

*THE NATION | DISPATCH FROM MONSE, WASH.; Sold on the town that didn't sell ;  
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horse lover. Los Angeles Times March 23, 2008 Sunday*

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Sold on the town that didn't sell ;  
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**BYLINE:** Stuart Glascock, Times Staff Writer

**DATELINE:** MONSE, WASH.

**BODY:**

Far from bright lights, nestled among sage lands and fruit orchards, this tiny town in eastern Washington once caught a bolt of lightning.

It happened when Monse went up for auction on EBay. The hard-luck town -- along with Bridgeville, Calif., and Tortilla Flat, Ariz., for sale at the same time -- sparked imaginations.

"Why buy a house when you can own the whole town?" pondered [ABC News](#). "Buying a whole town has never been so easy," wrote the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

A regional television magazine, Seattle-based KING-TV Channel 5's "Northwest Backroads," juiced the buzz for Monse. "Would you like to be mayor?" it teased viewers in 2003. Just buy the town!

The problem: No one ponied up enough cash to be mayor. Investors evidently want a little more noise, commerce and possibly some polish.

Washington's best-known "town for sale," which sits seven miles northeast of Brewster

and about an hour's drive from Wenatchee, never sold. Despite all the hoopla -- and its abundant wildlife, rugged frontier history and riverfront access -- Monse couldn't catch a break.

"It's sad that it dissipated," said Juli Doty, the Wenatchee real estate agent who pushed to see it purchased and redeveloped. "It was an incredible opportunity."

Initially, the sellers asked \$575,000 for the cluster of timeworn structures on 60 acres in Okanogan County. For a fixer-upper, Monse packed some desirable selling points: seven houses, a post office, a general store, a schoolhouse, a public boat launch, 100 parcels, fiber optics, railroad access, water rights and a bridge. Auburn and tan, the arid land snuggles up to the Okanogan River. Across it, the Colville Indian Reservation stretches over miles of open range. The river teems with bass. Hunters can stalk deer or cougar.

The initial crush of publicity intrigued prospective buyers, dreamers, idealists and a few kooks. A motley assortment of prospects fancied remaking Monse into a conference center, summer camp, family commune or retirement home. But no one closed a deal.

Weary of trying to find a single buyer, owners Frederick and Donna Van Doren reluctantly carved up the town into several pieces. The Van Dorens had tended the orchards and rented several houses from 1974 until a few years ago, when they moved about 70 miles south to Wenatchee. Better schools lured the family away, Doty said.

Thus far, buyers have nabbed two large parcels.

Paul Hammons, 52, a retired Teamsters truck driver from Seattle paid \$125,000 for an acre of riverfront property, a 1,800-square-foot house and a 5-acre apricot orchard. He, his wife and two children "wanted to get the heck out of the big city."

But before moving into their new country home, they faced another chore: cleaning. "The place was trashed," Hammons said.

"My daughter's first impression when she saw it was she started crying."

She is adjusting to the small high school a few miles away, and the family has settled in. Instead of sitting in traffic jams, they spot deer and moose from the living room. Eagles and peregrine falcons soar overhead.

Hammons speaks bluntly about why the town didn't sell: It was a wreck. Weathered buildings, some barely standing, and junked cars adorn several parcels. Half a mile away, hidden in a canyon of willow and sumac, a migrant labor camp is home to hundreds of farmhands who harvest the area's vast apple, apricot, pear, cherry and peach crops. (Only used during harvest season, the camp consists of 32 double-wide trailers.) Another neighbor -- a National Radio Astronomy Observatory station -- spies the sky with an 82-foot wide, 240-ton dish.

Undaunted by the aesthetic challenges, Janet Jordan, an insurance agent in Brewster, bought the circa-1900 schoolhouse and enough land for her two horses. Unmistakably a 19th-century structure, the school rises two stories, covers about 1,800 square feet, and features high ceilings and oak floors. "I'm nostalgic," Jordan said. "I'd love to restore that schoolhouse. A contractor told me it would be a labor of love."

No romantic builder has rescued the old post office. Another house on the riverfront remains vacant. About 30 acres that once produced apples for market languish in stillness.

The weather-beaten 1914 general store resembles a trading post from the mythic American West. Tattered doors and windows are boarded. Inside, ramshackle shelves and display racks collect dust.

The opportunity to list the unusual real estate advanced Doty's career. It led to her hosting a radio real estate talk show, broadcast in Ellensburg, Moses Lake and Wenatchee. She penned a how-to book, "For Sale By Owner," and she lectures widely on investing in foreclosures.

Still, she wishes the town had been reborn. "Some people wanted it for a family compound. The offers were never just right."

Old-timers have reverence for the history of Monse.

Steamboats stopped there in the late 1880s. The state tourism office notes that Monse started as a trading post, operated intermittently by a prospector between trips to Spokane. By 1916, Monse became a supply center for homesteaders. "Drive through and see the general store," the tourism website says.

As if time stood still, the "Town for Sale" television program can be found in reruns. With each broadcast, speculators, dreamers and want-to-be mayors track down the real estate agent.

The reruns also prompt friends of Hammons to call and rib him. Is he moving yet? they ask. He smiles. "I'm still here."

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**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO: TRUCKS TO TRACTOR: Paul Hammons, 52, a retired Teamster from Seattle, works the 5-acre apricot orchard near his family's new \$125,000 riverfront home in Monse, Wash., where they can see deer and moose from their living room. He says that he, his wife and two children "wanted to get the heck out of the big city."

PHOTOGRAPHER:Kevin P. Casey For The Los Angeles Times PHOTO:

DILAPIDATED: Insurance agent Janet Jordan walks through the schoolhouse property

she bought with enough land for her horses. She plans to restore the building: "I'm nostalgic." PHOTOGRAPHER:Kevin P. Casey For The Los Angeles Times GRAPHIC: MAP: Monse (Map of Washington State) CREDIT:MARK HAFER Los Angeles Times

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