

OLD UTICA

by Judy Penkake

Utica, Montana, little old cowtown on the Judith River, was one of the last frontiers to be settled because of frequent Indian raids and great distances from the protection of forts. Family men hesitated to make their homes in the area until after the gold rush of 1879 to Yogo. The few scattered settlers before that were bachelors, and the first one to build a home, plow a furrow and plant a crop was John Murphy.

John Murphy had come from Utica, New York, and soon others from the same town followed. They were P. W. Korell and Joseph Cutting and John D. Waite from Pen Yan, New York. Their headquarters was in a log cabin on Murphy's preemption claim of 160 acres in Meagher County, with the county seat far away at White Sulphur Springs. A part of this claim John Murphy laid out in lots and plotted a village, which was named Utica after the home of the founders.

One incident in 1881 created a lot of excitement in Utica. Before Utica had an officially appointed postmaster, John Murphy's cabin served as post office for the convenience of settlers. It was winter time and the roads were heavy with deep snow. The mail carrier's buckboard broke down and when he left on horseback, he took only the letters and left a heavier sack for the next trip, which would be in a couple months or so. The sack got kicked under Murphy's bunk on the dirt floor of the cabin and the dog slept on it for several months. The sack became covered with dust and was forgotten.

When the snow was gone, about the middle of May, a detachment of soldiers from Fort Maginnis rode into Utica from the north. They had been trailing a sack of money lost several months previously and asked if any had been found. It was the \$40,000 payroll for the soldiers at Ft. Maginnis which had disappeared. Murphy was willing for them to search the cabin, and he finally remembered about the sack the dog had been sleeping on all winter.

"That's it!" gasped the soldier. "That's the \$40,000 we've been moving heaven and earth to find, and it's been a bed for your dog!"

The coming of the homesteaders, poor roads and the opening of the sapphire mines in Yogo Gulch kept business lively in Utica for over forty years. With improved roads, the coming of the family automobile, and a disastrous flash flood that closed the sapphire mines, Utica began to dwindle. Its school finally closed in 1976 and then its church. Utica presently has a general store, post office and saloon, and a newly opened ceramics shop in the former church building. There is also a good local museum in a new log building and a club house in another new log building.

Utica has three claims to fame:

1. Utica was Charles Russell's first stomping ground in Montana and his first famous painting (the watercolor "Last of the Five Thousand") was produced in a cabin near Utica.
2. The world famous Yogo blue sapphires were found near Utica.
3. Native son Lawrence Pettit is Montana's first Commissioner of Higher Education.

Pike Miller homesteaded near Utica in 1880 and he visited in St. Louis, Missouri, with the Tussells. Their 15-year-old son Charles wanted to come West and wouldn't stay in school there, so Pike offered him a job on his Utica place and brought him back. Charles passed his 16th birthday on the trip in March. It turned out that Pike Miller ran sheep on his homestead and somehow Charles just couldn't get along with the sheep so within a couple months, he left the job and hung forlornly around Utica. Jake Hoover, the mountain man, happened to come along and took Charles Russell under his wing for a few years. Living with Jake among the wild animals and mountain scenery surrounding the cabin gave young Russell inspiration to draw and model with clay when he wasn't helping Jake prepare meat to sell the homesteaders and trapping fur animals. Then he joined Judith Roundup and learned how to be a cowboy. The terrible winter of 1886-87 came along and devastated the cattle industry. Charles was able to express it with his brush and pen in the little watercolor "Last of the Five Thousand," which was sent to Helena when the owner of the cattle herd asked how they were faring. Just this past summer the Utica Historical Society members have erected a log cabin replica of Jake Hoover's cabin almost on the same site. It is on the Trask Ranch in South Fork above Utica.