

**ARTICLES
AND
LETTERS**

from

JOEL OVERHOLSER

published earlier in the

MONTANA GHOST TOWN QUARTERLY

**Montana Ghost Town Preservation Society Annual Meeting
Fort Benton, Montana
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INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, in 1982, the Montana Ghost Town Preservation Society held its annual convention in Fort Benton. Those of us who attended have many great memories — the Grand Union Hotel, the Agricultural Museum, a very cold float trip on the Missouri from Fort Benton to Loma, and exciting speakers. One of the latter was Joel Overholser, who spoke on “Characters of Landusky.” He consented to have that paper published in the Fall 1982 issue of the Montana Ghost Town Quarterly, the beginning of a series of articles and letters that continued for nearly fifteen years. Joel became a friend, advisor, and supporter of the MGTPS. He served as Director for many years as his health permitted. His book, Fort Benton, World’s Innermost Port, published in 1987, is a collection of the notes he accumulated over his years of research.

In the Fall 1989 Quarterly Joel wrote the following when asked about himself:

WHO ARE WE?

Born Des Moines, Iowa, 1911 and came to Montana March 1913, when Dad homesteaded in Chouteau County. Resident Fort Benton from 1920, father working for River Press, then manager from July 1924. Began working part time at Press in 1926, full time after 1932 journalism degree from U.M. Army service July, 1942-Feb. 1946; France June 1944-1946. Gradually took over after return as editor from father.

Interest in Fort Benton history dates from college, active collection from 1935. Retired as editor first of 1981 to complete historical records and write book on Fort Benton history. Maintain office in River Press to answer rather frequent inquiries into phases of early history of area.

Received the “Board of Trustees Award for Contributions to Montana History” in 1984 from the Montana Historical Society.

Best wishes,
Joel Overholser

Editor’s Note: Joel added, “I have not thought of any article which would seem appropriate for the MGTPS newsletter lately, except perhaps a couple of shorts. If I do, I will send it in. I’ve felt for many a year that the contribution of Fort Benton to Montana’s beginnings has been overlooked. Anyway, it is still a live ghost town.” Thanks, Joel. We appreciate your contributions to Montana’s history and will look forward to future material from you when you are ready.

We are sure you will enjoy this compilation of articles and letters from Joel Overholser.

John N. DeHaas
Montana Ghost Town Quarterly
Editor 1974-2001

CHARACTERS OF LANDUSKY Joel Overholser

Landusky is one of those Montana ghost towns with more lives than a cat. Other mining camps have had one or two heydays and expired peacefully. Not Landusky, nor its nearby companion, Zortman. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to any day see an item to the effect that Pike Landusky had kicked off the cover of his coffin to see what in hell the town named for him is doing now.

Johnny Ritch, later Montana Historical Society Librarian, was quoted that you could hear Landusky long before you could see it around 1900. Queried about the remark in 1939, Mr. Ritch claimed he was misquoted. It was "audible before visible."

One anonymous gambler, of which there were ample numbers, claimed you could swing a pint tin cup around in the streets on a lively evening and catch a quart of bullets. Those were the good old days.

The late Boo McGilvra, his memory should be blessed by anyone interested in any kind of preservation fondly recalled 1910 when a pair of friends livened up a cat called Mustard with apricot brandy and tossed the clawing result through a cabin window onto Boo to awaken him to an earned hangover. Warren Berry remembered the 1911 Christmas the cook liberally laced the mince pie with brandy and the celebrants never made it to Jack Luck's saloon for an after-dinner drink.

Granville Stuart's Stranglers, rounding up rustlers in 1884, had a hand in Landusky's origin. Hard cases were riding speedily north out of Judith Basin, and to Dutch Louis Meyer it seemed that all his sudden guests would draw undue attention of the Vigilantes, so he joined the exodus. Dutch Louis picked up friends Pike Landusky and Frank Aldrich, and in July 1884 they found placer gold on Alder Gulch. It didn't compare with the original Alder Gulch, but it was sure better than an empty belly, what with all the unemployed freighters and such touching it out around Fort Benton. The stampede drew a couple of thousand — some lucky ones did better than bacon and beans.

One handicap was that the Little Rockies, in fact everything north of the Missouri and Marias, was Indian reservation in 1884. The miners played fox and hound with the soldiers — leave under escort and sneak back. None of the gulches was any big deal; about the best stake was \$1,200 for four months of hard work. Miners generally had traded with Tom O'Hanlon at Fort Benton, probably out the back door; with Milt Marsh at Rocky Point; or with Gil Norris at Fort Claggett at the Judith. In 1887 the reservation was opened to whites and everyone headed north of the Missouri.

Some good mining leads changed the pattern. Pike Landusky and Bob Orman located the Gold Bug in 1890 and three years later the August, named for the month it was found in. In June 1890, Landusky exploded into its riotous career, although some historians use the term, "the place was organized." This time the goal was hard rock mining, and there were lots of steady jobs.

Pike Landusky wasn't to enjoy his fame for long. December 27, 1894 he was relaxing in Jew Jake's saloon along with others. Jim Thornhill and friend Loney Curry entered to set the stage, followed by Harvey (Kid) Curry. The latter had a grudge. In

the fight that followed, Powell (Pike) Landusky was killed and the Currys were on the run.

This is the place for a few outlines of careers. First, mine host Jacob Harris, who by 1894 was using a Winchester for a crutch. Jake starved out of Fort Benton as a gambler when the freighters lost employment in '84, moved to Great Falls and was soon in a fracas where a fellow came at him with a knife and Harris plugged the chap. He tried Helena, lost in another fracas but beat the undertaker out of a job. Back in Great Falls he had a misunderstanding at a rail station with Chief of Police Treat, shot him three times and was wounded twice. A couple of spectators were hurt and Jake finally lost his leg, hence the useful crutch. The River Press couldn't understand all the didos, saying, "here he was regarded as a peaceful citizen." Which reminds me of the old story about a 6'6" chap who rode a grizzly into a saloon with a live rattler for a whip, mountain lion running alongside like a dog, hollered for a glass of sulfuric acid straight, then explained, "Up in Benton they run all the sissies out."

Pike Landusky came to Montana in 1868, with his nickname for the county of his origin. He never lost a fight until his last. The big quarrelsome Missourian hated Indians after one shot out part of his jaw and three teeth at a trading post on Flat Willow in the Judith Basin in 1881. He didn't count dead Indians but never killed a white man, though he put his mark on dozens, including Kid Curry, the cause of one of Montana's most celebrated homicides.

There were those who say that Henry, Johnny, Loney and Harvey Logan — they changed their name to Curry in Montana — drifted in with a stolen herd, unproven. Henry beat the odds and died a natural death fairly soon. Johnny got into a fracas with a Dutchman and had his arm shot off in 1892. It didn't improve his disposition none; he picked a fuss with Jim Winters in 1896 and went under. The remaining pair were on the dodge. Kid Curry joined the Wyoming Hole-in-the-Wall gang, led by Butch Cassidy. Cassidy had the distinction of never killing anybody while engaged in his profession; he cashed his six shooter in banks and specialized in abrupt train stops. Chouteau County didn't want Loney too bad; he hadn't committed any homicides. So along about 1899 he and cousin Bob Lee (or Curry) bought a Harlem saloon and paid cash. At that time when the national bank notes came into the Stockmen's Bar in Fort Benton they were signed by local bank officials. They sent the things in for investigation. Serial numbers proved them to be part of the loot from a Rock Creek, Wyoming train robbery. Somehow Loney and Bob got word, and between dusk and dawn they sold their bar to George Ringwald for the \$300 he had in cash and an awful liberal figure for the balance. Bob Curry was soon jailed in Wyoming, while Loney was killed in March 1900, attempting to escape arresting officials. That made Kid the survivingest Curry.

Kid Curry was one of the top hands at the much overrated occupation of gun fighting. He killed at least seven men, eight if one adds Jim Winters (who got the best of Johnny Curry), shot on his cabin doorstep some hours after Montana's most celebrated train robbery. One analyst rated Kid Curry about forth from the top in homicides. July 3, 1891 a Great Northern train was stopped near Wagner Siding west of Malta by armed men led by the Kid, with Butch Cassidy, Camille Banks, Ben Kilpatrick and perhaps Jim Thornhill assisting. It was one of the last major successes of the Wild Bunch, who soon scattered. Henry Longbaugh (Sundance Kid) was already on his way to South America.

The outlaws made the train crew uncouple baggage and express cars and pull

the rest of the train ahead, under gun point supervision. A young girl was wounded by warning shots to keep the passengers aboard. It took the outlaws four dynamite charges to blow the safe. The chief loot was \$40,000 in unsigned bank notes such as put the Harlem saloon on the auction block. There is also a shaky Montana legend that cupped silver dollars were passed a day or two later at the Mint in Great Falls. The Bunch got still away. Walt Coburn, then a button, said he provided them with remounts.

Old outlaws die hard. The Pinkertons later claimed Kid Curry a suicide after a fumbled robbery attempt in Colorado; the Landusky area's second and third generations will pass along the belief that the Kid lived to a ripe old age, revisiting his old stomping grounds a time or two. Charley Siringo, noted man hunter, agreed. Same goes for Butch Cassidy. As to Ben Kilpatrick, the "Tall Texan," there is little doubt. About 1910 he checked into the hereafter as a result of an ice mallet in the hands of a Railway Express messenger half his size.

The wild west stuff may be overrated; many of the homicides were on unarmed victims. There's an argument over whether Pike Landusky was heeled in his quarrel with Kid Curry. In some fights the dead man didn't even have a good set of teeth. But Lewistown had a Fourth of July in 1884 that makes the gunfight at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone look like a church auxiliary tea party. In 1884 Lewistown had been rather recently renamed from Reed's Fort and was pitching its first shindig. A couple of the celebrants were Edward "Longhair" Owen and Charles Fallon who carried the sobriquet "Rattlesnake Jake." They picked the touch way to enter Montana history, getting loaded with redevye and divested of cash by horse races and suffering consequent impairment of temper and judgement. Owen developed a sudden dislike of a young man dressed as Uncle Sam and hit him over the head, knocked him down, then with a cocked revolver made him crawl in the dust. When Owen expressed a desire to "clean out this town," the two mounted and rode up and down the only street firing revolvers. Townsman met the challenge, grabbing rifles off the T. C. Power store rack and getting set. One wounded Owen twice. Rattlesnake Jake, riding ahead, looked back and saw his partner in the dust and turned around. They made their last stand in front of a photographer's tent; he cashed in on the picture sales later. Owen and Fallon were in the center of the street and bullets were coming in from all directions. Two men made the mistake of crossing the street and one was killed. When the bullets had settled there were nine holes in Rattlesnake Jake and eleven in Owen, any one of which would have proven fatal. It was just as well. Granville Stewart and his Vigilantes were after them.

Rumor has it that it was a quarter century before Lewistown had a Fourth of July celebration again, and they must have lived happily ever after. Nobody ever heard of the town again.

LOST FORT BENTON

Joel F. Overholser

Fort Benton, which most residents believe justifiably terms itself "Birthplace of Montana," has lost during recent years four historic buildings to demolition crews. Two yielded to churches, one to a new post office building, an old jail is the fourth casualty.

Most important was the I. G. Baker & Co. store, a large brick building on Fort Benton's Main Street, completed in 1879 for a firm which traded for robes and furs north to the Great Slave Lake, selling these in London, Paris, and St. Petersburg. A log and adobe store a half block away dated from 1865. From 1874 until after the Canadian Pacific Railroad reached Alberta in 1883, the Baker firm held the supply contract for the Canadian government in North West Territories. When Canadian stores were bought by Hudson Bay Co. in 1891, an HBC director drank a toast to the end of a company that "scaled our dividends from pounds to shillings." The old store was demolished in 1975 and a new post office building erected on the site.

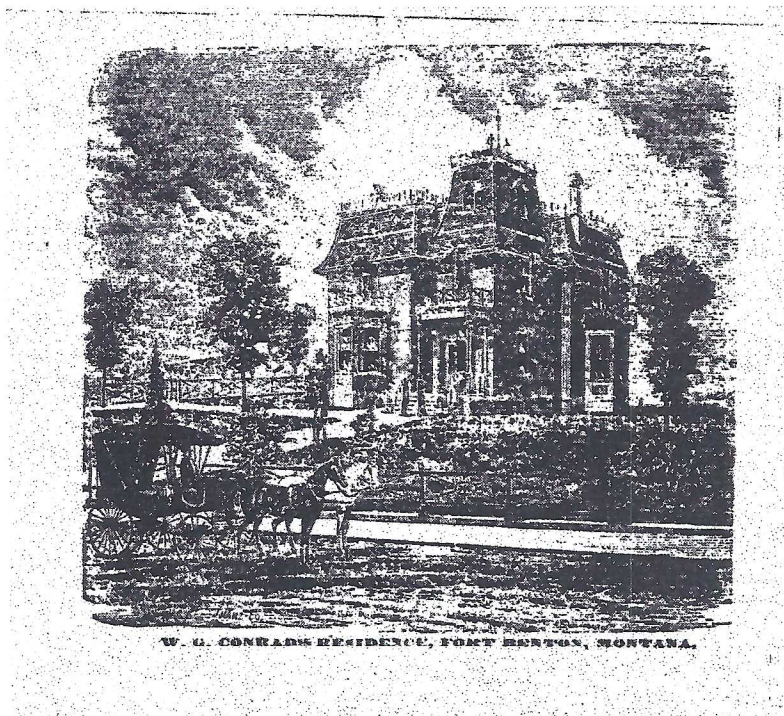
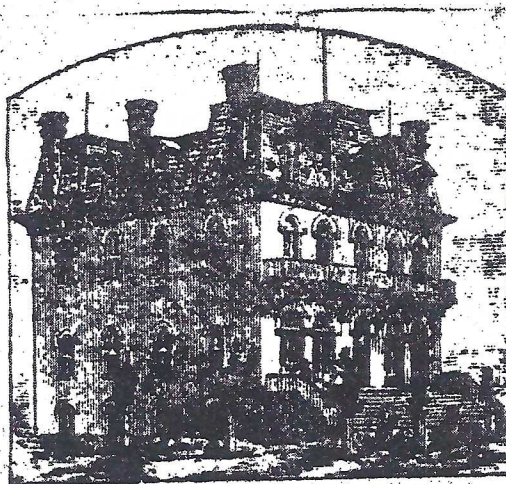
Wm. G. Conrad was manager of the firm when that toast was presented. He came to Fort Benton by steamboat in 1868, entered the employ of Isaac Baker, and within six years was supervising the Montana and Canadian business. In 1878 he erected a two-story Second Empire style home, first large brick residence built in Fort Benton. Through a succession of ballots in 1899 when the legislature chose U. S. Senators, Wm. Conrad was within four votes of taking the plum before W. A. Clark's millions intervened. The residence lasted a century, but in 1978 was demolished to provide parking for a new Catholic church. The more modest home of his adventurous brother Charles survives, as does the latter's mansion in Kalispell, built more than a decade later.

W. H. Buck stated Fort Benton's first newspaper in a log-adobe shanty on Fort Benton's Front Street April 1, 1875. By 1878 he felt prosperous enough to contract for a three-story brick building on Main, and next year had the finest printing plant in the Territory of Montana installed. He went broke by degrees in 1884. The structure, once quarters for Fort Benton's first two banks, was imposing enough that it was one of two pictures made by famed photographer F. Jay Haynes in 1880. The Record building was torn down in 1985 for a site for a frame church.

The Chouteau County brick jail, demolished in 1986, was built in 1881, the period making it oldest in Montana. It was third in Fort Benton; one built in 1868 burned in 1872, at least two prisoners with it. T. C. Power & Bro. built the second. When the brick jail was open, the log building was sold; the new owner sold the logs for firewood in the bitter winter of 1886-87. It might be well to scotch a tale that John Healy, county sheriff, was beaten by Billy Rowe. The latter served his terms before Healy, who wasn't even a candidate that year. Healy headed north to Alaska--Montana visitors can cut his trail all along the Yukon.

Last trace of the builders of that 1872 jail in Fort Benton vanished last year when the Pioneer Mercantile Co. closed out. This was successor to T. C. Power & Bro., a firm started in 1867 in a Methodist revival tent loaned by Tom Power's chief rival and best friend, I. G. Baker. The Pioneer Building was the third Power store, the first across the

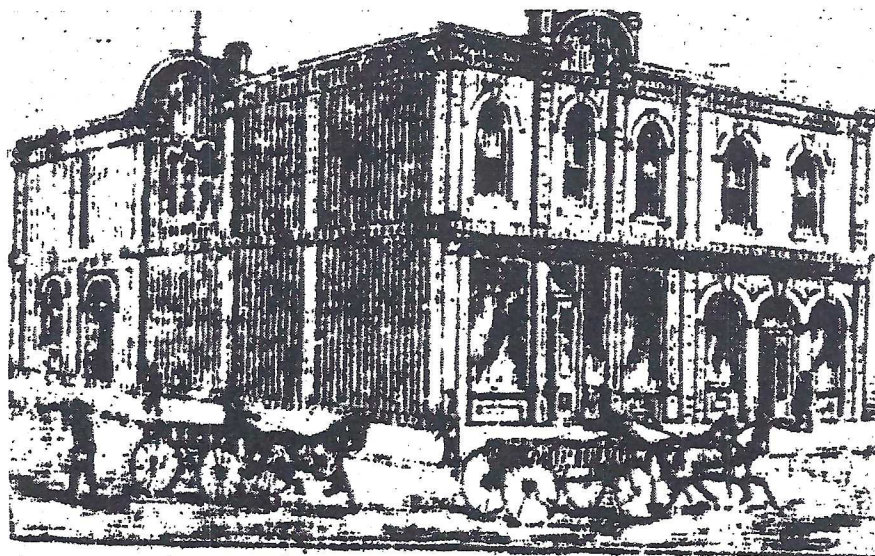
THE RECORD BUILDING



W. G. CONRAD'S RESIDENCE, FORT BERTON, MONTANA.

WILLIAM G. CONRAD
MANSION

I. G. BAKER & CO.
STORE



street, the second a two-part brick that burned on the coldest January night of 1916. The new owners are turning the store into an 8-unit motel.

Fort Benton's Grand Union Hotel, built in 1881-82, has proposed rehabilitation halted by financial problems, probably no action for a year.

A recent check by the writer indicates about 20 Fort Benton buildings, public and private, plus a scattering of small homes, are well into their second century, virtually all replacements for shacks of the 1860's.

Editor's Note by JND: In a recent letter in response to a query of mine, Joel wrote, "of all four, the one I hated most to see go was the old I. G. Baker store, although it, like the Record building, had been improved so the builders would not have recognized it. After the Baker firm pulled out in 1891, Charles Ayres put a grocery in the corner part, the other was used in early century as an armory for a Nat'l Guard unit, then it became a school auditorium while the other part was the gymnasium for years, the auditorium floor was sloped, later restored. In WPA days Bill Cavanaugh, director, made it a civic center. Duckpin bowling in the auditorium basement later, regular bowling alleys in the corner part. Then someone tried to make apartments in the main part. A real mess." Thanks for caring, Joel, even though the buildings are gone.

Fall, 1987

LETTER FROM JOEL OVERHOLSER, FORT BENTON

John N. DeHaas, Jr.
P. O. Box 1861
Bozeman, MT 59771

Dear Mr. DeHaas:

Reading the account of Diamond City in the latest newsletter, something clicked, Charles Fredericks, and I dug up and transcribed an account of 1924 by C.W. Cook, written to James H. Lowell, who was in Diamond City in 1867, came to Benton in 1869 and stayed two years, as attorney, Indian trader, etc. The museum has several of his letters (Lowell's) written from Montana. Lowell was reconstructing Montana gold rush life.

Cook has quite an account of his work at Diamond City. Fredericks was one of the better documented of the miners, X. Beidler has an account of his gold, saying he escorted it to Benton, then they put it on mackinaws to catch a steamboat below (Luella). St. Joseph Herald, Oct. 11, 1866, reporting arrival of Luella with \$3 or \$4 million gold aboard, "Frederick & Campbell alone, miners in Confederate Gulch, Montana Bar, having about \$475,000 worth of the precious ore." Granville Stuart mentions arrival of a wagon of gold, Beidler mentions three, and Robert Vaughn also mentions a big shipment, using two Germanic like names. I've come to the conclusion that the Luella may have taken down one big shipment, and a second via Beidler caught up at Cow Island. My estimate, using freight bills paid in gold, down passengers ditto, estimates of that by steamboat and mackinaw passengers, come to at least \$60 million via Benton (out of \$100 million).

Use any of this or toss it away.

Very truly,
(signature here)

GOLD: Pertinent portion of letter to Lowell from C. W. Cook. Original letter in Lowell Collection of Fort Benton Museum

White Sulphur Springs, June 30, 1924

Mr. James Lowell
Holton Kans.

Dear Sir:

Your letter was received last evening and I will make an attempt to answer it but will ask you to excuse penmanship as I am slowly recovering from a long and serious

illness and this is my first attempt to handle a pen and it seems unwilling to move in any direction. But when I get through if I think you can't make it out I will consign it to the waste basket.

You were in Diamond in 67, the bar was worked out in 66, it was rich. Probably \$1,000,000 was taken off of it. I look back now on my early experience in Diamond with much satisfaction. Hope it will not burden you. I will give you a short chapter which has never been written. In the spring of 66 I went to work for the Bow (rather illeg.) Ditch to see that it carried all the water possible without the danger of breaking. On coming home one evening I found every thing in an uproar. The town against the outlaws. The outlaws had started in to jump claims and one of the leaders had been killed and the members of the Ditch Co. who [were?] under the protection of the sheriff to keep them from the drunken howling mob of outlaws. The sheriff called on the citizens to help him; 75 men were armed watchers all night. In the morning they were taken to Helena under guard to jail them. Had their trial, turned loose, but to leave the territory as the outlaw element was too strong in Diamond. But before leaving Diamond the president of the company called me up and turned all the business over to me. In a few minutes I was made manager of one of the largest placer mining concerns in the terri. I was in a fix, I was but a boy who never handled large money or many workmen. I had no boss, no one to report to, no one to advise or help me. I worked twenty men days and the same at night. Had to clean sluice boxes morning and evening. The most I took out in 24 hours was \$16,000 and also had to regulate the water supply and collect the money each week which usually amounted to about \$10,000. The dust all had to be cleaned and cared for. I not only handled the company's gold but for another big company. As a matter of history one man (C. Fredricks) cleaned up more than one bushel at a time, but that was his summer's work. And to show you how we did business in those days he asked me to clean and sack his dust. He could not guess within 20,000 of what he had. My only instructions were to put \$5,000 in a sack and I did not seem him until the job was completed. I handled gold as a farmer does wheat. This all came into my hands unweighed and uncounted. At the time I did not see anything unusual or peculiar about my position. I thought nothing about it, but looking back on it at this time I can realize the situation and responsibility I presume no other young man was ever placed in like circumstance. There is no credit due any one for being honest, that is what we are entitled to expect from any good citizen. When you were in Diamond in 67 I was working company ground in the gulch, they had 600 feet, it was very rich. After the claims were all drifted out they were bought up by a company who put in a bed rock floom (flume) and sluiced the whole gulch out. Nothing is left of Diamond, no one lives there, the bare rocks are the tombstones of a dead city. In 69 myself with two companions explored what is now the Yellowstone National Park for which government gives us no credit. (I will send you some Park Bullatins in which is copied our notes.)

ELUSIVE GHOSTS

Joel Overholser

These are not ghost towns, but the area along the Missouri River below and immediately above Fort Benton is beaded with elusive ghosts, chiefly the sites of trading posts aimed at tapping the Blackfeet trade.

First was Fort Piegan, at the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers near present Loma, which James Kipp opened in style in late summer of 1831, converting a barrel of alcohol into 200 gallons of Injun whiskey, Montana's first grand opening. The post was burned after a season's trade, and archaeologists say the site is most likely on the north side of the Marias River.

Its successor was Fort McKenzie, built in 1832 about half way between Fort Benton and Loma, now in a cultivated field on Lundy bottom. Pestiferous pot hunters were the reason the site was ploughed under. In 1926 remnants, charcoal, unburnt logs and tokens of occupation were sizeable. Fort McKenzie died February 19, 1844, when Alexander Harvey turned a cannon on a trading party in revenge for the earlier killing of a fort employee. Then they burned it, fearing attack.

The whites had hurriedly and secretly built Fort Chardon (also Francis A. or F.A.C.) on the north side of the Missouri across from the Judith River by April 1844. Alexander Culbertson, returned from Fort Laramie, burned the place when he was recalled to restore trade relations the next year. Its exact site was relocated in April 1981.

The Judith Crossing bottom has another ghost site, that of Camp Cooke. This was by a few weeks the first military post built in Montana on the south side of the Missouri, near the Judith River. A Camp Cooke display in the Fort Benton museum contains a case of surprising relics donated by Maynard Shumate, long an archaeologist. Another is the Power-Norris store, built by James Wells of stone for Power in 1882.

Fox & Livingston (Union Fur) came into the Missouri area in competition with American Fur, building a small post in 1843 above and across from Fort McKenzie, one of two ghosts now disappeared. Fr. Point's 1847 sketch indicates it lay a short distance below Shonkin Creek.

Next year Union Fur built Fort Cotton on the second bottom above the future-Fort Benton, and on the other side of the river. This they sold to American Fur in 1845, and Alexander Culbertson apparently built on the site or nearby. The bottom has long been known as "Cotton." Culbertson proposed at first to name the post for Honore Picotte, one of the American Fur partners, which would have resulted in Fort Honore, Picotte, or even Henry, but finally settled for Fort Lewis in memory of the explorer.

Alexander Harvey, fired of course, for the 1844 massacre, obtained financial backing from Robert Campbell in St. Louis. No one could ever fault Harvey for lack of energy, courage or hatred, and he roared back up the Missouri to found Fort Campbell (I), another of the ghosts. From the site description it was located somewhere in Evans Bend, about 9 river miles below Fort Benton, built in 1846.

Culbertson in Fort Lewis listened to Indian complaints about difficulties in crossing

an ice-filled river. As he and his family always claimed that 1846 was the year of founding of future Fort Benton, the writer assumes a party of workmen was sent down in late fall or winter.

March 19. 1847 is given in Fr. Point's Journal (he was on the spot) for the beginning of the trading post. Culbertson moved it as Fort Clay; the name reverted to Fort Lewis (II) almost immediately. American Fur records in 1848 refer to the post as Fort Benton, and at a gala party on Christmas night 1850 Alexander Culbertson officially christened it in honor of Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. (In 1865, at a picnic in Old Fort Park, the writer had the opportunity to relate the story to a great-nephew of the same name, the noted artist.)

Alexander Harvey wasn't done with fun and games with American Fur. In 1847 he moved Fort Campbell to the Fort Benton bottom a half mile above the other fort, building it of adobe. Strangely, his trade with the Blackfeet was a substantial portion of that of the rival post. This site can be located by historic sign, proven by occasional beads. Granville Stuart sketched Fort Campbell (II) in 1865, but by the later 1870's the dobies had probably gone to fill in gullies on the Fort Benton bottom.

Here is the second unlocated ghost spot: In 1862 LaBarge, Harkness & Co. sent the Shreveport and Emilie LaBarge steamboats to Fort Benton. These unloaded about 600 tons of freight on the prairie above Fort Campbell and built Fort LaBarge. This wasn't much. When sold at sheriff's sale by Wm. Hamilton in October 1866, the buildings were storeroom, dining room, smithy, carpentry, dwelling, sawmill-grist mill, office and 11 log cabins--all dinky. From descriptions (all traces long gone), locals place it near the present water works.

Two other river points of note:

Coal Banks Landing: Here in the latter years of the 1870's hundreds of tons of steamboat freight were unloaded and freighted north to build Fort Assiniboine, one of the largest military posts of the Indian wars. The coal deposits of the area were discovered and being worked in the 1860's; in 1869 the steamboat H. M. Shreve bought some to test while wooding here. Steamboaters soon gave up. The writer believes it a matter of grates and draft, as 30 odd years later boats were burning local coal along the river.

Cow Island and Trail: Above the island a much used freighting trail ran up the creek 8 or 10 miles, then turned westward about 125 miles to Fort Benton. The writer's figures indicate extremely intensive use of this trail as perhaps 18,000 to 20,000 tons of freight off steamboats traversed it. LeRoy Anderson of Chinook has traced the trail to the Blaine-Chouteau county line and found traces of the wagon train burned by Nez Perce in September 1877.

Hunting ghost spots can be even more exacting than towns. Vernon Carroll of Cut Bank owns the place on which relics of an old whiskey fort remained. There has been extensive correspondence, and Vernon found first (old) Fort Maginnis, then that it had moved, so we have an old and a new skirting the Blackfeet reservation. And don't confuse it with the Fort Maginnis near Lewistown; that was named for Martin Maginnis, territorial delegate to congress. Vernon's was named for Tom Maginnis, perhaps a relative.

Winter, 1990

GHOST DIGGINGS

Joel Overholser

John Lepley, later a prominent cattleman in the Fort Benton area, and partner Chris Keyes (name has various spellings) in 1865 split up at Silver Creek near Helena. Keyes wrote Lepley: "Drop everything and come on. You don't want any horses or money, we can get all of the latter that we can carry." Lepley almost went, but didn't, and Keyes went off again in August. Somewhere south of the Little Rockies, according to a squaw survivor, the Keyes party was rubbed out by Indians. So the "lost Keyes diggings" went into Montana legend. Best guess is that the prospector hit an especially rich pocket somewhere in the Little Rockies.

Spring, 1990

THIS CENTURY'S GHOST TOWNS

Joel Overholser

Montana's first railroads reached its borders in 1880, the Utah & Northern, which later became the Union Pacific, from Utah north to Terminus (soon called Dillon). Toward Wibaux on Montana's eastern border came the Northern Pacific tracks. Over the years more steel was laid, and many of present Montana towns came into existence in the last century.

There was more and more building in the homestead period, which ultimately resulted in more modern ghost towns. Chouteau County has a number of them; readers in other areas can add to the list.

Town siting in the west was always a potential way to wealth but bad guesses were a sure route to poverty. Milwaukee tracks across southern Chouteau County in 1913 provided a number of examples: Square Butte, once hopeful, with newspaper, bank, etc., a bar survives; Shonkin, a platted townsite, and a building or two survives; Montague, newspaper, stores, bank, little left; Geraldine remains an incorporated town; Highwood as a pleasant community grouping but once with store, bank and newspaper.

The Great Northern line added a couple of ghosts; Virgelle had a very substantial mercantile store and bank; it had its beginnings as Coal Banks on the river in the gold rush. Floweree, located toward Great Falls, had a hotel, store and newspaper.

Well out west of Fort Benton is Genou, a ghost that never quite was, bank, newspaper, perhaps another business or two, and based on hope that the Great Northern would build a branch line to tap the homestead grain fields.

Summer, 1990

GHOST TRACKS

Joel Overholser

There are ghost towns galore in Montana's mining regions. Chouteau County has another type of ghost — the one time stretches of railroad which created a number of once-hopeful ghost towns of the homestead era.

The Great Northern Railroad (then the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba) reached Fort Benton September 18, 1887, and next day the city turned out to note the driving of a silver spike — now in the Museum of the Upper Missouri here in Fort Benton — that effectively ended almost 30 years of steamboating to the head of navigation on the Missouri. In 1913 the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific built its line across southern Chouteau County, leaving in its wake a number of hopeful towns, now dead.

From that county after 1920 went by far the greatest tonnages of agricultural produce sent out by any Montana county.

It was in December 1967 that a railroad conglomerate entitled Burlington Northern took over Montana's railroads; results 22 years later range from ludicrous to fantastic.

The one time Great Northern tracks between Big Sandy and Fort Benton and the Milwaukee tracks from Geraldine toward Great Falls have disappeared. The one time Milwaukee tracks from Lewistown to Geraldine have been preserved only by local interests. Both Big Sandy and Fort Benton are on stub lines. At the three points, if grain freight trains come head on, they have to back out with cargoes to Great Falls, Havre or Lewistown.

Parts of the old track grades remain visible, stripped of rails.

One of the first actions of Burlington Northern was to create another ghost, that of a corporate emblem. BN replaced the famed Great Northern goat on the box cars with an almost undecipherable emblem, perhaps wopper-jawed pliers, abolishing a symbol that cheered many a Montana service man when it showed up in different states. Charles N. Pray of Fort Benton, Montana's only congressman in 1907-1913, who steered the bill creating Glacier Park through a reluctant House of Representatives in 1910, regarded the goat as "the most extensively and best-known animal in the United States."

Winter, 1991

GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

Joel Overholser

So said the old time miners. Gold Placers of Montana (1948) by Charles Lynden for the Montana Bureau of Mines doesn't even admit there is gold in Chouteau County, nor does the excellent Montana Pay Dirt by Muriel Sibell Wolle. The writer would have disputed this in much younger years. However, it wasn't by much. One can still find flecks of gold along the Missouri, and in a few other spots one can find the semblance of black sands, probably brought in by the glaciers a few thousand years ago. The trouble is, it takes a number of those flecks to make a penny, even at present higher prices.

At one time, though, [sand] bars in the vicinity of Fort Benton were worked by small sluice, yielding a bit better than bacon and beans. Gus Monroe in 1902 reported getting fifty cents to a dollar and a half per yard from bars along the Missouri, with the richest old high bars below town.

Spring 1991

A PHANTOM GOLD FIELD

Joel Overholser

The Benton Record of June 28, 1878 gave a big play to a report of gold colors washed out on the North Fork of Snake Creek in the Bear Paw Mountains within five miles of the final Nez Perce battle, and the quick formation of a mining district by about 70 men. For evidence, a visitor got twelve cents in one pan. By mid-July men were showing specimens in Fort Benton, while others were discouraged about returning due to the digging involved. The Record kept pushing the good news, but a few weeks later an obituary ran: "excitement has subdued for a while, but no one has lost confidence." Or so said the Record.

Bear Paw Mountains were big news in the River Press April 10, 1889. some miners had traded placer gold to Tom O'Hanlon at Chinook, and the tale lost nothing in the article, headed "Gold Galore!" (Most likely the group had panned some dust from streams out of the Little Rockies, but when queried pointed coyly to the Bear Paw Range.)

There was a final quiver to this ghost. January 9, 1907 the River Press headlined "Great Copper Strike in the Bear Paws!" On April 17 the paper reported mine development plans. Then on June 7 a brief article called a report on the plan "discouraging." And there went the chance for a ghost town that left some traces.

Winter, 1992

EDITOR'S NOTE: Here is the letter from Joel Overholser that accompanied this article:

Dear John, I noted that in a press story the Bovey buildings, etc. apparently came out a bit on the plus side last season, so perhaps will continue on display. Reminds me, Charley Bovey, who I used to try and visit at least once a year, shortly before he died told me that Virginia City people mostly figured he was making a fortune out of Bale of Hay Saloon and [Wells Fargo] restaurant, and that he had more than broken even that year. I asked him how much and he told me almost \$100.

Anyway, it occurred to me that it was unusual, but I had most of the history of that 1865 frame, and wrote enclosed, you might like to have it.

Have been puttering around with a possible book, this with Montana's Missouri River instead of Fort Benton as central theme, probably won't materialize, but there is lots of material, such as a girl's account of her father at Rocky Point, and Sioux City perhaps losing those ten Sioux skulls Cap Andrews took down river in 1860, anyway, the Sioux City Historical Society threw up its hands at the inquiry.

*Happy Hunting,
Joel Overholser*

TRAVELING GHOST

Joel Overholser

One of the most historic buildings in Montana has proven to be a traveling ghost, and hopefully, Montanans did not have their last chance to view it at Virginia/Nevada City in 1991. There visitors saw it identified as the Jos. Sullivan harness shop.

The frame structure may have been built for an Indian agency in 1864, writer is still digging for year, by Gad Upson, Blackfeet agent who arrived in Fort Benton December 1863.

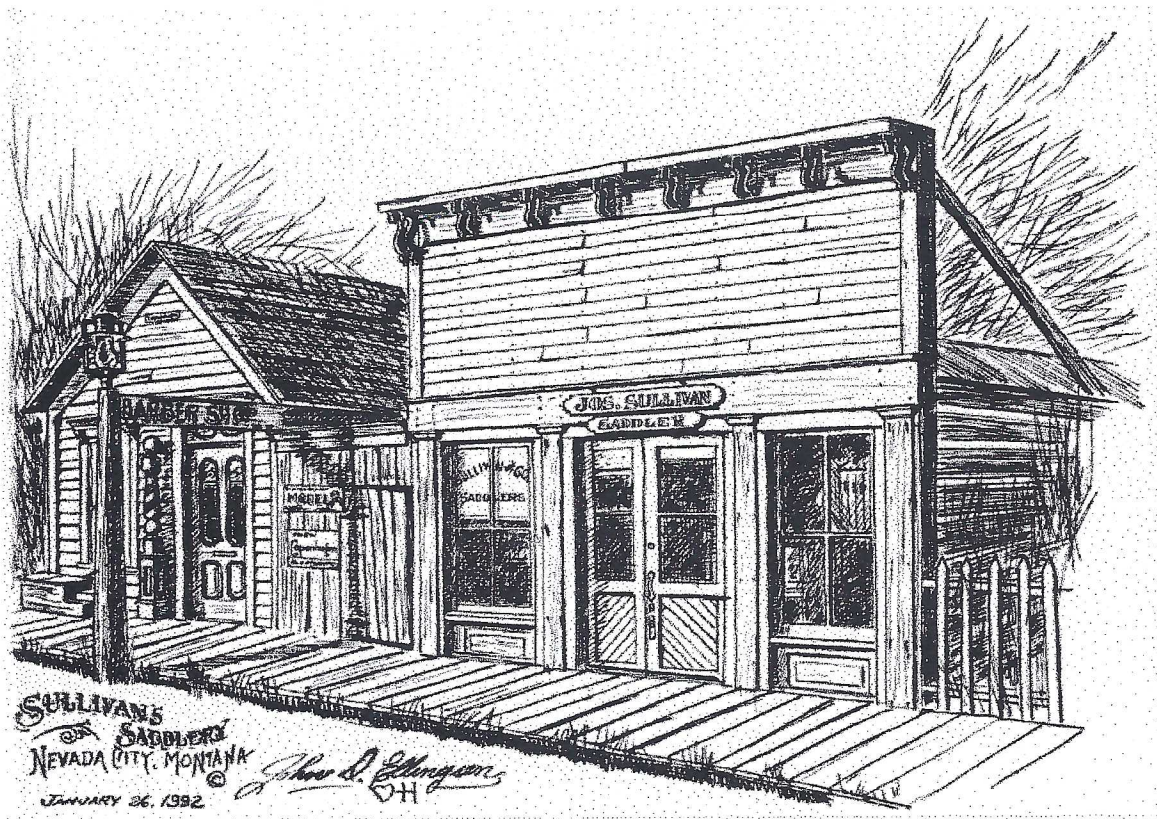
Certainly it was present and among the buildings comprising "Benton City" as Hi Upham (assistant agent to Gad Upson) on August 1, 1865 wrote a letter to a lady friend back east from this structure. "The city consists of 12 or 15 log houses. These are used as dwellings, stores, warehouses and saloons. When the trains are in here things are very lively indeed. The drivers then all get drunk and as they all carry a Revolver and knife and as fights are a daily occurrence, it makes everything look lively. Four men have been shot since I have been here." (about a month)

The structure earned a name that stayed with it for some time. In the Montana Post of Dec. 9, 1865, in a November 17 article from Fort Benton by Gad Upson, a treaty with Blackfeet and Gros Ventres describes, "43 chiefs in Council House decorated with white cotton, red and blue flannel, Upson, Meagher and U. S. Judge L. E. Munson." The treaty provided for cession of all lands south of the Teton, Marias and Missouri to the Milk River, Blackfeet to receive \$50,000 annually for 20 years, allow roads, telegraphs and military posts. (The U. S. government quickly forgot the annual payments.)

Apparently the U. S. official felt no more need for the structure. It seems that John Healey and his new wife Mary that winter operated a restaurant, hotel and bar fixings through the year end, the hotel being a "bring you own blankets" type, for it took another owner several years later to add beds. The history of the building for about fifteen years from 1865 has to date been untraceable except that it was a meat market for a time.

Then Jos. Sullivan moved from Deer Lodge to Fort Benton in the fall of 1881 at the urging of John J. Healy, so it can be presumed that Healy owned the building. Sullivan held forth in the small wooden structure until his death in April 1940. He made additions of log, adobe and lumber behind, reported as the area was gradually cleared at the rear. Along the way, one of Jos. Sullivan's contracts was 500 special design saddles for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, in early years Fort Benton's special customers. His saddles were built to last. His file includes several mentions from proud owners.

Charles Bovey of Great Falls, his name should be blessed by every one interested in conservation of the past, intervened when the Sullivan Saddlery was scheduled for demolition in Fort Benton, and moved it to Old Town at the fair in Great Falls in 1941. Fort Benton wasn't the most sinful about the past. Later, in 1960 the Great Falls fair board ordered Bovey to remove the by-then nationally famous Old Town for unstated improvements. Hence Virginia City became host city to a great exhibit from the past. Meanwhile, the Great Falls fair trustees, approaching the Bicentennial, wistfully proposed to build a Bicentennial village from scratch. And Charley Bovey had been helping Fort Benton get a museum underway. This failed, but the effort came to life in 1958 in a fine historical museum.



Spring, 1993

LETTER FROM JOEL OVERHOLSER

Your latest quarterly on Hobson's prostitutes was appreciated by myself and I felt that Henry Murray did a good job on this. Further, it boosts along a line of interest. I found prostitution references pretty scanty along the way, best addition by Dr. Paula Petrick around 1981 after some correspondence. Long ago editors generally ignored the topic although [I] have finally managed about 20 references. You could call it a ghost profession.

Down in that Virginia City area, or was, if it has been moved, is what I'm inclined to propose as the most historic building in Montana, the old Jos. Sullivan harness shop. Near as I can determine, it was built in 1864 for an Indian Agency by the Blackfeet agent; next year [for the signing of] the 1865 peace treaty with the Blackfeet, the Montana Post reported 10,000 to 15,000 Indians in Fort Benton. Council Hall was decorated with red, white and blue cloth for some 40-odd chiefs as Thomas Francis Meagher and U.S. Federal Judge Munson made Fort Benton temporary capital of Montana, and the building the temporary Capitol.

The aftermath was the acquisition of most of northern Montana, and there was near war on the bottom between Gros Ventres and dissident factions of the Blackfeet, averted by the thinnest of margins.

John Healy used Council Hall later as a restaurant, hotel (bring your own blankets) and saloon. It had varied uses before Jos. Sullivan in the latter part of the century took over. His death in the 1940 threatened the building with destruction until Charles Bovey made it the "star" in Old Town at the Great Falls fair, and he saved it again by moving it to Virginia City.

Editor's Note: Joel also states that his files, etc. are now in the Montana Agricultural Center with a small Archives and Library. He is "historian in residence." Grace and Bruce Helming of Wisdom report that they recently visited Joel in Fort Benton where he is now living in a retirement home. They purchased his book, Fort Benton, World's Innermost Port, and are enjoying it.

WHOOOP-UP TRAIL Joel Overholser

This spring the "Whoop-Up Trail of North Central Montana" was included in the National Register of Historic Places. As some of the views and assumptions may be conducive to argument and differing views, the writer thought best to add his name as source.

This trail with the wonderful name becomes one of the listed national historic trails. Adding a bit, this trail was a largely oxen route and crossed the Teton [River] a short distance from Fort Benton, angled northwesterly to cross the Marias near Dry Forks and kept going to the Canadian border and onto an American trading post named Fort Hamilton by John J. Healy and Alfred B. Hamilton in November or December of 1869. Why Whoop-Up?

Customers were mighty wild Indians, not tamed by an influx of Sioux after the Little Big Horn, the trade good pretty high powered, Fort Hamilton was burned and rebuilt. Some Bentonite asked how things were going across the border and got the word, "they're just whoopin' it up," and the name was born and the trail names.

Other forts followed, mostly American. Actually at the time Canada had little law, few whites, little government for what Paul Sharp, writer, termed "Whoop-Up Country."

For the presentation of the Whoop-Up Trail, a Canadian, Dr. Margaret Kennedy of University of Lethbridge wrote its lively history. No stranger to the writer of this, Margaret one day in August 1989 brought more than 260 pages of typing and diagrams, information about the whiskey forts in southern Alberta what Dr. Barney Reeves and she had worked out.

Interest up in Canada way in these beginnings is still evident; of six visitors here so far this year, three wanted more information on the trail and wanted material on the trail, while another supplied a few more American whiskey forts across the border.

The Whoop-Up Trail and reports coming back about very interesting profits selling liquor to Blackfeet and other tribes up north of the Medicine Line rekindle the boom. A man could get into business for himself if he had the wherewithal for a jug of whiskey worked into Indian-type booze. Margaret K. felt she had found and identified 60 whiskey posts on the Canada side of the line. Others, including two Canadians helping the writer's files, have hit a similar total.

Whoop-Up whiskey was no drink for a connoisseur. Fort Benton's I. G. Baker and T. C. Power were into the booze business, along with others such as Murphy Neel. Carroll & Steel were also, although the large well-financed firms purveyed considerably more legitimate wares than the boys with a barrel and a hope.

The coming of the Mounted Police to Canada's wild west, about 400 of them, threw the trade into chaos very quickly.

About 10 or 15 years ago the writer's historical files ruined a very ambitious project for a story on the Whoop-Up trade. No notes were saved and this business is based on recollection: The chap's ambition was to make a long sensational account of the bitter rivalry between the Baker and Power firms of Fort Benton. He was sadly disabused. "There wasn't," the guy on the phone was told. He doubted the work.

"Look," he was told further, "Power had a steamboat load of foods and not a place on the levee for a toothpick. Baker heard about it and took a big Methodist revival tent to Power. T. C.'s store began in that tent, and 'Dad never forgot,' son Charley wrote in 1927." The caller wasn't satisfied and was supplied more dope. "Their two stores built the first decent hotel in Benton, bought the first Benton-owned steamboat, started the first bank. Up in Canada they took turn about picking towns, and in case they didn't keep it even, at the end of a business year each wrote a check for the other of 25% of the profit in Canada to send to the other guy."

Editor's Note: When he sent the above article Joel wrote:

"When I get a Canadian visitor just think, 'Where did I put the Whoop Up Trail?' because that's what they all seem to ask about. The international aspect makes it special in my thought, too.

Seems to me I showed you where my files are now in our Ag Center, and since brother and his daughter sold the River Press last year spend much time in what was name Schinden Library. I tell people I'm there about 10 mornings and 1 to 3 afternoons, usually have visitors a couple of times a week. Last week a group from Edmonton, two girl historians and a crew with camera, VCR type.

Sticking in a banknote for dues. Great Falls Tribune is all wrapped up about a visitor center, Lewis & Clark, and am about to tell them that here is the Lewis & Clark [Center] for Montana, designated so by the 1929 legislature and again in 1975 and our committee named a special state body by Gov. Tom Judge, so the June 11, 1976 dedication was it for Montana. Forget whether that statue made \$50,000 or more profit. When I wrote a bit about Great Falls and Lewis & Clark for the River Press the linotype operator got it Great Galls, and I damned near let it stand."

Joel O.

Fall, 1995

LETTER FROM JOEL OVERHOLSER

Dear Folks:

... if any Ghost Towners make it to Fort Benton drop in and see me and what I have here, left side of Montana Agricultural Center by a small sign that says Schinden Library, with my history files and library.

Happened to mention to Jack Lepley, in charge of Ag Museum and history in general, that I'd be writing you, and he thought your group might possibly be interested in your annual meeting in Fort Benton in 1996, as then the Hornaday Buffalo group will be on display in a building specially built for them.

For those not familiar with the Hornadays, these were taken by Mr. Hornaday in the early 1880s from among the very last of Montana's wild buffalo. Hornaday prepared an exhibit for the Smithsonian in their museum, which it is believed was the first natural history group exhibit in the world. It remained in the Smithsonian until broken almost 70 years later, when the mounted animals were returned to Montana. Fort Benton has received loan of the entire group.

Near my office and Jack's a building went up this year to house the collection, following the Smithsonian pattern of the six. In a note a few weeks ago I alerted the *Great Falls Tribune* that this was a world class exhibit and to await developments.

Jack Lepley figures to work on preparation later this year.

Very truly,
Joel Overholser

Winter, 2000

IN MEMORIAM

With regret we report the death of Joel Overholser of Fort Benton. Joel was a longtime member of MGTPS, a former member of the Board of Directors, and a contributor to our Quarterly. He was the editor of the Fort Benton River Press until his retirement in 1981 and author of Fort Benton, World's Innermost Port. Quoting from the dust jacket of the book, "Joel Overholser came to Montana at age 2 in 1913 and never left the state except for military service from 1942 to 1946. He received a degree in journalism from the University of Montana and joined the River Press. In 1995 Governor Marc Racicot proclaimed "Joel Overholser Day" to honor his efforts in gathering and sharing knowledge. Joel's enthusiasm for the history of Montana and the Fort Benton region will be missed by us all.

Joel Overholser died October 20, 1999. We have truly been enriched by his contributions to Montana history.