

BLM project uncovers secrets of ghost town

**By Perry Backus
Missoulian**

GARNET - Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Maria Craig knew all about the history lurking beneath thick stands of evergreens on the hillside just above the ghost town of Garnet.

She may have been the only one.

Over the last 70 years - since mining activity in the area stilled - the forest has grown over the ditches, dams and collapsed tunnels that hundreds of hard-rock miners constructed in their frenzy to find gold.

While the buildings in the main part of Garnet attracted thousands of tourists every year, very few ever noticed the historic cabins, mills and mining sites scattered about the nearby countryside.

This summer, some of those secrets were uncovered when the BLM thinned 26 acres of forest near the ghost town - in the Garnet Mountains northeast of Missoula - to help protect the area from fire.

By the time loggers had finished their work, a whole complex of mining activity was visible to even the untrained eye. A couple of cabins, which had been hidden by thick stands of alder and ponderosa pine, were exposed. There were also any number of ditches and shafts and collapsed tunnels revealed by project's end.

"Before this work was completed, it was hard to understand the magnitude of the work that was done here," said Craig. "You get a much better feel for the historic landscape. It was really hard to stitch it all together with all the vegetation that was here."

"It's really amazing when you see how much they accomplished," she said. "It was certainly a lot of hard work."

It's also just the tip of the iceberg.

Over the past couple of years, Craig and another archaeologist have worked to inventory all the historic features in a 350-acre area surrounding the historic town in anticipation of a larger fuels-reduction project to protect the area from fire.

"Most people think Garnet is just the cabins and buildings in the main part of town," she said. "It's actually a little more spread out than that."

Most of the buildings and land surrounding the historic town have been managed by the BLM since 1970.

But most of Garnet's buildings weren't built to last. Like many gold rush era towns, the hard-rock miners who flooded the area in the late 1800s were more interested in making a quick buck than in settling down.

Some of that history has left the townsite in the back of a pickup or the trunk of a car.

"We do unfortunately still have people coming up here bottle hunting and metal detecting," Craig said.

It's illegal to remove any historical artifact from public land. Once an artifact is removed from its historic setting, it loses its relevance, she said.

"We've already lost a lot of history from Garnet," she said. "Over the years, people have removed a lot of items from the town. We don't want to lose any more."

After more than a century in Montana's dry climate, the buildings that survived are a fire waiting to happen.

"It wouldn't take much more than an ember or two to get them started on a hot summer day," said Shelagh Fox, a BLM fuels management specialist. "We were really blessed in 2000 when the wind shifted during the Ryan Gulch fire."

This past summer, another fire started about a mile away from the townsite. Firefighters fortunately caught the blaze before it got much larger than 50 acres.

"These fuel-reduction projects around the ghost town will dramatically improve our chances of defending it against fire in the future," said Fox.

The challenge was finding a way to thin the forest while protecting fragile historic structures that run the gamut from old cabins to earthen dams. Nathan Arno's Firewise Forest Landscaping accomplished that difficult task.

"It wasn't easy for them," Fox said. "There were so many historic structures. The number of ditches and dams and mine shafts around this site were just unbelievable."

"When we began, many of us were pretty skeptical that we could do this kind of work in this type of forest and not harm the historic resources," she said. "We were all pleasantly surprised."

To make her point, Fox walks over an area filled with collapsed tunnels and ditches just downhill from the teetering Mountain View Mill. The area is pocked with tree stumps.

"We couldn't just let them come in here and drag the logs to a landing," Fox said. "They had to be careful to not disturb these important features. They did an excellent job in doing that."

"This kind of work will give fire managers a lot more options when the next fire flares up," said Fox.

She said the agency would like to put together a plan that would allow similar efforts to get started as soon as 2007 on the 350 acres the BLM manages around the ghost town.

"This is some of the same kind of work that you'd see in the urban interface," Fox said. "It's expensive. It can run anywhere between \$900 and \$1,500 an acre. We certainly can't afford to do that on all 350 acres."

But the clock is ticking - the next fire could be the one that roars through the historic town.

"The risk continues to grow every year we wait," Fox said. "There will be a stand replacement fire here someday if we don't do something to manage this area."

"If Garnet burns down, it's gone forever except for the photographs and the memories," she said.