail cars during the weekends
- Over time MDU became less dependent on the Acme mine because they have a 3 way feed closer to town so it got less productive
- MDU owns 23 MW from a plant in Gillette and they purchase the rest from Black Hills

#### Interview notes with John Craftor

- A lot of the people who worked for MDU at Acme were transferred into Sheridan

·Interview notes with Jerry Merrihew

- Substation called model-sub
- As you go towards the old nightclub, can still see some of the concrete abutments of the Dietz mines
- The company paid your wages, kept you, provided for you
- Yes, the building is important to try and keep. It played an important part in the development of this community. Progressive to have the trolley and electric lights. For the time it was progressive
  - o Museum? Great polish heritage here
  - o Acme sight would be a great place because it's in the middle of all these coal towns
  - o "It's important for us to focus on the things that draw other people here" for Wyoming, that is our history, hunting, fishing, our outdoors
- Tie flume and tie plant for railroad ties in the bighorns, the trolley made it possible for people to get in and out of town quickly
- Some guys would ride the flume down into town
- Natural gas plant
- Trolley only ran for 8-10 years-ish
- Generators, turbines, and boilers are still in there, everything else is likely scraped
- Mel started with MDU in 1971 read meters for 8 years, 3 years civil engineering education then became a draftsman and then title changed to assistant engineer and they paid for International correspondence school (3 years). Still works for them designing lines and monitoring stations
- Wyoming legislature certificates your area of operation so all the power companies have their specific areas of service so there's no competition between power companies.
- There's an old trolley car back behind the old Kmart sight on Main and the old sale barn

Interview notes with Nancy Herdt

Notes from Nancy/Paul and Monarch Picnic

- Pine Island campground, last Sunday in July around 11 a.m. Miners would take their kiddos up into the mountains and camp with them. Faded out around 1944, but a few years ago they got it going again. Became a committee and this will be the 3rd annual picnic, the descendants put it on but everyone is welcome. Come from all the other mining communities as well.
- Name
  - o Paul G Perry and Nancy
- Where and when were you born?
  - o 1947 born in Sheridan
- Where did you grow up?
  - o Sheridan county
- What is your connection to the town of ACME?
- Did you or someone you know live in ACME?
  - o Moved there for 2nd grade
- How long did you/they live in ACME?
  - o Left around age 13
- What is one of your earliest memories about the power plant?
  - o They played in the power plant as kids, would catch moths
  - o Nancy: gypsies and how they lived close to the railroad, would come to ask for chickens and if you didn't give them to them they would steal them in the night. School programs at Acme and the two circles of the town. Had so many kids to play with and brought her bike because the ranch didn't have sidewalks. Nancy's mother and sisters went to Acme school.
  - o They still have bricks from the school

- o They had everything at the store there from candy to Levis
  - o Hunted and sold magpies
- What job did you/they hold at the plant?
- Can you describe what it was like to work at the plant?
  - o Good working conditions, good bosses? Crappy working conditions?
  - o Some of them had pretty good jobs (engineers, etc.)
- Can you describe what the ACME community was like?
- What kinds of people lived and worked there? Did you know any community members specifically?
  - o Huck Finn mentality, no law but no real trouble, no drugs
  - o Rode ice chunks down the river when they were kids
- How did the community come together?
  - o Memories of celebrations, meals together
  - o They knew everybody, close knit, no real celebrations but holidays
  - o Softball team, burn tires, play hockey on the river
  - o Had gardens
- Can you describe the natural environment of the ACME site during that time?
  - o Stayed away from goose creek because all of the sewers ran into that but Tongue river was a playground. Nice to have the confluence there and have one for each. Duck hunting in the winter. He still fishes up there once in a while and hunts pheasants. Has an agreement with Game and Fish
- Was anyone recreating in the area?
- How did the community change when the plant was shut down?

- o Nancy remembers when Acme was shut down, her home was turned into a pit mine
  - o Padlock came and cut down all the trees and ruined the forest hunting area
- When the people of ACME left, where did they go? Sheridan, Monarch, Montana?
  - o He left and started working on a local ranch Legerski and Sons
- How can these community histories be honored with the new reclamation project?
  - o Paul: some sort of plaque, more dedication to the mines
  - o Nancy: it would be nice to keep the building safe but could be expensive. Great as a landmark or educational park to show kiddos what a coal fired power plant looked like

#### Interview notes with Leon Washut

- Monarch was the last surviving mining town
- Beat the crap out of ACME in ball games
- Lived in ACME from 41-43 then moved to monarch until 1953, moved to Billings
- Request for potential interview subjects:
  - o Stanko and Chesler– Most deceased or moved away
  - o Zawata – Ed's son lives here in Sheridan (also named Ed?), lived in Acme and his dad worked at the power plant, Dennis Zawata
  - o Jim Barilows daughter, Shirley Coy (maybe Barilow?) spends her summers here in Sheridan
  - o Judy Slack (previous director of Wyoming room), somewhere here in the archives there's a picture of her grandfather, last name Curry, was an engineer who might have insight into the mining/electric technology



- o Bonnie Feador(Turner) lived in Acme all her life, born around 47/48
- o Shery Lawton, 1953-1961 lived around Acme, her family is having a reunion on August 6th
- o Ed Barboula, just turned 87, raised in the mines and there should be a picture of him in the book
- o John Buyock owned a ranch outside of Monarch turned his ranch over to the land trust and knows a lot about the mines specifically
- Dig into the technology of the power plant because it was extensive for the time
- People were very proud of the power plant technology as well as the mining technology
- Who made the connection between the mine and then building a power plant, because that was a great idea
- Immigration, his grandfather was 1 of 12 and 8 of siblings came to America
- Magdalena Degorski wrote a book, taught school in southern Poland and discovered a registry of names of Polish who came here. She came here and did research on the names. From the Tri-Villages to America?
- Stanley Kuzara's information he used for his book is here in the Wyoming Room

#### Biographical questions

1. Name
  - a. Leon Washut
2. Where and when were you born?
  - a. 1941 born in Sheridan hospital, lived in Acme right after he was born. Most kids were born at home before WW2 and there were still mine doctors, the only one

left was in Monarch when he was born. There was a hospital in Monarch and Carneyville, the only purpose of the doctor was to care for their own people. Most immigrant came from complete poverty, no health care, sanitation, etc.. get here have electricity, water, access to doctors. Out of all the towns, Acme was beautiful. Mine owners did a good job of promoting the towns they owned

3. Where did you grow up?
  - a. Acme 1941-1943, Monarch until 1953, then Billings
4. What is your connection to the town of ACME?
  - a. Lived there and did extensive research for his book. Acme was very rich in ethnic history and various types of people. Technology was one of the downturns
  - b. Did you or someone you know live in ACME?
    - i. How long did you/they live in ACME?
    - ii. What is one of your earliest memories about the power plant?
  - c. Hit a home run and knocked out a window of the plant, earliest memories of Acme were going over for baseball games
    - i. What job did you/they hold at the plant?
5. Can you describe what it was like to work at the plant?
  - a. Good working conditions, good bosses? Crappy working conditions?
6. Can you describe what the ACME community was like?
  - a. What kinds of people lived and worked there? Did you know any community members specifically?
  - b. Grandfather moved to Acme, his dad went to the 2nd and 3rd grade in Acme. Cheslar was his wife's brother, lost a leg bought the pool hall and the theatre. His grandfather he thinks owned it then sold it to Cheslar. The community that evolved there was fairly advanced; had sports, bands, dancing. Language barriers for

education, diversity, no English spoken by some of the immigrants. Both had single principals that had huge influence on the individuals (great teachers)

7. How did the community come together?
  - a. Memories of celebrations, meals together?
  - b. Sports, bands, holidays. Huge amounts of patriotism occurred in these camps, many people went to WW2, suspects the percentage of miners who went to WW were very high. In Kooi (maybe others), flag raising was done everyday
8. Can you describe the natural environment of the ACME site during that time?
  - a. The river, source of recreation (swimming) and bathing facilities. River was skated on in the winter. Bill Lea, people used to throw tires into the river, kids would fish them out of the river during WW2. In the mines, summertime work was less necessary.
9. Was anyone recreating in the area?
  - a. Yes
10. How did the community change when the plant was shut down?
  - a. It was pretty small already and then it was the final death when it was shut down
11. When the people of ACME left, where did they go? Sheridan, Monarch, Montana?
  - a. Everywhere, a lot of other mine workers went to Acme and Monarch and when those were shut down, a lot of the people were of retired age so they got scattered
  - b. Voting records, censuses, school registration information, and pictures are here in the Wyoming Room
12. How can these community histories be honored with the new reclamation project?
  - a. He would like to see something done to create a park, some visitor center that tells the history of all of the mines. But it all costs money to start and to keep up, 2008/2009 people were closing down those facilities. If the building is preservable that's great but if not it's okay. Probably a purely economic decision on what to do

with the site. New access to hunting which is nice, because people can have access to the environment again. Can access Tongue River from there up to the bighorns. Very thankful to Dave Polands (holands?) community planner in California closely tied to interior department, he looked at this area and suggested creating the black diamonds, coal district. His vision was to create a bi-way that went from the mountains to Tongue River reservoir. Leon really likes the pedestrian bridge. Thinks that the rest of the land belongs to Padlock ranch. Scott family.

Specific things he wants to know:

- General Crook, who was here before Custer battle, when he left here, he went to the Rosebud through goose creek and then tongue river. Did he cross through Acme to switch rivers?
- Some clear writeup on the technology, how it evolved or didn't evolve.
- Who actually worked on the power plant, they may not have been immigrants.
- His supposition is that part of the creativity here is that Acme didn't have to deal with the transportation from mine to plant. How did the whole process work of the coal transfer to the power plant. After the mine shut down, where did the coal come from?
- How many power plants were there in Wyoming when this one was opened and how do they compare?