

The Unabomber next door: Lincoln not defined by its most infamous denizen

Nolan Lister

Apr 4, 2021



The town of Lincoln, Montana, 25 years after the arrest of Ted Kaczynski.
THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

"When I came back from college, it was a wintry spring day," Lincoln native Becky Garland said with the ease that comes from countless retellings. "I was looking out the window and here's Ted riding his bike down the highway."

Her neighbor Ted, who is now known around the globe as the infamous Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, was making his way to the library like he often did.

Garland, a lifelong resident of the small western Montana town where the Unabomber was arrested 25 years ago this week, said that type of person is common around those parts.

"I've been a Realtor now for 13 years, and it doesn't change," she said. "There are people who want to be in the middle of nowhere."

As a college student and lover of her hometown's surrounding public lands, Garland said she and some friends were vocal opponents to a proposed gold mine at the headwaters of the Blackfoot River.

"(Kaczynski) felt like there was a connection because I was so outspoken," she said.

Kaczynski would talk to her and her sister about gardening, about the politics of the day. She said she knew he was an intelligent person after the local newspaper ran



[Becky Garland, left, tells a story about knowing Ted Kaczynski as a kid growing up and working at her family store in Lincoln.
THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

a competition to see who could find the most grammatical errors in the eight-page paper. Kaczynski found 127.

After his family cut him off financially, Kaczynski asked Garland about working for her family's business. He had written a four-page synopsis of his life that he gave to Garland in the hope that it might help her "understand what type of job he might be looking for."

"It was basically his resume, but it was about growing up, feeling left footed, being a brilliant guy, going to Harvard when he was 16, going to University of Chicago, falling in love with a girl, just all these things," Garland said about his carefully crafted narrative.

The day Kaczynski was arrested, Garland was in Utah for a wedding.



Main street of Lincoln on March 26, 2021.
THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

"But I get home, and I'm 15 minutes home after being gone for five days, and the FBI and the post office folks, all the cops came, and they said, 'We need to talk to you,'" Garland recalled. "So I took them into the store, into my office, and I was interrogated for four hours."

She said some of the townsfolk may have pointed the FBI in her direction as a result of her activism.

"How were you not in the Netflix documentary?," asked Karyn Good, a 13-year Lincoln resident, as Garland told her story.

"Oh, I hide from that," Garland said. "But I guess 25 years later I'm ready to tell you."

Garland said she held on to Kaczynski's handwritten life story for a few years before she finally threw it away.

Lincoln was there, nestled between peaks of the Continental Divide in the Blackfoot Valley, long before Kaczynski showed up, and Lincoln will be there long after he is gone.

"Had the Unabomber never lived in Lincoln or never been caught, we'd be right where we are today," said Lincoln resident Bill Cyr, who served as chief of the volunteer fire department at the time of Kaczynski's arrest. "I think the sculpture park would have still gone in. We'd still be doing Envision Lincoln. I don't think the Unabomber in any way hurt Lincoln or helped Lincoln. It happened. We lived with it. We dealt with it."

Now 25 years later, the story Lincolnites tell about themselves has nothing to do with Kaczynski.

Good is the lead organizer for the aforementioned Envision Lincoln. As first reported by The Blackfoot Valley Dispatch last month, Good and Envision Lincoln secured a \$20,000 Montana Main Street Grant to help the unincorporated community develop a downtown master plan.

The group parlayed that into a second grant through the Big Sky Trust Fund. Lincoln plans to use the \$47,000 in total to pay for the services of a professional planner to help develop a "cohesive, community-driven vision for Lincoln's future," the Blackfoot Valley Dispatch reported.

Good said this is typical of her community.

"We're a town that kicks butt all on our own," she said. "We have a way of making things happen here. It's certainly isn't because we're a wealthy community, but we're a determined community."

This "determined community" has had to reinvent itself over the past 25 years, according to Laurie Welty, president of the Lincoln Valley Chamber of Commerce, who said she closed on property in Lincoln the week Kaczynski was arrested.

"What we're looking at now is the tourism aspect of Lincoln because we don't have the mining any longer. We don't have the logging. We don't have some of the traditional or historical ways people have survived in Lincoln. The ranching has diminished quite a bit," Welty said. "It was almost like trying to determine an identity after those things were gone."

Theodore John Kaczynski, known to many as the Unabomber, was arrested at his property near Lincoln, Montana on April 3, 1996. Sixteen bombings...

After the proposed gold mine pulled out in 2000, a vacuum was created around the area's public lands.



Caroline Foster of Helena and her children, Reed and Peyton, look at Jaakko Pernu's "Picture Frame" recently. The sculpture was one of the first to be installed at Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild in 2014.
TOM BAUER, Missoulian

"Lincoln has had one commonality since the 1800s," Cyr said. "There's always been a promise or threat, depending on your point of view, of the next big thing coming — gold, copper, ore, oil. That was kind of Lincoln's identity."

At that point, residents had to make their own promises for the future, Garland said.

"Looking back at the boom and the bust of the natural resource economy and how that all has changed for the good or the bad, we are no different than Butte, Montana, or any other place," she said. "We have all this beautiful public land. Let's capitalize on it."



The Lincoln Prosperity Proposal would develop a 70-mile off-highway vehicle loop with the construction of 20 miles of new connector trails.

THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

Enter the Lincoln Prosperity Proposal, the product of about six years of meetings between conservationists, outfitters, outdoor recreation advocates, firefighters, timber interests and others. The proposal calls on Congress to set into law land management on 200,000 acres of Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, including 56,000 acres

of new wilderness, 63,000 acres of conservation areas, nearly 70,000 acres of forest restoration areas for logging and fuels reduction, motorized recreation areas and new trails designed for mountain biking.

"I think it is really unusual to put together a group of ATV enthusiasts, loggers, mountain bikers, conservationists, all of these people, you put this crazy mix together and they sit and talk for six years about something and come up with a plan that works for everybody," said Good, who also helped coordinate the Lincoln Prosperity Proposal. "It's so well balanced, anybody could get on board with it."

Boosting the local economy is a major factor behind the proposal. New trails will attract mountain bikers and encourage them to stay in town for a couple of days. Restoration areas will provide new sources of timber. And motorized users will see an organized trail system on former industrial timber lands.

"It's been some amazing work that these people have done to give everybody a spot who wants to come and play in Lincoln and live in Lincoln," Garland said. "That's out of love for the area, for necessity of economy. We're a hardy bunch and we're going to make it happen."

Garland is no stranger to civic engagement and community organizing. She spearheaded the creation of Lincoln's Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild, an outdoor sculpture garden that attracts more than 50,000 visitors a year.

Not many people have as comprehensive an understanding about their community as librarians. Lewis and Clark Library Lincoln Branch Librarian Kate Radford said it is not surprising that this small town has so many positive things happening.

"People are so passionate about this community," Radford said. "The people who are here love Lincoln more than I've ever seen a group of people love anything."

While many may still only think of Lincoln as the home of the Unabomber, there are plenty of Lincolniters telling the real story of their home.

"Good always comes out of bad," Welty said. "If it weren't for the Unabomber, that whole thing, that's what got a lot of people to take that first look at Lincoln. But once you see Lincoln, Montana, that second look is because of Lincoln. Then they fall in love with Lincoln and what Lincoln has to offer."

The Ted K Archive

Nolan Lister

The Unabomber next door: Lincoln not defined by its most infamous denizen

Apr 4, 2021

helenair.com

www.thetedkarchive.com