



Photos provided by the Montana Historical Society

Helena was devastated after a major fire in 1869. Binzel and Hamper brewery is up at the head of the gulch. Pictured in the center of the photo are: Adam Gerherzer, first from right; George Binzel, in middle next to a child; Balthazer Binzel, eighth from the left, who came to Helena in 1866; Christ Kenck next to George Binzel; and Joe Spurzem, on the wagon. BELOW: Early fire chiefs A.J. Davidson, left, C.N. Jeffers, Seth Bullock and T.H. Kleinschmidt were members of the volunteer fire department, pictured here in 1875.



The long campaign of women's suffrage

By Martha Kohl and Tom Cook
Montana Historical Society

The right of women to vote is taken for granted today, but the thousands of people who fought for that right should never be forgotten.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of woman suffrage, as it was known back then, being approved by Montana voters. In honor of this centennial, the Montana Historical Society is encouraging all Montanans to take a new look at the important roles women have played in our state's history.

A good place to start is "The Suffrage Daily News" that began publication in 1914 in Helena.

It is well-written and thoughtful — as well as tough and challenging. In a September 1914 issue, for example, the front page headline speaks glowingly of a parade held at the Montana State Fair by suffrage supporters, touting it as the "most significant ever seen in the Northwest."

The front page also carries a political cartoon of a meeting in a cigar-filled backroom. Attending this anti-suffrage meeting are caricatures labeled "Food Doper, Anti-suffragist, White Slave Dealer, Saloon Keeper, Special Privilege and Gang Politician."

Montana suffragists used images like this to win an important victory for Montana women.

On Nov. 3, 1914, Montana men went to the polls, where they voted 53 to 47 percent in favor of women's suffrage. It would be another six years before women got the vote nationally. Montana suffrage supporters rejoiced, and in 1916, followed up their victory by electing Maggie Smith Hathaway (D) and Emma Ingalls (R) to the state Legislature and Jeanette Rankin (R) to the U.S. Congress.

An air of inevitability surrounded the victory, but it had not come easily.

Montana women's rights advocates first proposed equal suffrage 25 years earlier at the 1889 state constitutional convention. Fergus County delegate Perry McAdow (R), husband of successful businesswoman and feminist Clara McAdow, championed the cause. It eventually failed on a tie vote.

Although the constitutional convention did not grant them equal suffrage, Montana women did retain the right to vote in school elections (first ceded to them by the 1887 territorial Legislature). The new constitution also granted all tax-paying women the right to vote on questions concerning taxpayers.

For Montana feminists, however, the goal was equality in voting rights. It proved a difficult target. Suffrage clubs formed and disbanded as the movement lurched between periods of concentrated effort and years of "discouragement and apathy." The state Legislature voted on equal suffrage

More SUFFRAGE, page 6C

fiery history

Several fires in Helena's early years helped shape the town

By SEAN LOGAN
For the Independent Record

In early 1881, a few weeks after Helenans had voted for a municipal charter, the newly elected representatives of the city of Helena enacted Ordinance No. 2., which provided the fledgling municipal government with a seal.

The seal contained the words, "City of Helena, Lewis and Clarke County, Montana, 1881," with a central device of a phoenix. Helena by then had risen from the ashes enough times that it would have been difficult not to choose the mythical creature for its symbol.

From the earliest days as a mining camp, Helena struggled with fire. Folks framed it in terms of being one of the four fundamental elements of the physical world; earth, wind, water and fire. The devouring element, as it was often called, threatened the town during the first four years after the discovery of gold — but only enough for the townsfolk to realize what calamity they had narrowly missed.

In 1869, however, the "fire-fiend" visited and filled them with a terror they would relive again and again for the next five years and retell in their old age.

By December 1873, the growing town had experienced seven major fires since that first visitation. Each time the entire community and its little fire department would bravely battle, lament the deplorable condition of its firefighting capabilities and then rebuild. Each time they'd try to shore up their defenses and also build with "fire-proof" materials as much as possible, preparing for whatever came next.

In a report published in a Helena newspaper late in that month, chief engineer Seth Bullock wrote, "As the water supply is wholly inadequate, I would recommend the construction of two new cisterns on Main Street and one upon Fifth Avenue. With these increased water facilities, a large fire in Helena would be an impossibility. I would also recommend the purchase of a 'Babcock Self-acting Engine.' These machines have been adopted in the East and have proved very efficient in the extinguishment of fires."

It appeared he didn't feel well prepared with the existing water system and the equipment used to deliver it to an engagement with fire. What he did have, though, was significantly advanced relative to even his recent predecessors.

From late 1865 when Helena first organized a fire brigade until after the conflagration in August 1872, the fire department's defense consisted of men with buckets who delivered water drawn from a handful of cisterns and ditches.

They also had a hook-and-ladder company whose motto was: "We destroy to save." Their equipment consisted of ladders, ropes and grappling hooks. The men who formed the company used them to tear the fire building down, as well as the buildings adjacent to it, to help stop the fire.

Within a month of the conflagration, which damaged about \$140,000 in property, Helenans pooled almost \$6,000. With these funds, they were able to purchase a hand engine (a mobile pump capable of delivering a water stream through a hose), hose, additional cisterns, hooks, ladders and axes. The hand engine brought a huge advantage in firefighting as it gave Helena a means to put an effective stream of water exactly where it was needed. As importantly, they could move the engine quickly.

On Christmas Eve 1873, a new hook-and-ladder truck arrived from the Corinne, Utah, route. On New Year's Eve, the department elected its officers for the upcoming year, 1874. During the following week, the various companies (engine, hose, hook-and-ladder) would elect new officers to lead their divisions of the department. On the evening of Jan. 8, the hose company held a meeting to elect its officers, and the entire department was invited to join in the celebrated occasion.

At 7 a.m. on the following morning, fire was showing from a dwelling in Chinatown, in the very southernmost part of town. The tower watchman immediately gave the alarm that notified the slumbering townsfolk there was a fire in their midst.

More FIERY, page 2C



BEST OF HELENA **WINNERS & RUNNERS UP**

JANUARY 24 IN THE Independent Record and at helenair.com

Fiery

continued from 1C

Because of their absolute fear of the "Fire King," much of the town and its fire department immediately descended upon the Chinese gambling house at the head of Last Chance Gulch.

It is important to understand Helena was born at the confluence of two gulches that beckoned in wind currents to flow freely and gain strength from the commingling of weather and topography. As the morning grew, so did the winds, to the point that by the time of the pealing of the tower alarms, they came with gale force.

Upon the arrival of those who sought to stamp the fire out in its incipency, they found a foe that ignored their efforts and confidently developed with the influx of air and the proximity of fuel.

In a brief time, the shanties in Chinatown surrounding the fire's origin were ablaze. Fed by winds described as a "perfect hurricane," the flame front, reported as "a tornado of red-hot lava," tore north down West Main and Main streets. Buildings that were considered "fire-proof" readily succumbed to the intense radiant heat of the burning buildings that surrounded them. This heat actually ignited the stores of combustible goods inside them. Thus, these buildings of stone and masonry construction burned from the inside out.

It also spread east, uphill as fire does, growing by direct flame contact but also by hurling embers and chunks of burning debris far ahead of it. This fire-spread threatened the residential neighborhoods in that upper part of town.

Firefighting efforts were more or less concerted

between the fire department and the community. Citizen firefighters used axes and water buckets to attack fire and buildings ahead of the fire. Newsprint told of the thousands that worked tirelessly to protect their community.

The fire department's engine and hose companies used their mobile hand engine, hose and bucket brigades to draft from cisterns and apply water as best they could. The hook-and-ladder company carried out their work.

Chief engineer M.G. Chase tried his best to place these companies as strategically and responsibly as possible. This must have been challenging with flanks moving north along Main Street and east up the hill from the gulch and a front that devoured everything in and ahead of its path.

An alternate means of protecting property was simply to remove the goods and valuables to a safe location and to then write the building off. Numerous banks and businesses did exactly that. Homeowners tried to do the same where possible.

Sometimes this pre-emptive salvage strategy did not work. For example, members of Helena's Masonic Grand Lodge removed their records to the First National Bank. That institution had earlier removed its store of cash, records and other important papers to an even more remote location. By the time the Masons realized the First National was threatened, it was too late. The building and all their Masonic property was lost.

The fire was ultimately stopped by the combination of fireproof buildings and a cistern at Broadway and Main. On the hill, the well-established water supplies and firebreaks created by structure dem-

olition and the network of streets helped quell the blaze heading that direction.

Overall, the fire burned a swath north to south from Cutler to Broadway and east to west from Main to Joliet, roughly what is now Cruse Avenue.

By the time the devouring element had run its course, one man lost his life and close to 150 buildings were destroyed, causing nearly \$900,000 in damage.

Helena quickly assessed its losses. The evening edition of one Helena newspaper provided a very detailed listing of the building and content losses and generally whether or not the losses were insured. After this enumeration, it was mentioned that the mail left town prior to the fire and that telegraph service was down. There was a brief mention of a man possibly missing.

The next day's editions contained revised estimates of property loss and reported the sad tale of Konrad Knipper, the man reported to be missing. He was an employee of the International Hotel, located at the intersection of Main and Bridge (now State) streets. The hotel, described as the "finest and most complete public house in the Northwest," was an early victim of the fire.

When the fire spread from the south across Bridge Street, Knipper ran to the rear of the hotel and cried for help from a second floor window. When no one came to his aid, he dashed back to the front of the building to exit through the main entrance. By then, the front of the hotel was well involved, and it is supposed he was trapped by the fire and burned alive.

It was further surmised that if the unfortunate Knipper had remained calm and waited for help

to arrive, he would have survived. Two women were rescued from the rear of the building from which the young man had made pleas for aid.

There were also a number of minor injuries and close calls, and a reporter noted it was amazing that there was not more loss of life.

Of the approximate 150 buildings lost, there were some very high-dollar losses. This destruction came at a time of year when merchants had large inventories stockpiled due to the difficulty in getting freight to Helena in the winter.

The largest financial loss, valued at \$160,000, was the building and entire stock of the Gans and Klein, a well-established clothier. Several hotels were completely destroyed. Two bank buildings, Helena's library and dozens of other businesses were wiped out by the conflagration.

The loss of the law library of Wilbur Fisk Sanders, prominent Helena attorney, had an enduring impact on Helena and the state. Col. Sanders had kept a significant and irreplaceable collection of books and papers of the Montana Historical Soci-

ety. These all went up in smoke.

As Helenans evaluated what lay before them and the daunting prospect of rebuilding, angry sentiment turned toward Helena's Chinese population.

The fire had its origin in a Chinese gambling house. In fact, newspaper articles claimed that the fire started in the same area and followed almost the same path as the first conflagration in 1869. It was suggested that the Chinese be forced out of the gulch and out into the open north of town.

As the days progressed, the furor died down and the community realized it had itself to blame.

A newsman wrote, "Fire is the very element of purity. Terrible as these visitations are everywhere, they come from neglect and fault somewhere and are sent to teach us a lesson ..."

Almost the first and most natural exclamation of anyone who witnessed the locality when the fire commenced, the amount of combustible material gathered there and the direction of the wind and the narrow streets across that the fire had to leap, "what an invitation for fire!"

Helena began to look forward in earnest to better development and building practices.

The fire department went to work immediately to improve their organization's ability to provide protection from fire. Within days, the chief engineer redefined the boundaries of the fire districts.

In late March, it had contracted for the building of a new, more substantial watchtower and began a fund to purchase a steam fire engine. In early April, a lot was purchased on which to build an engine house, the first station built specifically for Helena's fire department. By August, Helena placed an order for a Silsby steam fire engine, which would arrive almost a year later and would usher in the Helena Fire Department's horse-drawn era.

Helena rose again from the ashes.

From that fateful morning in January 1874, Helena learned some terrible and costly lessons. But they did heed the warning and, because of that, Helena would not experience another urban conflagration for almost 60 years.



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