

The glacial period ending 12,000 years ago formed several moraines, The Polson Moraine containing Flathead Lake, and the Elmo Moraine creating topography for another smaller lake detached and to the west. The body of water for millenniums was sterile. The waterfall south of the lake, now known as Smith Falls, created a barrier against any upstream inflow of fish. In the spring of 1892 life would travel overland to the lake.

The sound of creaking wagon wheels winding on a rutted trail foretold the end of the lifeless era. The cargo, originating in Denver, had traveled by train, ferry and finally freight wagon. On board were three large wooden barrels called hogsheads. Two contained native cutthroat trout, the other the pea mouth-minnow of the carp family, feeder fish for the trout. Once emptied those hogsheads were to have enormous, long-lasting consequences.

The lake's Kootenai name is Kwittkanuq (ki-th-ka-nook) meaning either "Big Lake" or "Big Mountain Lake." It had been a stopping off point for various tribal hunting/war parties heading North, South, East or West. It was also a place for the Salish people for gathering berries and later, fish.

The lake's new name and, life supporting phase, originated out of sentimentality from a Joko area man to his wife. Peter Ronan was the agent for the Flathead Indian Reservation and lived with his wife Mary and their eight children at reservation headquarters near Arlee. They loved to camp at Kwittkanuq. Mary Ronan loved it so much that around 1890 Peter managed to use his connections to change the Native name to Lake Mary Ronan. He also used his influence to introduce the first fingerlings to the lake named for his wife.

Fish thrived in the lake, so much so that, within a few years Salish Indians would camp, in all seasons, and catch fish by basket loads. In 1913 Somers State Fish Hatchery began taking eggs from the native cutthroat and rainbow primarily from Donaldson Creek and a fish trap on Freeland Creek. Today the healthy population of kokanee creates a prized fishery for sportsmen, and the collection of 2,000,000 eggs annually supports the rest of the state. In the early 1900's the fish population increased to the point that it created enough demand for the start of several fishing camps and the introduction of the lake to more people.

In the next 100 years, the original cutthroats would share their environment with a wide variety of newcomers: Chinook and Coho salmon, rainbow, Yellowstone cutthroat, west slope cutthroat, kokanee, grayling, brook trout, largemouth bass, sunfish and yellow perch were stocked. The baby-step of three hogsheads was the tip of a development spear that created life within the lake and development of the shores around it.

Charlie and Edith Thomas founded Camp Tuffit, at Lake Mary Ronan, on doctors' orders. Edith suffered from poor health, and the doctor prescribed that Charlie, Edith, and their four children "tough it" for a while presumably to improve her health. He built a lean-to out of fir branches that became a rough cabin, then a series of cabins with boat rentals and the business is now a multi-generational institution with devoted year-to-year guests.

In 1900 Georges Sipes homesteaded 160 acres on the lake's shore, proved up on the homestead in 1906. He was entrepreneurial by nature and built a large 40 X 80 foot dance hall with a 14 X 50-foot lunch room, later to become a roller rink, followed by several rental cabins and an apple orchard. The resort was called "Sipes Camp" later becoming Mountain Meadows. In 1920 Fred and Dora Babcock converted an early eight room settler's home to the "Motor Inn" now much changed and named the Lodge at Lake Mary Ronan.

Logging has been active in the Flathead since the 1880s. In the Flathead Valley, the construction of the Great Northern Railway led to an increase in Proctor Valley logging. Railroads needed

over 2500 cross ties per mile of track as well as timber for pilings, telegraph poles, fuel-wood for camps, tunneling, cribbing, bridges, and buildings. Locally ties were cut at the “Y” on the Lake Mary Ronan road and then carried by wagon to the dock at Dayton, then to the mill at Somers. Large old growth logs were likewise freighted out by wagon or sleigh to be milled in Somers.

The Somers Lumber Company opened a plant and launched a boat on Flathead Lake to take logs, from Dayton, by boom to the plant. The efficiencies of their strategy caused a surge in demand, and the greater Proctor Valley and the backcountry surrounding it had the supply. Logging in the valley exploded. The increasing demand for local timber and improved transportation to mills generated much-needed income for local homesteaders. The formula for clear-cutting was in place.

Early logging was primarily done in winter, and the logs were hauled by sleigh to Dayton. In 1929 a small railroad spur was constructed from Dayton Creek to Dayton. The inaccessibility of the Lake Mary Ronan backcountry by horses delayed timber harvesting, but the internal combustion engine changed all that.

Chainsaws would eventually replace the crosscut saw, trucks replaced horses and the heavy equipment to cut roads for them opened up the previously inaccessible watershed. Huge land acquisitions by timber companies from railroads and private parties bankrolled the expansion. The Lake would pay the price for that prosperity and the inevitable watershed denigration that followed.

Three hogsheads of fish, the Homestead Act of 1862, the Railroad Act of 1864, combustion engines, World Wars, post-war booms, logging company real estate holdings, and the love of the Lake Mary Ronan environment has dotted her shores with homes, businesses, and plans for future development. The challenge is, for all her friends, to find the balance that will allow this beautiful place to be “Big Lake” Kwittkanuq (ki-th-ka-nook) for all of us now and in the future.