



# PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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## APRIL MEETING

Monday, April 15, 2024

**“Taft, Montana – America's Wickedest City”**

**Presenter:** John Shontz, of Helena, MT

**Where:** Second floor of the Northwest Montana History Museum, 124 2nd Ave. East, Kalispell

**Time:** Gab 'n' Greet, raffle and book signings start at 6:00 p.m.  
Soft drinks, beer and wine available.

**Historic Presentation:** Program begins at 7:00 p.m.

No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early. Call (406)-309-0938 with any questions.



Despite its reputation, Taft existed for only four years.

## ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

**M**otorists heading up Interstate 90, west of St. Regis, will see no sign of Taft. But the former railroad boom town was once billed as America's wickedest city.



Three hookers in Taft.

Taft had no churches, no schools and only three residential homes, yet 10,000 men and 500 prostitutes once called Taft home. Taft burned to the ground three times and was rebuilt twice.

“Everything 'wild west' we saw on television in Gunsmoke etc. happened at Taft – it was real,” notes presenter John Shontz. “Gunfights, murders, robberies, fights and just plain debauchery comprised the daily life in Taft.”

The boom town came into existence during the 1906-10 construction of the Milwaukee Road through the Bitterroot Mountains. The railroad

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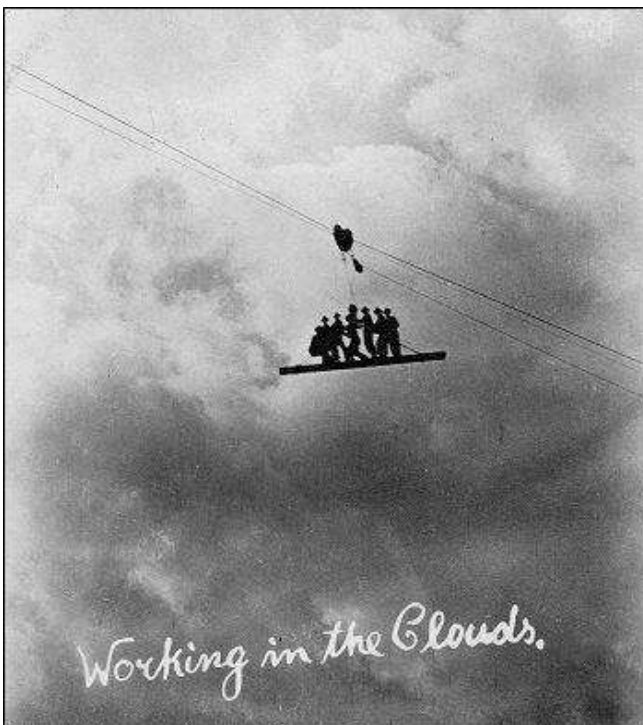
project was an engineering marvel of its day, and included an 1.8 mile-long tunnel and multiple trestles. Much of the technology invented for the project is still used across the globe, says Shontz.



Construction of the fourth trestle on St. Paul Pass.

“Life and safety meant nothing on this project as John D. and his brother William Rockefeller wanted the railroad built as fast as possible,” he adds.

Taft vanished in the historic 1910 forest fire, and the Milwaukee Road, which once served every major town in Montana except Kalispell



and Helena, ran its last train through the state in 1980.

But its trestles and tunnels live on in the Hiawatha Bike Trail, and is now traversed by some 70,000 bicycle riders each summer.

“This is the story of the people who built the railroad through the Bitterroots from the board rooms of Manhattan to the thousands of immigrants who shoveled their way across and through the mountains. It is a true Montana tale,” says Shontz.

### *About the Presenter*

Helena native John Shontz has written extensively about railroads and transportation in Montana, and is author of *Taft – America's Wickedest City*.

He grew up in a newspaper family and his



mother was a judge. He attended Carroll College, in Helena, and received an undergraduate degree in television management from St. Cloud State University in Minnesota and a law degree from Seattle University. Shontz served on the staff of governors David Hall and David Boren in Oklahoma,

and ran a marketing and advertising agency in Sidney, Montana with national clients like Safeway and McDonalds.

He then practiced natural resource, copyright, transportation and open government law for 20 years in Helena and was a member of the Montana House of Representatives.

Shontz is also coordinator of the *Orphan Train Project*, about the 1854-1929 movement to relocate abandoned children from East Coast Cities.

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## FROM THE SHERIFF'S SADDLEBAG

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne

April brings our first full month of Spring which means several things – the weather is constantly changing between sun, wind, rain, snow, sleet, and any or all combinations in a day. The first weekend brings the Creston Auction that raises funds for the Creston Volunteer Fire Department. And over the next couple weeks people start getting their gardens ready and those spring flowers will continue to bloom.

This year marked the 58th annual Creston Auction which in essence has become a historical event on several levels.

First it is a snapshot of the collectibles, farm equipment, and treasures (junk) that represent the east valley and the greater Flathead Valley.

Second, it brings the community together and affords the “old timers” the opportunity to reminisce with friends, fellow farmers, and to meet with others to pass on their deeply rooted history and stories of growing up in the Creston / Lake Blaine area and beyond.

At least one person has attended every auction over the past 58 years and that is the current Creston Fire Chief Gary Mahugh, who is also celebrating 50 years with the Creston Volunteer Fire Department.

Finally, regardless of how nice the weather is the weeks preceding and following the auction, the cold rain and/or snow will make an appearance between set-up on Thursday, check-in items on Friday, and the auctions on Saturday and Sunday. This year was no exception.

Moving the focus back to the Northwest Montana Westerners, we are still seeking members who are willing to step up and serve on the Board and/or help out with our monthly gatherings.

We are also looking at a field trip down the

Mission Valley to have a private tour by Bud Cheff of the Ninepipes Museum of Early Montana. This field trip will be in addition to our regular presentations.

The Board meets from 6:00– 6:30 p.m. before the 7 p.m. presentation at the museum. All members are welcome to attend to observe the meeting. Also, anyone interested in becoming more involved with the group is encouraged to show up early and volunteer your time and services.

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](mailto:edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com).

## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

Though it doesn't look like it from the surface, our group is still struggling to find its footing. Ron Beard did an excellent job of rounding up speakers, and Kyle Stetler prepared a list of prospects, until overwhelmed by his other volunteer work. Last-minute cancellations caused some panic, but were successfully papered over.

We will continue our search for speakers and topics. We also need to have a few topics standing in the wings, ready to step in when illness or other complications arise. Your leads are important.

For the first time since the pandemic, Monday's presentation will not be Zoomed. No one joined the last meeting online. Instead we are experimenting with video recording the meeting. Former museum director Jacob Thomas has said he knows how to download the result to YouTube.

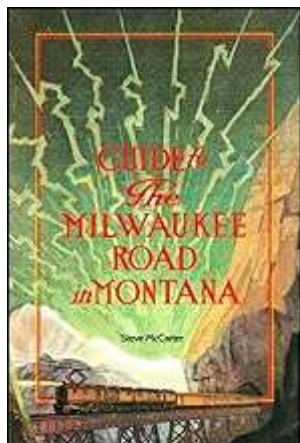
I also need help with making the newsletter more relevant. One issue is the Mark Your Calendars section. Right now I am filling it with the History Book Club.

But if your local museum or history group has an event, I would be glad to publicize it. Email me at [richardahull@charter.net](mailto:richardahull@charter.net).

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## FROM THE BOOK SHELF

By Rick Hull



Though its origins dated back to 1847, the Milwaukee Road came late to the railroad game in Montana.

By the time its tracks to Tacoma and Seattle were completed in 1909, the economy had changed.

When the Milwaukee Road left Montana in 1980, it left a number of

towns to wither on the vine, or literally vanish.

The *Milwaukee Road in Montana* is a summary of the railroad's history, and a guide to the towns along its route. Though it was published by the Montana Historical Press Society, finding a copy may be difficult.

Though connected with the Rockefeller family and Standard Oil, the driving force behind the Milwaukee Road was Chairman Roswell Miller. Upset with being relegated to being a connecting line with the Northern Pacific and Great Northern, he decided to push the railroad through to the Pacific Coast.

The price tag was set at \$45 million. But the NP and GN, who were essentially the same company, bought up right-of-way bottlenecks in the route, raising the price.

The Milwaukee's route was never more than 50 miles from the Northern Pacific. It shared some key cities, like Butte. But it also veered through the middle of state along the Musselshell River, creating 30 towns like Harlowton and Roundup.

It differed from the NP and GN by building its trestles out of concrete and steel, rather than temporary stone and wood. Twelve bridges crossed the Musselshell and the tracks crossed five mountain ranges. It was also known for its unique clocktower train stations, which remain standing in Great Falls, Missoula, Billings,

Spokane and elsewhere.

It was also unusual in using electric locomotives along much of its route. A train descending a mountain pass could generate enough electricity to power a train climbing up the other side.

The merger of the Great Northern, Northern Pacific and Burlington into the Burlington Northern in 1970 was the final blow and the Milwaukee Road slid into bankruptcy in 1977. The railroad abandoned its western lines, and the last train crept west out of the state in March 1980, limited to 10 mph because of poor tracks.

## TRIVA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Last month's question asked what happened to the three historic bars on Kalispell's Main Street when Prohibition took effect in 1919.

**Trish Walsh** and **Scott Tanner** both had the answers.

The *Silver Dollar* became *Jordan's Cafe*.

The *Brewery Saloon*, which had added a bowling alley in 1901, became the *Palm* and had a lunch counter and cigar and cigarettes. Like many bars of the time, it also sold hunting and fishing supplies.

The *Pastime*, which was the target of temperance advocate Carrie Nation in 1910, was taken over by Gus Thompson for his pool hall and cigar store business. Thompson had pitched in the first World Series in 1903.

### ***This Month's Trivia Question***

Here is some railroad trivia. Be aware these are trick questions.

What drives the wheels on a diesel locomotive?

Which member of the crew is in charge of running the train?

Why were torpedoes kept in cabooses?

A bonus question: What is alimony?

Submit your answers to the editor at [richardahull@charter.net](mailto:richardahull@charter.net) and we will print the names of all those who get them right.

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## MARK YOUR CALENDARS



### ● May 1

The History Book Club discusses *“Montana Disasters; True Stories of Treasure State Tragedies and Triumphs”* by Butch Larcombe. 2 p.m. at the Northwest Montana History Museum.

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## GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

**NWMTW 's** meetings are held on the third Monday of the month, except the months of December and January, at the Northwest Montana History Museum at 124 Second Avenue East, Kalispell, Montana.

Meetings begin with a Gab 'n' Greet session from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. for a chance to get acquainted. Local history authors will have their books for sale.

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. Soft drinks, beer and wine will be on sale by museum staff.

## NEW MEMBERS

The following have recently joined the Posse:

Bob Brown, Whitefish  
Jeff & Kathy Joern, Columbia Falls  
Ken & Mary Miers, Kalispell  
Scott & Jan Tanner, Kalispell  
Jackie Zelman, Kalispell

## WESTERN MONTANA'S OTHER TOUGH RAILROAD TOWN

By Rick Hull

All three of Montana's railroad construction towns had bad reputations. The Great Northern Railway had McCarthyville, known as one of the toughest towns in the state. The Milwaukee Road had Taft, the wickedest city in the nation.

And the Northern Pacific had Weeksville, known for its lynchings. How many were strung up is unsure. Contemporary reports are contradictory, with duplicate and confusing names given to the victims. A story published by the New York Times put the total in one incident at 10. A more likely total is two.

Unlike the two other boom towns, Weeksville can still be found on the map. It is an official “census-designated place” located between Plains and Thompson Falls, with a 2020 population of 81. None of the town's original buildings remain.

The town dates to the summer of 1882, when the Northern Pacific began to lay tracks down what had been only a rough Indian trail along the Clark Fork River. The Cabinet



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Mountains squeeze against the river near Thompson Falls, creating obstacles like the notorious “Bad Rock” cursed by early travelers. Steady blasting was needed to make progress through the rock walls.

Several hundred workers descended on the Weeksville camp. Among them were Chinese laborers. Accidents were common. One report says – through malice or otherwise – that a blast near a Chinese camp killed over 50.

Lawlessness was rampant and life was cheap. The dead were hastily interned in shallow graves.

According to a clipping from the Missoulian in December, 1882: "Pretty tough stories are told of the state of affairs at Weeksville. It is said that many of the inhabitants are so thoroughly cowed that if a man was being murdered on their very doorsteps they would not go to his assistance, lest an accomplice murder them also."

The New York Times article of February 1883 was lifted from the Butte Inter-Mountain, and the writer had a similar prologue: “For many weeks past a spirit of lawlessness, robbery, and murder has reigned supreme at that point.



**Railroad tracks along the Clark Fork River.**

“Good citizens were terrorized, and the rules of the robbers were so potent that it became unsafe for any man with a dollar in his pocket to appear on the street even in broad daylight, while under cover of the darkness a carnival of crime was conducted by the thugs and cutthroats, who so greatly outnumbered the good citizens that any attempt to arrest and punish the criminals was attended with almost certain death to those who might otherwise have been willing to aid in the enforcement of law and in visiting upon the head of the guilty the proper penalties for its infraction.”

The Oregonian at Portland had a correspondent at Weeksville, sending in his news under the title, "Notes from the Front." An extended article under date of Jan. 26, 1883, says in part: “No one was safe to go outside his own door at night. He may be garroted and rolled during the day, a stray bullet fired by careless hands may strike him.”

The story continued, “In short, these vultures ran the town. Citizens knew not what to do. Two deputy sheriffs were appealed to, but they were powerless. At last the vigilantes were reorganized; careful men were selected; a bold courageous captain elected, and oaths of secrecy were taken to protect the business man and give a moral quiet tone to Weeksville and surrounding camps.”

An early incident involved Buzz Sweeney, a criminal kingpin who extorted tributes from the saloons. Members of the Sweeney gang included Ohio Dan, a youngster known as Billy the Kid (not to be confused with the Billy the Kid of New Mexico), and Dick (or Nick) the Barber.

Curly Campbell's saloon was the sole holdout to the shakedowns. Sweeney went to teach Campbell a lesson and in the confrontation, was shot dead. Campbell was put on trial, only to escape the court room after his testimony with Sweeney's men in pursuit.

The judge, fearful of the wrath of the Sweeney gang, looked at his courtroom empty of everyone except the prisoners, and called out, "Evidence don't show you're guilty of any misdeeds. You're free!"

Campbell eluded his pursuers by hiding in a hay stack.

A vigilante committee was organized.

According to a newspaper account, "It appears that the business men and others at Weeksville had previously held a mass meeting to take steps to rid the town of its desperate Characters. It is reported that the people were afraid to go to town, so certain were they of being robbed of their money, and perhaps murdered. At a mass meeting the citizens announced their determination to clean out the desperadoes at any hazard, restore order and make it possible for people to come and go without danger to their lives."

The Oregonian reported that an early target was the ill-named 'Billy the kid'.

"Among the most desperate was a youth, whose name I could not learn, called, 'Billy, the kid'. He, like Goliath of old, defied God and man. He boldly asserted that he had robbed, rolled and committed other crimes, and no one dared to dictate to him. He finally went to camp Thirteen, where he got his 'hard earnings' from a working man that he and his pals rolled. The committee of safety gave him 10 minutes to leave. This he did, coming, however, to this place and robbing a man an hour after he got here. As soon as the vigilantes heard of this they came to town and took their man from saloon, intending to give him a hearing. 'Billy' watched his opportunity and made an effort to escape the captors."

"He ran toward the river followed by a volley of shots. Reaching the water he was greeted by a second volley, then sank to rise no more."

But another account says, "Bill the Kid was a freckled youngster, and the Vigilantes decided to give him a chance. He was taken to the river and told to 'light out.'"



**Northern Pacific steam locomotive**

The catalysis for the lynchings came in the aftermath of an attempted robbery of a Wells Fargo messenger on a construction train.

This vigilante showdown occurred either in December of 1882 or January of 1883. One account says, "On the evening above mentioned a crowd of some seventy or eighty surrounded Dick the Barber', to enact the first scene of the new era of law, order and reform. The desperado' realizing for the first time that his life was short, that the fullness of the winter of discontent was upon him, appealed

piteously for mercy and completely broke down. But the mob refused to listen to his supplications for a moment, and made hasty preparations for the execution. However, the doomed man 'kicked up such a racket' and made so much disturbance that he was shot through the back, and a few moments afterward he was dangling at the end of a rope, his career of pillage, robbery and murder at an end. The cutthroats have lost a valuable ally and hell is the gainer."

The January 22 account in the Idaho Statesman had a different story. "On last Sat. night a party of vigilantes from Weeksville came down on a special train, and going to the hotel here, demanded admittance. Mr. Doane, the proprietor, not knowing who they were, refused, where upon they broke down the door and with drawn revolvers requested the desperate characters known as 'Ohio Dan' and

'Nick the Barber,' to come outside. Resistance was useless and the doomed men quietly submitted to be led to The railroad cars, when the entire party started back to Weeksville.”

“When a short distance from the other side of Thompson Falls the wretches were led to two separate trees and swung into eternity. This act was prompted by the number of murders and robberies committed in and around the 'Front' the past two months. The two men mentioned were found to be guilty of these atrocities, hence the summary manner in which they were 'taken' off. At last accounts everything was quiet, on the extreme front.”

The borrowed New York Times account had a higher body count.

“On last Sunday night four desperadoes, known as 'Ohio Dan,' 'Blondy,' Ed Enright, and another man, were arrested. The first three were hanged without ceremony, and the fourth was converted into a lead depositor,” the correspondent reported.

"At the 'Y,' another camp two miles west of Weeksville, a similar scene was enacted. Three men, names unknown, being hanged on the same tree and at the same time. When the coach left Weeksville, so a lady passenger stated to Mr. Hart, the bodies of two men were still dangling in the air from a limb of a tree, giving the early morning scene a ghastly aspect. It was also reported to her that the three victims at the 'Y' were similarly suspended, having been thus left by the avenging vigilantes so that there should be no possibility of a return to life.”

Either Ohio Dan or the Barber had earlier been shot in the foot, and used crutches. The crutches were used as a impromptu tombstone, and remained on the grave for 20 years.

The Oregonian concluded, “Since the above advent the place is quiet. Quite a number of other camps, including two women, received notices to leave immediately. Now the laborer, after his day's work is over, can with safety come to town and transact such business as he may have, without fear of being hounded and tracked by any of these vampires.”

As one man expressed it, "Weeksville's civilized now. There ain't no more corpses on the railroad payroll an' you can sleep again without barricadin' your bed with bales of hay.”

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