

# CAMP TO CAPITAL

## STEP INTO HELENA'S PAST



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### **Acknowledgments**

The idea for this project began with teacher Maureen Redfield who initiated a community history unit at Central School many years ago. She and colleague Jan Pepin together carefully nurtured the *Camp to Capital* concept, Chere Justo at the State Historic Preservation Office greatly enriched the unit, and historian Ellen Baumler refined the ideas and added her own research.

When Maureen and Jan retired, they left an important legacy. Instilling pride in one's hometown, making it one's own unique place, is a special need that lasts a lifetime. Central School third grade teachers Karen Sturm and Nancy Robinson wanted to continue this gift and make it more widely available. They, in partnership with Ellen at the Montana Historical Society, applied for funding to produce the current booklet through the Great Ideas Grant Program.

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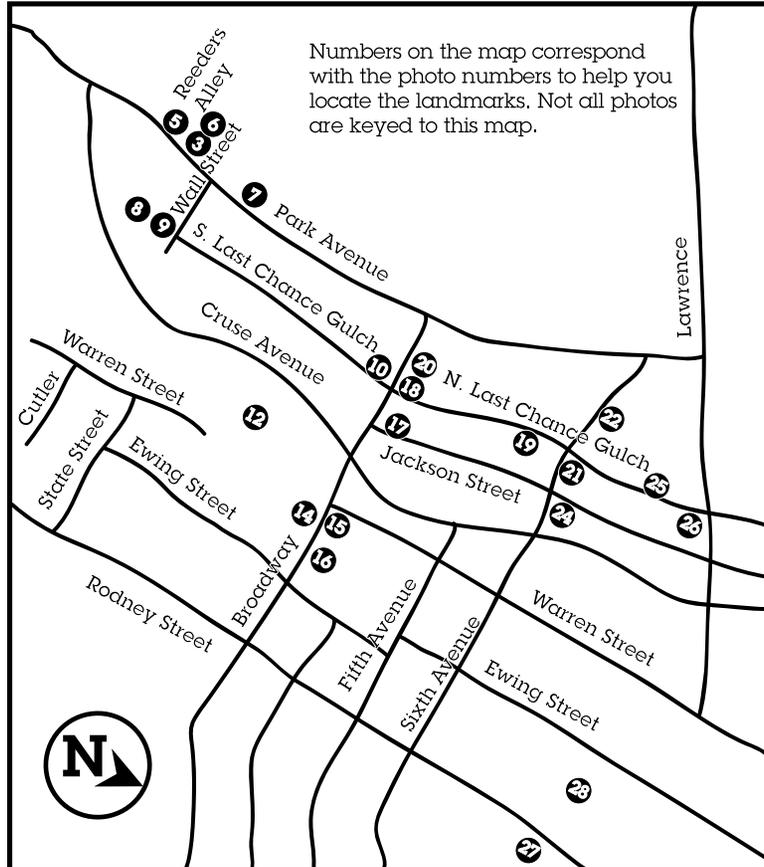
*Camp to Capital* is a far-reaching, permanent resource for teaching and learning Helena history. Thanks to the Helena Education Foundation for supporting this concept and to the Helena Elks Lodge #193 for providing the funds. Profits from the sale of this publication will be used for reprinting.



## Introduction

Fires, earthquakes, time, and progress have all played roles in changing the way Helena looks. You can learn much about Helena's history by learning about its buildings. The photographs in this booklet help tell the grand story of how Helena grew from a mining camp to a modern capital city.

By visiting modern places and studying the historic pictures in this booklet, you can experience "you are there" history. Teach others what you learn. In a real sense, you will become a steward of your community heritage by passing your knowledge along to others. Follow the directions and *Step into Helena's Past*.



**1. Miners pan for gold. This photo was the model for the oil painting in the Senate Chamber of the State Capitol. (Dan Dutro photograph, MHS 958-350/359)**

Four prospectors, nearly out of food and provisions on July 14, 1864, took one last chance on the stream that ran through the gulch. They found "color" in their pans near today's Last Chance Gulch and Wall Street (across from the library). When they made camp that night, they laid a rope all the way around it following an old wives' tale. People believed that rope kept rattlesnakes away. More likely, it was human activity that kept the dangerous snakes away from camp.

Only one of the discoverers was from Georgia, but they became known as the Four Georgians. Before the western gold rushes to California, Colorado, and Montana, much gold mining was done in Georgia. Historians think these men may have been using a Georgian method of mining.

Helena's first bank, a building of sturdy stone, was built on the discovery site. Elaborate imported locks kept the gold inside safe. But, the building originally had a sod roof. It wouldn't have been difficult for robbers to dig their way inside!



**2. Blackfeet Indians camped in the area in the 1870s; Mount Helena is in the background. (Bundy and Train photograph, MHS 953-370)**

Generations of Indians hunted in the rich Helena valley. Following the first gold strike, prospectors built cabins along the gulch and their diggings drastically changed the landscape. Legend says that Tomah, an Indian chief from an unknown tribe, watched from a hilltop in silence as miners destroyed the ancient hunting grounds. The Indian people, so the legend goes, warned the miners that the valley was “a place where the earth trembles.” The earthquakes that struck Helena in 1935 proved them right.

In the fall of 1864, miners decided that the camp at Last Chance needed a proper name. They gathered and elected John Somerville chairman. Some voted on the name “Tomah” in honor of the chief. Instead, they finally decided on the name Helena after Somerville’s home town in Scott County, Minnesota.



**3. The Pioneer Cabin is Helena’s oldest home and its locust trees are more than 130 years old. (Katie Baumler photograph)**

Wilson Butts staked a claim in 1864 and quickly built the back room of the Pioneer Cabin on it. Wilson’s brother Jonas arrived in the spring of 1865 with his wife, Louanna, and their three small daughters. The family lived in their covered wagon while the brothers built the front room. Wilson installed Helena’s first window glass, brought to town by covered wagon. Blackfeet camped on Mount Helena had never seen glass windows. They often startled Louanna by peering through them. The family of five lived in the tiny front room for several years.

In 1867, Louella and Stephen Gilpatrick moved into the cabin where their first child was born. Louella brought two tiny locust tree seedlings from back east and planted them by the front door. They were the first non-native trees planted in the area. Louella’s neighbors laughed at her for taking care of the little trees, saying that they would never grow in Montana, but in time they grew to shade the entire front yard.



4. Helena looked like this from Mount Helena when Jonas and Louanna Butts arrived in 1865. The hill in the center is Firetower Hill, before the fire tower was built. (New York Historical Society, negative no. 16197-A)



**5. Chinese at Reeder's Alley. (Unidentified photographer, MHS PAC 80-27 f15)**

In 1870, hundreds of Chinese lived below Reeder's Alley, many in cabins left by miners who had moved on. They worked the miner's abandoned claims, owned restaurants and shops, and cultivated beautiful gardens selling the first fresh produce to Helena residents. Many eventually returned to China, but some stayed. Today, a few descendants of Chinese pioneers still live in Helena. The original Chinese neighborhood, however, was demolished in the 1970s. Only this little cabin at the foot of Reeder's Alley remains. During the late 1870s and early 1880s, the cabin was home to the Yee Wau brothers who operated a Main Street grocery store.



**6. Stand in the Pioneer Cabin's backyard, facing the stone wall. This is where George Mitchell (in the wagon) had a wood and poultry business. (Unidentified photographer, MHS Uncatalogued Helena)**

George Mitchell was the Pioneer Cabin's last resident. He sold firewood and raised chickens in his backyard from about 1903 until he died in 1938. Mitchell was not a good housekeeper, and when he died workers discovered that he did not trust his money to banks. They found his earnings stuffed in paper bags, in old socks, and stuck in nooks and crannies everywhere.

The outhouse is not there anymore, but the stone wall looks the same today as it did in 1903. Reeder's Alley is behind the fence. Louis Reeder, a Pennsylvania brick mason, built the tiny one-room apartments of brick and stone for miners in the 1870s and 1880s. Unused doorways on the Stone House show where some apartments used to be. Reeder brought the rowhouse style from back east, but also added western style false fronts. A log cabin was probably on the lot before the rowhouses were built. Find it at the photo's upper left. It is still there today.



**7. This was the first photograph of Helena, taken in 1865. Stand on South Park Street with the old federal building on your right and the library on your left. Look east toward State Street. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 954-177)**

Bridge Street, today's State Street, was Helena's first commercial area. Bullwackers drove oxen and mule teams onto Bridge Street where they unloaded goods and supplies. Merchants covered their log cabin stores with false fronts to make the buildings seem taller and grander than they really

were. This made residents feel a little safer in the wilderness.

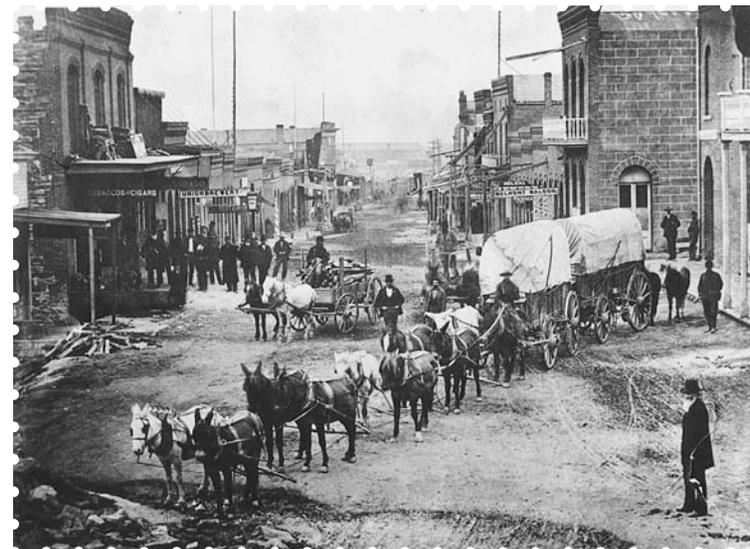
Sometimes in bad weather supply trains could not get through the mountains. The price of flour in some camps rose to \$100 a sack! Committees searched homes to make sure no one had more than his or her share. People had to make do. Pies made of dried or canned fruit were the miners' favorite food. Shops baked pies by the ovenful, but when flour was scarce and very expensive, bakers made pies using brown paper instead of crust.



**8. Ladies on Cutler Street, 1885. Stand at the bottom of the steps of the old federal building and look toward Reeder's Alley. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 954-187)**

Cutler Street ran through Reeder's Alley and roughly along today's sidewalk in front of the old federal building. The big brick building in the photo on the right is Helena's first city hall, city jail, and fire station. It was just south of the current Lewis and Clark Library. There are no trees to be seen except Louella's locust trees.

Trees on Mount Helena had long been cut down. Lightning sparked a fire on the slopes in the 1890s, blackening the remaining stumps. The city made a plan. On Arbor Day in 1899, Helena schools took the day off. Each student got an orange and a basket full of tiny evergreen seedlings. The children hiked up Mount Helena and back, planting trees as they went to re-forest the slopes. Violinist Fred Kuphal serenaded them as they worked. The oldest trees on Mount Helena today are those the children planted.



**9. Main Street (Last Chance Gulch) 1870s. Stand with the library on your left, Anchor Park on your right, and look down Last Chance Gulch toward Broadway. (Bundy photograph by unidentified assistant, MHS 954-202)**

Everything that couldn't be made or grown in the mining camps had to come by steamboat to Fort Benton and overland by ox or mule team, or by railroad and then overland from Salt Lake City. For a brief time, even camels carried goods into the mining camps. They were sure-footed on mountain trails and did not need much food or water, but mules hated them. Mules could smell camels from far away. If a camel train came around a mountain trail from one direction, and a mule train came from the other, the mules would bolt every time, spilling goods down the mountainside. Camel transport just did not work.

In the 1950s, city officials changed Main Street's name because they believed its new name, Last Chance Gulch, was more colorful and would better attract tourists.

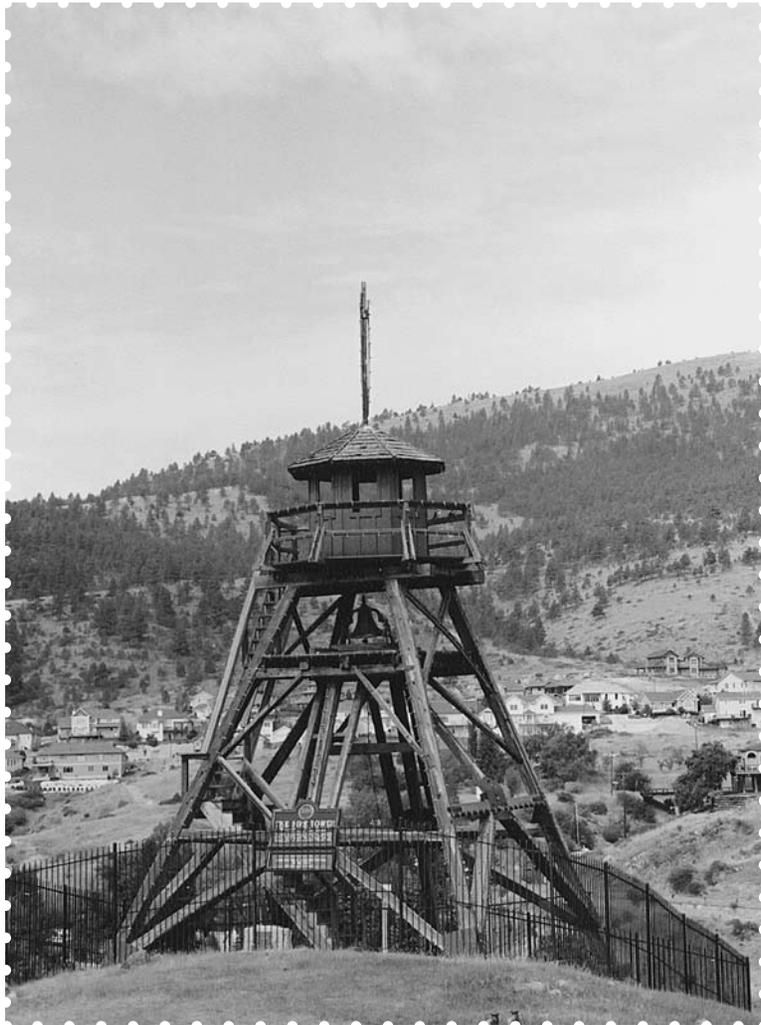


**10. Firemen in a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in 1873. Stand on Broadway and look south toward the library. Find the building plaque that says Sands Brothers Dry Goods (32 S. Last Chance Gulch). The building's second story was not added until later. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-595)**

Wooden buildings close together made fire a mining camp's worst enemy. People used woodstoves for cooking and heating. It was very dangerous, and if one building caught fire, so did its neighbors. There were nine terrible fires between 1869 and 1874. Residents rebuilt, and when they did, fireproof buildings of stone or brick replaced wooden ones. There was no wood anyway because miners had chopped it all down for cabins and sluice boxes. On the left you can find a sign advertising LIME, made in kilns. Building with brick and stone required mortar to hold the building blocks together, and mortar was made with lime.

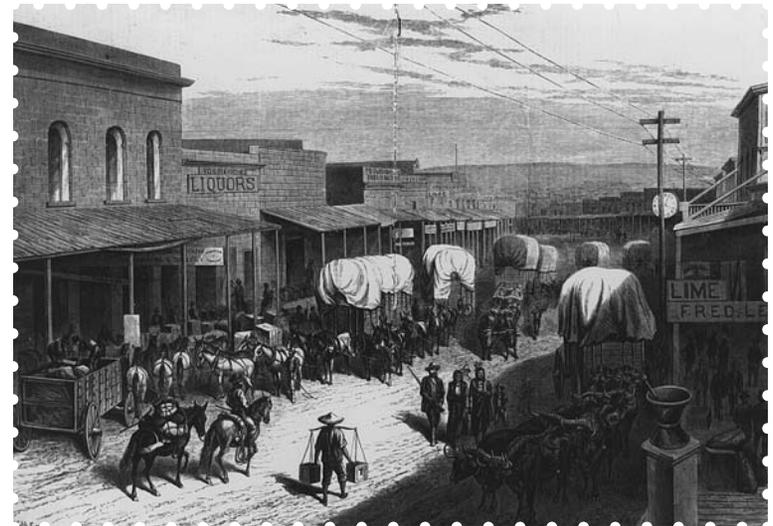


**11. Grizzly Gulch Lime Kiln at the end of West Main Street. (Katie Baumler photograph)**



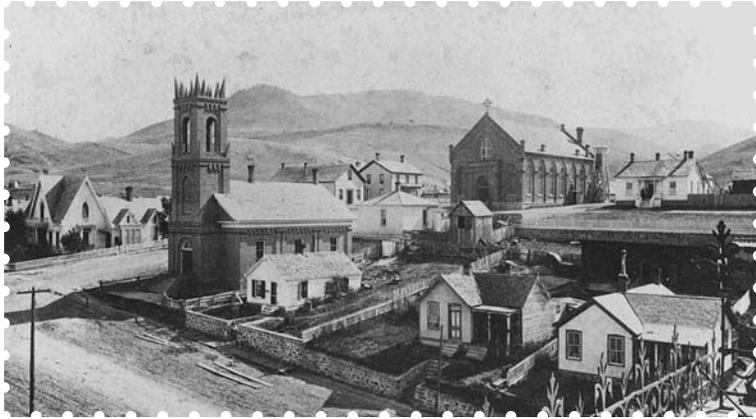
**12. The Guardian of the Gulch (Katie Baumler photograph)**

One of Helena's worst fires occurred in 1874. That time, even the fire tower burned! Helenans call the fire tower the "Guardian of the Gulch" because it meant life or death to early residents. When it was rebuilt in 1874, a room was added at the top so the watchman could scan the town for wisps of smoke where none should be.



**13. Main Street (Last Chance Gulch), 1878. (Harper's Weekly, Feb. 2, 1878, MHS Reference File)**

People of many different backgrounds came to Helena, and the Chinese made up one of Helena's largest ethnic groups. Chinese came to the United States to join the gold rushes. They suffered discrimination, and laws made it illegal for Chinese to own mining claims. They could, however, rework abandoned claims. This is why many Chinese came to Helena in the 1860s. In the 1880s, Chinese workers helped lay railroad tracks across Montana, and they did dangerous work blasting rock to make paths for tunnels and roads. Despite these very important contributions to our state, the Chinese have been forgotten. Cemeteries did not usually allow Chinese burials. Outside Forestvale Cemetery is China Row where there are many unmarked graves of Chinese pioneers.

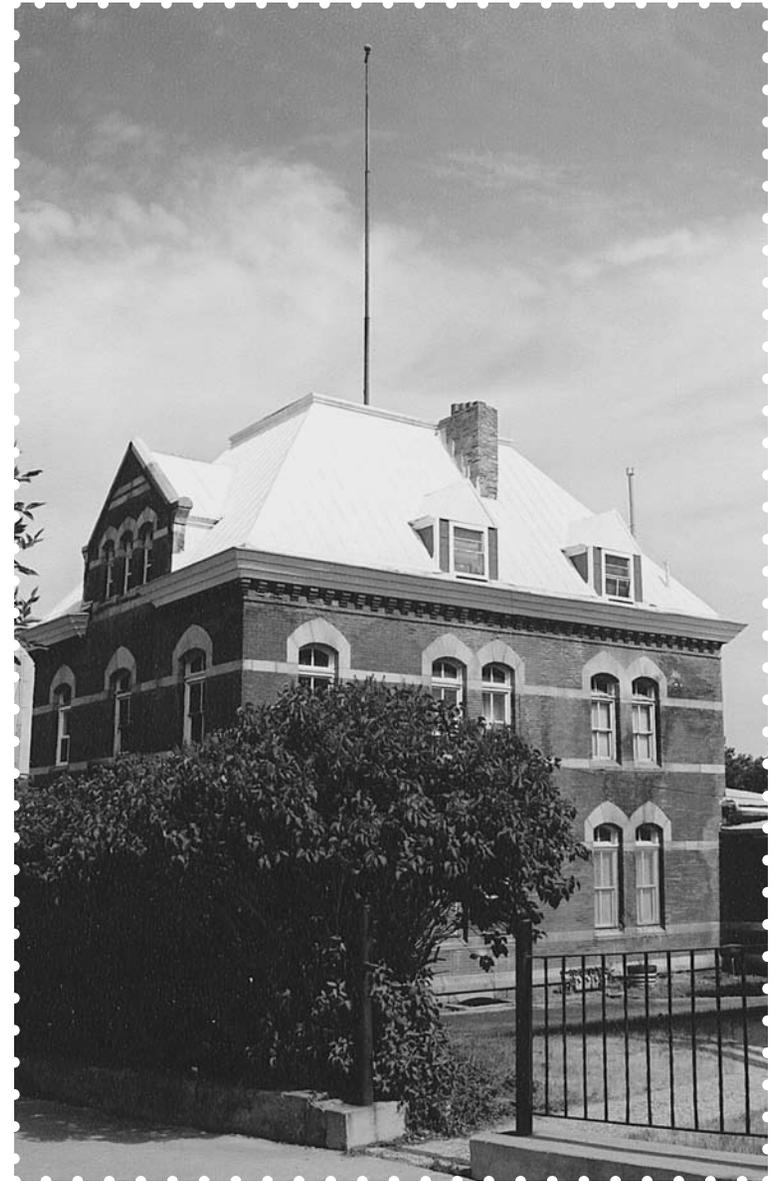


**14. Broadway and Ewing, about 1876. Stand in front of the Assay Office at 206 Broadway and look across the street. (F. A. Greenleaf photograph, MHS 953-246)**

The street was at a much higher level when this photo was taken from the roof of the Assay Office. Today, the Cannon House at 303 Broadway, built in 1868, seems to perch upon a hill because the street level is so much lower. Its pointed roof looks just the same. The Methodist Church with the spiky tower fell in the 1935 earthquakes, and its next door neighbor is not there anymore, but the two houses, corner right, are. So is the stone retaining wall.

The Church of the Sacred Hearts, top center right, was Helena's first cathedral. The Tower Apartments today spread over the hilltop once known as Catholic Hill where a hospital, boy's school, girl's school, orphanage, and bishop's residence stood until the earthquakes destroyed them.

The Assay Office was the first federal building in Montana Territory and one of only five assay offices in the nation. Built in 1875, miners brought their gold to be weighed and melted in huge ovens. Its scales were so sensitive that a pencil mark would change the balance.



**15. The Federal Assay Office accepted gold dust and nuggets worth \$50 or more in exchange for currency. The office operated from 1875 to 1934. (Katie Baumler photograph)**



**16. Courthouse Square at Fifth and Ewing, 1890, taken from an apartment house roof. (C. F. Pearis photograph, MHS 953-352)**

The halls of the 1886 courthouse, then the territorial capitol building, rang with cheers upon statehood in 1889. The building served as the State Capitol until the current capitol was built in 1902. The building's red stone trim from Wisconsin shows how the railroad changed Helena's architecture by bringing new materials from far away. The 1935 earthquakes toppled the tower along with the upper story. Find the scroll with the strange spelling of Lewis and Clarke County. The final "e" was dropped after 1900 when publication of Lewis and Clark's *Journals* made Clark, without the "e," the official spelling. The county had to change its spelling, too.

A corral and warehouse show the square as a busy industrial area. The jail is now the Myrna Loy Center. The first Presbyterian Church, lower right, was torn down and the site became the parking lot. Find the ghost signs for a nearby boarding stable building that still stands today.



**17. Ming Opera House, 1898. Stand on the west side of Jackson Street, near the top of the stairway leading down to Performance Park, and look across the street. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-833)**

It is hard to imagine that Helena's first opera house hides behind the 1915 gray stone front of the Consistory Shrine Temple. The Ming, built in 1880, was famous across the northwest. It had one of Helena's earliest gas lighting systems. Rubber tubes in the basement delivered natural gas to dozens of jets on the stage and in the house. This was a very dangerous system. The gas jets were open flames, women wore long full skirts, and people were careless. Fortunately, there was never a fire in this theater. The opera house was later briefly used for silent movies, then remodeled into an auditorium in 1915. The original 1880s hand-painted scenery still hangs above the stage.



**18. The Atlas Block is an architectural advertisement for fire insurance. 953-16**

Helena's many fires gave one building unique symbolism. A company built the Atlas Block in 1889 as an advertisement for its fire insurance. Stylized flames lick at

the building's roof while salamanders play at the top. In mythology salamanders are creatures that cannot die in fire; they rise again from the ashes just like an insured building. Atlas here holds the weight of the building on his shoulders as if to say, "Buy my fire insurance and I will carry the heavy burden."



**19. Stand on the concrete pavilion in the North Last Chance Gulch walking mall, and look to the west side of the street, toward Broadway. (Edward Reinig photograph, MHS 953-473**

Lightning struck the roof of a building sparking a fire in 1928 that destroyed four major buildings on the block's west side. One of these, the site of the New York Store, was a pioneer business. Owner Herman Fligelman immediately rebuilt. Find the tailor and seamstress perched at the roofline, advertising Fligelman's superior clothing.



**20. Fire in 1944 destroyed Colonel C. A. Broadwater's Montana National Bank, site of the present building with the women's mural. (L. H. Jorud photograph, MHS 953-482)**

Businessman C. A. Broadwater built a bank on this corner in the 1880s, and in 1890 he spent a great deal of money remodeling the huge building. People told him he was foolish to spend so much on a building in a town that would not last. "Buffalo will soon be grazing on the streets of Helena," they said. And so Broadwater installed a huge carved buffalo head over the doorway of his bank. It was rescued from the fire. You can find it now grazing in front of the Lewis and Clark Library. You can also find a small piece of Broadwater's fancy bank at the southeast corner of the Livestock Building.



**21. Trolleys on Main Street in 1891. Stand in Constitution Park and look toward the gulch. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 954-204)**

Horses pulled Helena's first trolleys, but soon steam and electricity replaced them. Trolleys ran on tracks carrying passengers all over Helena. One early model had an engine that ran on a coal-burning fire. These put out terrible black smoke with soot that got into houses all along the line. Women complained that their freshly hung laundry got all dirty when the trolleys passed by. They also made a lot of noise and frightened horses on the street.

At right, the 1889 Power Block still dominates the gulch. The number of corner windows corresponds to the floor: the second floor has two windows, the third floor three, and so on.



**22. The first Montana Club, Sixth and Fuller, built in 1893.  
(Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-326)**

The Montana Club, famous throughout the northwest for its elegance, was originally for men only. During the depression of the 1890s, the club needed to make money so members built a bowling alley in the basement and allowed

wives to bowl at certain times. It was not Helena's first bowling alley, but it was the first time women were allowed to participate.

The beautiful building burned down in 1903 when fourteen-year-old Harry Anderson started a fire on the sixth floor because he wanted to help the firemen put out the fire. Unfortunately, there was not enough water pressure in the fire hoses or ladders tall enough to get to the flames. The wind whipped through the gulch and the fire completely engulfed the building. Young Harry spent the rest of his youth at Pine Hills in Miles City, the state correctional facility for boys. His father, Julian Anderson, was the club's bartender. Julian was a beloved employee who worked at the club from 1893 until 1953!



**23. Montana Club after the fire, 1903. (Unidentified  
photographer, MHS 953-327)**

The morning after the fire, only the stone arches remained of the old Montana Club. The present Montana Club replaced the old one in 1906, and the original arches were incorporated into the new building.



**24. Sixth Avenue and Jackson in 1898. Stand across from the old Union Market on Sixth Avenue. (C. F. Pearis photograph, MHS 954-192)**

Old and new stood side by side in the 1890s. The Union Market eventually replaced the log cabins where a tinsmith, whose portable anvil is parked by the street, had his shop. The back of the Goodkind Building at Sixth and Last Chance Gulch is at right. It is the only building in the photo that is still there today. Despite the fancy buildings, wooden sidewalks and unpaved streets show that Helena still had a ways to go.



**25. Haymarket Square, 4<sup>th</sup> of July, circa 1902. Stand in front of Wells Fargo Bank and look up the hill toward Central School. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-602)**

The open area pictured is where the bank is today. It was a favorite public gathering place for farmers' markets, speeches, and community celebrations. Vigilantes even lynched a man there in 1901, throwing the hangman's rope over the cross arm of a telegraph pole. After 1922, the Helena Taxi Cab Company moved into F. J. Nye's Harness and Saddlery business (find Nye's sign, left) as automobiles replaced horse-drawn transportation.

Old Central School in the center, built in 1875, was Montana's first school with graded classrooms. On the left is the very elaborate Helena High School, built in 1893. It stood on the corner where the Central School teachers' parking lot is today. On the right is the first Helena Public Library and Auditorium, built in 1890 at Seventh and Warren. Neither building remains today. Central School was rebuilt in the same place between 1915 and 1920.



**26. Lawrence and Main Streets, 1895. Stand across the street from the Holter Museum and look east up the hill. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-139)**

Helena's first cemetery, established in 1865, was on the top of this hill. By the time Central School was built, graves nearly covered the hilltop. Since most tombstones were wooden, some had decayed or been moved; not all graves were clearly marked. Workers moved the graves, at least all they could find, to Benton Avenue Cemetery when Central School was built in 1875.

In 1893 when the high school had just been finished, Lawrence Street was widened. Note the cut in the hillside. After a heavy April rainstorm, students walking to school were shocked to find a coffin that had washed out of the hillside and burst open in the street. Inside was a well-preserved, red-haired miner!



**27. Temple Emanu-El at 515 N. Ewing. (Unidentified photographer, MHS 953-239)**

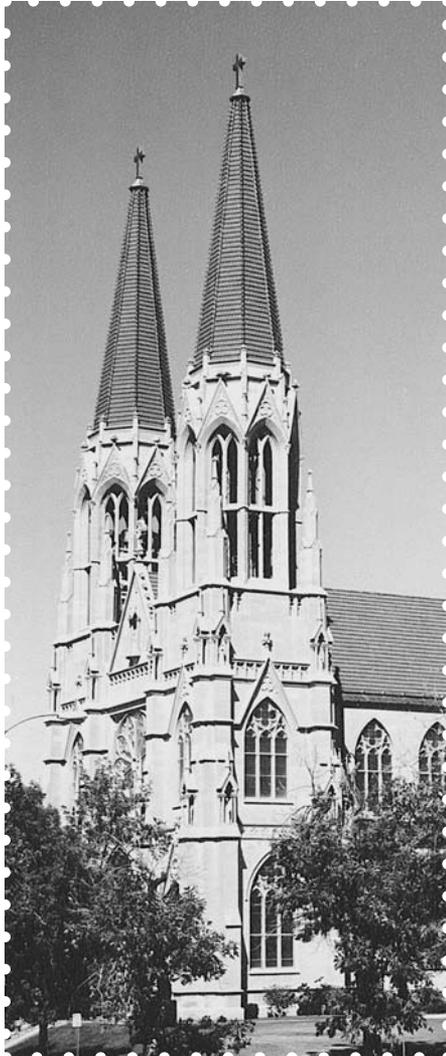
Helena's Jewish pioneers were important to the early community because they had family ties to large cities and banking houses. Marcus Lissner, for example, could borrow money to rebuild when others could not. Lissner's International Hotel, nicknamed the Phoenix, twice rose from ashes. Without these pioneers, Helena could have become a ghost town.

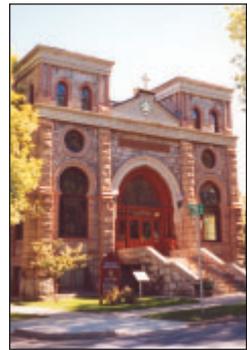
The Jewish community built this synagogue in 1890. It was the first Jewish temple between St. Paul and Portland. By the 1930s, there were few congregation members left in Helena and the building was sold to the state for \$1. The state removed Hebrew lettering over the doorway and the black star-studded onion domes. The sanctuary was divided into two floors for offices. The Catholic Diocese bought the building in 1981. The date of 1890 according to the Hebrew calendar, 5651, remains on the cornerstone.

## 28. St. Helena Cathedral (Katie Baumler photograph)

Wealthy miner Thomas Cruse was a major contributor in the building of St. Helena Cathedral. Ground was broken in 1908 and the first mass was said in 1914, but the ornamentation was not completed until 1924. The 46 stained glass windows were being made in Munich, Germany when World War I interrupted the work. Workers buried the glass to keep it safe until the war was over. Then the windows were finished and shipped to the United States.

Thomas Cruse's daughter "Mamie" died in 1913, and so her father gave his beloved church one last gift: fifteen bronze bells installed in the north spire. Each bell is inscribed, "In memory of Mary Margaret Cruse, by her father, Thomas." The largest one weighs 3,500 pounds. Next time you hear the bells ring out, remember that they were once known as "Mamie's Bells." Thomas Cruse died in 1914 just as the building was ready for the first services; his was the first funeral in the church.





**Clockwise from upper left**

Power Block at Sixth and Last Chance Gulch (see #21)

Montana Club (see #22 and #23)

Colonel C. A. Broadwater's buffalo, Lewis and Clark Library (see #20)

Shrine Consistory Temple, formerly Ming Opera House (see #17)

Reeder's Alley (see #5)

Catholic Diocese of Helena, 515 N. Ewing, formerly the  
Temple Enamu-El (see #27)

Front Cover: Central School (see #25)

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