National ads urged enthusiastic consumers to visit copper mines

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Today's tourists may stop by the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Mont., to see how large-scale mining resulted in a Superfund site, but Americans in the 1950s had different reasons for visiting the mine, says Montana State University historian Tim LeCain.

They were enthusiastic consumers who were excited about seeing the places that contributed to their increasingly prosperous lifestyles, LeCain said. Since copper was an important metal in cars, refrigerators and homes, a national advertising campaign called "See America the Bountiful" urged tourists to visit Butte and Anaconda and other cities with copper mines.

"Were it not for copper, modern communication systems would be practically non-existent," said a1950s ad. "For telephone and telegraph, radio and television can speed our word or image to its farthest destination as swiftly as light itself, but only because copper provides a pathway for the electricity that gives lift to these communications."

Advertisers after World War II focused on the benefits of mining, not the methods or environmental impacts, LeCain said. They almost said that the Butte mines would never be exhausted, that open-pit mining could continue for several decades, if not longer.

"The ads promise nearly infinite supplies of copper to support the rapidly expanding American way of life of mass consumption," LeCain said.

LeCain researches environmental history and testifies on related matters in court cases. He has now written a book that describes the development and effects of the technology that made large-scale open-pit mining possible. Published this summer, the book, titled "Mass Destruction: The Men and Giant Mines That Wired America and Scarred the Planet," tells how mass production for mass consumption was fed by mass destruction extraction of natural resources. Like weapons of mass destruction that strike civilians and soldiers alike, mines indiscriminately destroyed rivers, farmland and animals. Once a positive attraction for tourists, the Berkeley Pit is now an "environmental dead zone."

The book also tells the story of Daniel Jackling, a young metallurgical engineer who, with his colleagues, developed the huge steam shovels and rock crushers that led to the Bingham Pit in Utah and other massive open-pit mines in the West.

"Their steam shovels could do in 10 minutes what a strong man could do in a day," LeCain said.

The book explains the swinging pendulum of public opinion toward mining. In the end, instead of condemning mining forever, LeCain encourages Montanans to develop clean technology that will allow mining to continue in a way that's helpful to the environment instead of destructive.

Many Montanans today see mining as a devastating part of the state's past and no longer an option for its future, LeCain said. They prefer an economy that's based on tourism, hiking and pristine wilderness locations.

"That's great, but I throw out the challenge at the end of the book that there are still a lot of natural resources in western Montana and the Rocky Mountains," LeCain said. "Wouldn't it be great if Montana led

the effort to develop technology necessary to develop the type of mining that was environmentally safe, clean, benign?"

A world without mining is unrealistic, LeCain continued. Consumption in India and China is skyrocketing, and copper mining is still big business in Indonesia, Africa and South America. Copper is a good metal in many ways. It's energy efficient and can be recycled repeatedly. It's still in people's homes, wires, water pipes and cars.

"We still use that stuff, and it's going to come from somewhere," LeCain said.

Brett Walker, head of MSU's Department of History and Philosophy and LeCain's collaborator on a study comparing mines in Japan and Anaconda, said LeCain's book is path-breaking for two reasons.

"To begin with, he doesn't demonize mine owners and managers as historians have typically done, because it wasn't only capitalist greed that motivated them (though greed was an important force)," Walker said. "Rather, as Tim shows, it was also a belief in the power of engineering and technology. Literally, managers thought they could engineer surface pollution away, just as they thought they could control subsurface environments.

"Second," Walker said, "Tim illustrates the interaction between technological and natural forces at the mine. In fact, he blurs the line between the two, showing how the Anaconda mine functioned as a kind of hybrid world, one that was neither natural or entirely artificial."

Source: Montana State University (news : web)