



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Posse of Westerners

Vol. 10, No. 6

Kalispell, Montana

July 11, 2023

Richard A. Hull, Ye Editor, e-mail: richardahull@charter.net

JULY MEETING

Monday, July 17, 2023

Topic: "A Mansion in the Mountains:
How Kalispell's Treasured
Landmark Came to Be

Presenter: Brit Clark, Conrad Mansion
Museum director

Where: Conrad Mansion grounds,
300 Woodland Ave., Kalispell

Time: Greet 'n' Gab, book raffle and book
signings start at 6:00 p.m.

Historic Presentation: Program begins at 7:00
p.m. on the mansion lawn. Seating will
be provided, but you can bring your
own folding chairs. Inside seating is
an option in case of inclement weather,
but there will be no tour of the mansion.
No reservations are needed, but come
early since space may be limited.
Call (406)-309-0938 with any
questions.

Posse members may join the program through
Zoom at the following address:

[https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84571188926?](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84571188926?pwd=SGFaTW1Cak5BT09xSHptMmJabE15UT09)
[pwd=SGFaTW1Cak5BT09xSHptMmJabE15UT09](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84571188926?pwd=SGFaTW1Cak5BT09xSHptMmJabE15UT09)

Meeting ID: 891 9948 1805

Passcode: 003734

E-mail Tim Christenson at
tim.chris@yahoo.com for more help.

ABOUT THE PRESENTATION



As a special treat, July's talk on the Conrad
Mansion will be at the mansion itself. And Brit
Clark, director, is making the presentation.

Every year thousands of people from all over
the world visit the mansion, Clark notes. Built in
1895 by Kalispell's most famous founding father,
Charles Conrad, the mansion offers a glimpse into
the life of Montana's rags-to-riches pioneer.

But her presentation will also focus on the
development and construction of the mansion
itself, and the role played by Conrad's wife, Lettie.

It will dive into the life and achievements of
famed architect, Kirtland Cutter, and his vision
for the Conrad's dream home, and later, the Lake
McDonald Lodge in Glacier National Park.

And it will also look at the life of Charles and
Lettie Conrad in the new town of Kalispell, when
the Conrad Family bounced from hotels to
boarding houses while their home was being built.
Charles was away on business most of the time,
leaving the construction and design of the house

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to his wife, Lettie. The three-story mansion contains 22 rooms.

Clark will explain about how the Conrads were early vacationers to the Flathead Valley who decided to move here after Charles' successful career as a Fort Benton pioneer businessman. And she will detail how a friendship with Jim Hill, president of the Great Northern Railway, resulted in a decision to build the brand-new town of Kalispell on former farmland.

Her presentation will also explore the surrounding properties owned by the Conrad family, including present Woodland Park, Wild Horse Island and more.

Through Lettie's management, the Conrad Mansion became a community hub or a "town within a town," complete with stables, boarding houses, community gardens, and an aviary.

Clark will conclude with the controversy that led to the city receiving the mansion as a gift, but limiting its role to \$35,000 in restoration.

Overcoming a last minute challenge, the mansion opened as a museum in 1976.

About the Presenter

Brit Clark is a fourth generation Kalispell resident who has always been fascinated with Montana culture and history. While majoring in history at the University of Montana, she spent her summer breaks as a tour guide at the Conrad Mansion and fell in love with the building, its history, and the ability of interacting with people from all over the world. She has served as the director of the Conrad Mansion since 2018.

Describing herself as a typical millennial Montanan, she spends her free time at breweries, downhill skiing, and hiking with her husband and dogs.



FROM THE SHERIFF'S SADDLEBAG

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne

Another friendly reminder that we will be meeting outdoors on the lawn at Conrad Mansion for the upcoming July meeting. Seating is limited so recommend bringing your favorite (comfortable) lawn chair for the presentation.

We encourage max participation this month as we will be voting on the new name to replace Northwest Montana Posse of Westerners. The final six nominations are as follows:

- The Greater Flathead Valley Western History Club
- Association of Montana History Buffs
- Western Montana History Buffs Club
- History Mavens of Montana
- The Kintla's – Exploring NW Montana History
- Glacier Country Western History Club

We had several recommendations similar to the NW Montana History Museum and were asked to discard them to not confuse the two organizations. These included all nominations that began with "NW Montana History...".

Once we vote and choose a name the Board will move forward with the formal process of recording and updating all facets of the new title. This includes but is not limited to filing the new name with the Secretary of State; updating the bank account; designing a new logo; drafting new by-laws and charter; determining the names of our monthly newsletters (Pony Tracks and Pony Tracks Express); transforming the web page or creating a new one; marketing strategy; et cetera.

All this will take time and effort from the membership. Anyone who can assist with any portions, especially web page design and social media would be greatly appreciated.

As discussed at the May meeting the intent of this rebranding is to better present the club to the

community, continue to grow the membership and guests while maintaining the high-level professional presentations that we have been known for.

Once again to volunteer or if you have any questions, recommendations, or concerns, please get in touch with me at 406-871-6001 or edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com.

GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

NMPW 's meetings are held on the third Monday of the month, except the months of December and January.

Meetings begin with a Greet 'n' Gab session from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. for a chance to get acquainted. Historical attire is encouraged, but not required.

Local history authors will have their books for sale, and will be available for signing.

The presentation starts at 7 p.m. and is free for members and youths 16 and under. Non-members pay \$5.

Historic books are raffled off as a fund raiser.

All meetings will be broadcast on-line via Zoom for out of the area members and the members who cannot attend the meetings.

Contact Kathy at kbrittonrn@gmail.com with any questions .

FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **August 21:**
“Gustavus Sohon: A Pivotal Player in Northwest Exploration ”
by Ken Robison
- **September 18 :**
“Fools Rush In: Johnny Grant and the Early Montana Cattle Industry ”
by Lyndel Meikle
- **October 16:**
“Indian Trails of the Northern Rockies”
by Darris Flanagan

FROM YE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

An advantage of being a Montanan is how county fairs and Indian powwows are routine events. This past Fourth of July had two local powwows – North American Indian Days in Browning and the Arlee Powwow on the Flathead Reservation.



The flag-bearers lead the grand entry.



The dancing is judged and each wears a number.

The editor has attended the Arlee Powwow over the years and found it both exotic and familiar. This year's visit was no different. The powwow is family friendly and mellow. It has a no-alcohol policy and in the past vehicles were inspected at the gate.

But you are the minority in a different culture, where many are darker skinned, wearing brightly

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colored outfits made of fur and feathers. and where the Canadian flag is as prevalent as the American.



Young and old join in the dancing.

The big event is the grand entry, where at 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. daily, hundreds dressed in elaborate costumes enter the arena dancing to the sound of native drummers.

All ages and sexes are represented, providing a multitude of photo opportunities. Those talking on a cell phone while in native dress is one incongruity.



The old and the new combine at the powwow.

A big attraction is the concessions, offering jewelry and other native art, as well as more modern accessories. Freshly prepared fry bread, served with honey, is a treat. There are also Navajo tacos, built on a fry bread shell. For those who wanted something different, there was also Baskin-Robbins.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

How and when did geographic features like Maria's River lose their apostrophe?

Trish Walsh guessed that the apostrophe was dropped over time, which is true for Marias River.

But apostrophes were eliminated across the board in 1890 when the *U.S. Board on Geographic Names* was established.

Apostrophes can still be used as part of a name, such as O'Malley Hollow. But possessives were forbidden, such as Pikes Peak, even before 1890.

Five exemptions were allowed. Two are though lobbying efforts – Martha's Vineyard and Clark's Mountain in Oregon. The other three are to prevent confusion: John E's Pond in Rhode Island, Carlos Elmer's Joshua View in Arizona and Ike's Point in New Jersey.



This Month's Trivia Question

Look at this photo of McDonald Peak in the Mission Valley near St. Ignatius. Do you see the mythical creature trapped in the mountain? The Flatheads have numerous stories about it and considered it a tribal nemesis. So what is this dangerous animal?

Details on the mythology will be in next month's issue.

Submit your answer to Ye Editor at richardahull@charter.net and we will print the names of all those who get it right.

FROM THE BOOK SHELF

By Rick Hull

This 1983 book, *Half Interest in a Silver Dollar*, by Kalispell attorney James Murphy is considered a local classic. It is still in print and readily available.

The title refers to an agreement between the 18-year-old Charles Conrad and his brother, William, when they arrived in Montana in 1868, with only a dollar between them. Charles had been a member of Mosby's Raiders, a guerrilla group operating just outside Washington D.C. in the Civil War. The war devastated the family farm, and the pair headed West. At the steamboat town of Fort Benton they went to work for a local freight company, hauling supplies into Canada.

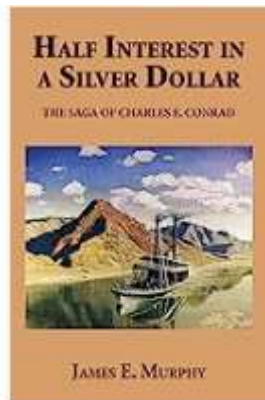
Half the book covers the Fort Benton adventures, including Conrad's the rescue of 275 Canadian Mounted Police who were surrounded by hostile Indians.

Both brothers did well, expanding into the cattle business. When the railroad made Fort Benton superfluous, Charles looked for new opportunities and chanced on the opportunity to create a new railroad town in northwest Montana.

Chapters in the book cover marriage and inlaws, the Conrad buffalo herd, building of the Conrad Mansion and its Japanese servants. After Conrad's untimely death at age 42, the book follows family members in later years, including a ne'er-do-well son. And it ends with the controversial but finally successful effort to save the mansion.

The book is both well written and stuffed with detail. It doesn't avoid issues like Conrad's Blackfoot first wife.

Paperback, 321 pages. \$20.
Mountain West Publishing, Missoula.



NEW MEMBERS

The following have recently joined the Posse:

Tom Jones, Whitefish

Mary McCracken, Creston

Glenda Brown, Kalispell

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How a Preacher's Unpaid Salary Helped Create Kalispell The Lost Memoirs of Rev. George Fisher

By Rick Hull

Charles Conrad and the Kalispell Townsite Company purchased five farms to create the brand new town of Kalispell in 1891. One of the properties belonged to pioneer preacher George McVey Fisher, who was supporting his wide-spread ministry by farming.

“The one hundred and sixty acres of land on which I was compelled to locate, when moving into that section, I sold to the townsite of Kalispell, so that I might say I am the father of one town, one Presbytery and five children, and the greatest of these are the children,” he later declared.

How a Presbyterian missionary who had hoped to go to Chile became a founder of Kalispell is a convoluted story.

Fortunately when Rev. Fisher was 78 years old, he sat down in 1927 to chronicle his life with the goal of selling it to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Entitled *Fifty Years of Skypiloting*, the 89-page handwritten document was rejected as too lengthy for the magazine and remained hidden for 60 years.

George McVey Fisher was born October 31, 1849 in Pennsylvania. After attending Washington and Jefferson College, he returned home to his grandmother's farm to pay off his college debts and accumulate enough money to head to seminary. There was another two year delay in his education when his grandmother died, and he didn't graduate from the Union Theological Seminary of New York City until nearly 33 years old. Alluding to a theological dispute with one presbytery and disappointed about losing a chance to become an assistant pastor in Valparaiso, Chile, he found himself heading west to Missoula, Montana in 1882.

The journey was by train to Utah, and then a narrow gauge railroad to Deer Lodge. The final journey was by stage coach, which included getting out and walking through Hellgate Canyon when the road was too muddy to haul passengers.

“When I took up the work in the Missoula church we found sixteen members enrolled but I could never find but six,” he wrote in his memoir.



Built in 1892 with Rev. Fisher's surprise windfall, this historic home continues as one of Kalispell's grand residences.

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“It was almost impossible to rent a room. Missoula was full of people who had no houses of their own. Men who were working in the woods getting out timbers & ties for the Northern Pacific. It was too expensive for a poor missionary to room in a hotel, even if moderate in cost, was not suitable. So finally I had the promise of a room in a private home if I would partition it off from an unfinished part of a very large room. I had to purchase the material & do the work and pay \$10 per month rent for 6 months after that \$20 per month.”

“I began my preaching in hired halls in Missoula”, he continued. “During the week these halls were used for entertainments of any sort which came to town. It was the only place for public dances, which always left the building in disorder and owing to the scarcity of lodging houses men who packed their blankets spread them upon the dusty floor for lack of a better place to sleep. These rolls of greasy blankets were often left in a corner of the room. “

His ministry included preaching at four different communities in the Bitterroot Valley, which required a monthly trip of 130 miles. Fisher recalled riding 43 miles on a livery barn horse. “You may guess I was just a little bit not quite so limber as when I started. The next day being Sunday I had the privilege of preaching twice and riding twenty miles which helped to limber me up.” His territory initially covered an area larger than Ohio, he noted.

In 1886 he married Mary Swaney, and that fall took a vacation in a covered wagon across the Flathead Indian Reservation into the upper Flathead Valley.

“It was on this vacation trip I preached the first sermon ever heard in the valley in the Ashley school house,” he wrote.

“I found seven or eight hundred people who had no religious services of any nature,” he reported back to the Montana Presbytery, and he persuaded them that he could launch a nondenominational community church serving all Christians. And he had a way to help pay for it.

“There was no way more feasible than for me to file on some land and also raise our garden stuff and do a little farming as well as a good deal of preaching. I looked around and bargained for a man's improvements upon one hundred and sixty acres not yet proved upon,” he recalled. “I bargained for pigs, chickens, hay, grain and vegetables as well farming utensils.” The property also included, “the dirtiest, greasiest cabin you could find in a days ride.”

On Thanksgiving 1887 he moved permanently to the Flathead.

“Our family then consisted of my wife, myself and one baby, Crystal Fisher. We came to Flathead in a covered wagon; the ground was covered with snow. At night, we slept in Indian blankets, in Indian cabins, on our own bed spread on the floor.”

Their new home was 14 by 20 feet. “The house we moved into was a log cabin containing two rooms, a puncheon floor (plank hewed out of a tree with an ax), mud roof (poles covered first with birch bark then clay or soil) which made the house warm in winter and cool in summer, but not altogether water proof during a steady rain.”

The nearest settlement was Ashley on the southwest edge of present Kalispell. It consisted of a post office, drug store, grocery, school house and three residences, Fisher recalled. But it also had a literary and debating society.

“We received one mail per week it was due at 10 A.M. and departed at 4 P.M. If a letter needed answering it must be done at once else went unanswered for a week. We called this Red Letter Day which it was in truth.”



Rev. Fisher in 1875

“The Ashley school house was a log building put up by the neighbors with voluntary work and was used as town hall, for school, church, politics, dances and all kinds of meetings. The chinking between the logs did not keep out the cold enough to make it either comfortable or safe for services. I announced that on Monday morning I would be at the school house with papers, gunny sacks and a chisel to stop up cracks to make the building warmer and would be glad to have any one assist. When I went it was already half done.”

Fisher conducted a traveling ministry as before.

"I often had a round-trip of 24 miles on horseback, with two sermons and Sabbath school," he wrote in his diary. On a cold Dec. day in 1889, "went to Fairview schoolhouse on the east side, crossed the river on the ferry boat, making a round-trip of 24 miles."



Rev. Fisher in 1900

“Mr. Stewart and three children came just as I was leaving. We waited almost an hour, then started home and met four others coming. Could not return, as I had an appointment at Ashley in the evening, so announced preaching again in two weeks.”

“I did not organize a Presbyterian church in the valley until June 2, 1889, which was at Ashley and consisted of seven members,” he wrote.

His plan to supplement his preaching was successful, but trouble was brewing. “We could not have made ends meet if it had not been for our produce and meat,” he wrote. “The first year we were here I raised corn to eat when roasting ears. We had enough also to feed some corn to the chickens and pigs. And last but not least I shelled some of it by hand, ground it on the coffee mill and my wife made a number one corn bread of the meal. There was no flour mill nearer than 130 miles.”

“Although it was understood by Presbytery that I would have to use our farm to help in our financial support owing to the great distance we were removed from the railroad and the great expense of travel I was absent from a spring meeting of Presbytery. I had mailed my application for renewal of commission, not be present to report verbally, two member of Pres said they heard I was farming instead of preaching. So we were set adrift so far as any financial aid from Pres or the Board was concerned. I had never missed preaching once & twice each Sabbath.”

“We couldn't afford to move. We now knew for a certainty the G.N.RR was coming through the valley. Just the time a minister would be needed more than ever. Already a dam was being built in one of our rivers for sawmill purposes. I took a contract to bank logs to help keep the wolf from the door.”

Help came from an unexpected source. Jim Hill, the president of Great Northern Railway had rejected exorbitant prices from the developers of Columbia Falls to build its divisional railroad headquarter at the mouth of Bad Rock Canyon. Instead he teamed up with Fort Benton businessman Charles Conrad to build a new town named Kalispell from scratch.

“Until all unlooked for and unexpected we were offered more than the farm was worth, then, for farming purposes. Our ranch is now located under the business portion of Kalispell,” recalled Fisher.

And he spread his good fortune around. Using his windfall, Fisher financed construction of a Presbyterian church on the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue.

“I organized the first church in the new town, built the first church building. The ranch's price was a great help in erecting the building and also moved us out of the mud covered roof cabin into a modern home which we yet occupy. Not is that all, this is now Kalispell Presbytery with 10 churches, three of them self supporting.”

To add to his new wealth, he platted "Fisher's Addition to Kalispell" on the west side of Kalispell. He picked a prime lot on the corner of Fifth Avenue West and Second Street for his new home.

Further vindication came in 1901, when the church board debated whether to pay him back wages, or have "a change in the pastorate of our church." When 15 members of the church signed a petition threatening to drop their membership if Fisher was fired, the board relented and agreed to pay \$2,500 owing back to 1895.

In his 1927 memoir, Fisher concluded, "During my stay in Montana I have been a home missionary sixteen out of eighteen years. For two years I paid my own expenses, preached my own sermons, organized churches and handed them over to Presbytery. I have given to these, in service unpaid for and actual money, almost seven thousand dollars – more than the Board of Home Missions and the churches combined, for the work as it now stands in Flathead Valley"

Fisher lived in the Second Street West home until his death in 1934. His wife died in 1937, and the house remained in the family until the 1980s.

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month's issue. Copy received after that date will be held over until the subsequent issue.

The next edition of Pony Tracks will be issued August 15, 2023 (or thereabouts)

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