

# Mineral County



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*Natural Pier Bridge, west of Alberton. (inset) The first Natural Pier Bridge, ca. 1905. by Jack Schmidt in July 2013, BH Photo 275691; inset, by Mineral County Museum Archives.*

**T**wo rivers, the Clark Fork (formerly known as the Missoula River) and the Saint Regis, effectively divide the length of Mineral County in half. Add in the many smaller creeks descending from the mountains and it's easy to see how people can be isolated from each other and necessary resources. Efficient transportation through the county required constructing many bridges for vehicles and rail traffic and enabled residents to access resources and engage in their local and regional communities.

One of the early roads in Mineral County needed to cross the Missoula River just west of Alberton, MT. A bridge built in 1905 utilized a natural outcropping of rock in the river to support the span. This bridge was deemed inadequate and was soon replaced by a "modern" Warren truss bridge built by the Wausau Iron Works Company in Wisconsin. This bridge was completed in 1918 and is still in use today. At the time, the Natural Pier Bridge became a component of the Yellowstone Trail and the early US Highway 10, linking residents of Mineral County with points east and west.

In many ways, MSU Extension also serves as a bridge, joining research-based information and resources of the University with the needs of local constituents in Mineral County.

## Ten Years in Business

This year marks 10 years of business for Western Montana Specialty Foods. As many small businesses across the country are closing their doors, Western Montana Specialty Foods has continued to persevere. In 2011, owner Mary Ippisch and her crew drove two hours to the Mission Mountain Enterprise in Ronan, Montana, to process their relish in a rented facility. Today, she owns her own commercial facility in Superior, where she processes, packages, labels and distributes her delicious Bitterroot Zucchini Relish to grocery stores and colleges across the state. While the products are also available online, this unique blend of relish made with local bitterroot zucchinis has proven to be a local favorite. Amidst the challenges created by Covid-19, Western Montana Specialty Foods rolled out a new flavor of relish, are converting to an organic product, and continue to market hand-made cakes and specialty desserts. They continue to work with the Mineral County Revolving Loan Fund and are excited to be making their move into national distribution. We look forward to seeing their "Made in Montana" products in stores across the nation.

In 2021, the Mineral County Office of Economic Development assisted over 30 individuals and small businesses by providing over 100 hours of technical support to explore

and navigate the funding opportunities created with the Covid-19 pandemic. Additional funding has been provided to two small businesses and there are a total of five loan clients currently. By partnering with the Mineral County MSU Extension Office and the Mineral County Economic Development Corporation, a local 501 c3, support and supplies have been provided to local businesses to continue curbing the spread of Covid-19 in our rural community.

## A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Progressing through a second year of the Covid-19 Pandemic has been stressful on community members and businesses throughout Mineral County. Feelings of despair, isolation, anxiety, and frustration, all identified as pandemic-specific emotional impacts from a national study by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard Medical School, were just as evident in Mineral County as other areas of the country. One particular event in Mineral County helped to alleviate some of these impacts in 2021, the successful return of the Mineral County Fair in August. Local county fairs provide a focus for community members to come together in planning and logistics as well as participation. In essence, the event itself is a “bridge” that brings community members together, reduces some pandemic-related impacts, and provides focus for working together and moving forward.

In 2020, the local government and community organizations responsible for organizing the county fair chose to cancel the community event. MSU Extension and 4-H volunteers held a successful abbreviated fair for 4-H participants with great success, but the community as a whole was unable to participate. This year, all parties involved eagerly worked, organized, and successfully launched the return of the Mineral County Fair. Evidence of a community coming together can be seen in photos of people relaxing, having fun, and enjoying an event that had been cancelled the previous year. Fair weather volunteers are a sign of good community support, but foul weather volunteers are a sign of great community support. The weather during all but the last day of fair was excellent; sunny and not too hot. The final day of fair, the day when volunteers come out to clean up, pack everything away in storage, and take their personal equipment home again, dawned with clouds, cool temperatures, and a steady rainfall. While many volunteers would have waited out the rain, 4-H volunteers and several community volunteers showed up and worked through the rain. A traditional breakfast feed was moved into a barn out of the weather and appreciative volunteers could get a warm bite of food. This sort of community support is the bridge to moving forward and meeting the present and future needs of Mineral County.



**Top:** Cassidy Goins (left) and Mary Ippisch (right), by 99 PRODUCTIONS LLC; **Bottom:** 4-H Volunteers feed a hungry clean up crew after fair, by Dave Brink

## Mineral County Staff

Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

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