



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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JUNE MEETING

Monday, June 17, 2024

"Montana's Vigilantes – Good Guys or Bad Guys?"

Presenter: Carol Buchanan of Kalispell

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

Time: Gab 'n' Greet, raffle sales 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.

ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

This month's presentation is by an author who has spent most of her life exploring the subject.

Carol Buchanan's interest in Montana's vigilantes began when, at 12 years old, she and her family visited Alder Gulch, near Virginia City, Montana.

"One evening after supper I walked up to the Hangman's Building and went inside. As I stood looking at the beam on which the five road agents were hanged," she notes. "I heard the ropes creak. That has stayed with me ever since."

Inspired, she crafted a historical novel around the events of the time. "I wrote a draft in the '70s but couldn't sell it – and rightfully so," she recalled.

It wasn't until she and her husband moved to the Flathead in 2001, that Carol decided to try again.

She started with five years of digging through the proceedings of the Montana Historical Society, tracking down reminiscences and pioneers' recollections, and other authors' notes.

The Vigilance Committee of Alder Gulch was created in December 1863, following a series of killings and robberies in the gold rush towns of early Montana. More than 100 travelers had been murdered that fall. In one incident, five men were killed and \$12,000 in gold stolen.

In the first six weeks of 1864 at least 20 gang members were hung in Bannack, Virginia City and Missoula, including alleged leader, Bannack sheriff Henry Plummer.

The vigilante movement and hangings spread to other mining towns, including Helena in 1865-1870 with at least 15 extrajudicial hangings.



Henry Plummer's Tombstone
Montana Historical Society

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Modern Montana Highway Patrol uniforms carry the 3-7-77 insignia associated with the vigilantes.

But there have been charges that the vigilante leaders were more driven by political motives than law and order. In 1993 there was a mock trial of Plummer that ended in a deadlock, and led to a move to grant an official pardon.

Carol sharpened her writing skills with help from Authors of the Flathead and online classes, and in 2005 she finished her novel, *God's Thunderbolt: The Vigilantes of Montana*.

After submitting it to publishers without response, she decided to self publish. The book took off, winning the 2009 Spur Award from the Western Writers of America for best first novel.

She followed up with *The Devil in the Bottle: The Tragedy of "Jack" Slade*; *Gold Under Ice*; and *The Ghost at Beaverhead Rock*. Her fifth novel, *A Time of Trial*, is in the last stage of being published.

About the Presenter

Carol has an undergraduate degree from Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Wash., a masters from the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas; and a PhD from State University of New York, Albany, New York.

She worked for Macmillian Publishers in New York, and later was a copy editor in the Seattle area.

Carol has taught classes at Flathead Valley Community College on the vigilantes and "Becoming Montana." Her late husband, Richard, was a Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer and ran Byte Savvy locally.



Carol Buchanan

FROM THE SADDLEBAG

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne



June has brought some warmer weather affording us to get out and work in the garden and yard. Don't forget to get out and explore, take a drive, or go for a hike before the dog days of summer begin to set in next month. We are looking to head up to Many Glacier for a day hike then hit the Cattle Baron Supper Club in Babb. Early dinner at 4 p.m. and home before dark.

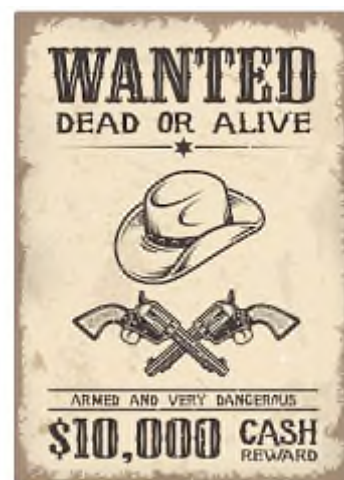
Monday, Carol Buchanan is back to talk about Montana's Vigilante's. Its been about four years since her last presentation to the Westerners on the Vigilantes.

And then Saturday we will have our field trip down to Polson and Charlo to visit the Miracle of America Museum and the Ninepipes Museum of Early Montana History. This is our only scheduled field trip this year.

Next year we are looking at a trip to Helena to tour the Montana Historical Society Museum and its new Montana Heritage Addition.

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 Email to: edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com.



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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

My quest to combine technology and history continues. The goal is both preserve historic material, such as hand-typed memoirs, cassette tapes and unique books, and to make them readily accessible on line.

One interesting discovery is the Czur scanner at the county library. This device will not only allow you to scan a 300 page book in little over an hour, it will automatically separate the facing pages into two images, and then adjust for their curvature. The page splitting was initially unpredictable, despite lining the book up with lines on the monitor. To quote one librarian, the device was too smart for its one good.

But it turned out it needed the black matte background that came with the machine. There are also rubber fingers for holding the book open that are specially colored to be invisible to the software.

The Northwest Montana History Museum is digitizing historic letters from Rev. George Fisher and his family. Most of the west half of Kalispell is on his former farm.

The letters are in cursive handwriting and immune to any optical recognition software. But they can be swiftly input as readable and searchable text by using speech recognition software. Commercial versions are expensive. However it is free with Microsoft Windows.

After a quick setup, speech recognition is just a matter of pressing the windows key on the lower left and the H key. Punctuation and special characters are added by speaking "period", etc. The key combination has to be reused after each time after stopping to type in a correction.

Audacity is a free program that allows cassette recordings to be saved in digital formats. Inexpensive cassette players are sold that will plug directly into the computer's USB port.

Another advance worth exploring is QRU codes. Photographing the code with a smart phone

leads directly to a web page. QRUs can also bring up a Google Drive file, which eliminates the expense of owning and maintaining a web site. A QRU code on a museum display could bring up extra detail and even an oral narrative.

The ultimate goal is a virtual museum with unlimited space and open 24 hours a day.

TRIVA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Last month's trivia question was about the unusual ranching operation launched on Johnson Slough, at the head of Swan Lake, about 1925. The ranch had 160 fenced acres, and a stock of 2,400, with plans to increase that number four-fold.

Trish Walsh, Edward Gillenwater and Scott Tanner knew that it was Montana Muskrat Company. It is unclear what happened to the operation, but the Great Depression starting four years later likely put an end to market for fur coats.

The site is now part of the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

This Month's Trivia Question

The Northwestern Montana Basketball Tournament was broadcast from Kalispell in 1927. What was its significance?

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

MARK YOUR CALENDARS



● June 15-16

Fort Connah rendezvous, seven miles north of St. Ignatius. Noon Saturday and 10 a.m. Sunday. Wagon rides, living history demos, tomahawk throwing, bake sale and much more.

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FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **July 15:**
“Historic Tales of Flathead Lake ”
by Butch Larcombe
- **August 19:**
“Matting Canning and the fight
for freedom of speech ”
by Doug Ammons
- **September 16 :**
“Montana Highway Tales –
Curious characters and peculiar
attractions” by Jon Axline
- **October 21:**
“Mike Mansfield – the gentleman
politician” by Bob Brown

GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

Northwest Montana Westerners' 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.

THE THOMPSON FALLS VIGILANTES

Editors Note: The Clark Fork Valley and Thompson Falls had its own vigilante stories. The main action took place at Weeksville, a railroad construction town just east of Thompson Falls. As recounted in April's Pony Tracks, a national news report declared 10 robbers and murderers were hung in January of 1883. The actual toll was more likely two.

But Thompson Falls became its own hot spot for crime and vigilantes when a gold rush developed just across Thompson Pass in Idaho. Here is a excerpt from an undated article by Eric Thane, as archived by local historian Sam Johns, in his 10-volume collection, *The Pioneers*.

Thompson Falls boomed. From Thompson Falls pack trains in the eighties carried supplies to the gold strikes in the Idaho Coeur d'Alenes. Before any road was built men were sometimes paid to pack supplies on their backs – 35 cents per pound, generally. Some carried over 100 pounds of material; others, it is said, packed up to 200 pounds. One husky packed in a sheet iron stove, making the trip in two days and netting himself \$500.

In the fall of 1883 there were some 10,000 people in Thompson Falls and most of them wintered there. As in Weeksville the previous winter, there was a boom of vast proportions. Saloons were the most conspicuous structures in the place. The most notorious of these was the "Shades" which is associated with Jack MacDonald, a S-card monte expert and the hero of various shady escapades.

With crime rampant and honest men afraid of their shadows, a Vigilance committee was organized in 1884. There were some 225 members in the committee, a large number of them possessing cool heads so that wholesale hanging of the outlaw element was prevented. At a meeting it was decided to "float" the undesirables, rather than deal with them with ropes and bullets.

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Accordingly, 25 men, considered the most dangerous in the community, singled out and notices sent them.

As in the days of Virginia City and Bannack, the Vigilante signature as placed on all notes: "3-7-77" – a symbol supposedly derived from the dimensions of a grave.

In this instance the rougher element new that the Vigilantes were not an organization to trifle with, with the result that a few hours after the 25 men had been warned, 24 of them left. One, Jim Hardy, either braver than his fellows or more foolish refused to take the notes seriously.

"Vigilantes:" he snorted to a crowd in Curly Jim's saloon, his favorite hangout. "They're not scarin' me. Why I can lick every Vigilante with one hand behind me."

Then his gun handy, he swaggered out into the street. His boldness grew as he passed various men whom he knew to be Vigilante members, and they paid him no second look.

"Run me out of town, eh?" he snorted. "They can't run me out of is place. I'm stayin' here until I'm ready an' pleased to pull stakes."

Put he wasn't so sure the next day when several men carrying a rope halted him. His face turned white at the significant way it was looped.

Hardy fought off the hands that reached for his arms, and fled down the banks of the buildings, with the Vigilantes in pursuit He managed, to evade them and hide in Curley Jim's saloon. He couldn't hide indefinitely, of course, for there were men in the salon who saw him and were sympathetic with the Vigilante cause. The Vigilantes presently closed in on Jim and he was dragged from hiding.

Someone threw a noose around his neck, and he was hurried to a big tree.

He tripped, and fell but the Vigilantes did not halt; they dragged him until he recovered his feet.

Under the tree they loosened the rope a little to allow him to breathe.

"You got our note, " the leader charged.. "Why didn't you leave, like the rest?"

"I'll go now, if you'll let me!" Jim Hardy pleaded, "I'll go a long ways away, an I'll never come back."

He pleaded the harder when the leader hesitated in uncertainty. Presently the leader turned to the Vigilantes and called, "What about it boys, shall we let him go?"

There were several mutters of assent and the leader flipped the noose from Hardy's neck.

"You've got your life!" he said. "Now see you get out of here and out of here. And you better move fast, because we can change minds mighty quick!"

Before he had finished, Jim Hardy was a cloud of dust rapidly diminishing in the distance.

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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 issue July 10, 2024 (or thereabouts)

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