



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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FEBRUARY MEETING

Monday, Feb. 16, 2026

"The Birth of Kalispell"

Presenter: Bruce Guthrie of Kalispell

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

Time: Gab 'n' Greet start at 6:00 p.m. Soft drinks, beer and wine are available and raffle tickets for historic books are sold.

Historic Presentation: Program begins at 7:00 p.m. No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early. Call 406-207-0949 with any questions.



Kalispell's First Bank

selling city lots in April of 1891. According to the Inter Lake, \$400,000 worth were snatched up in days.

The Inter Lake was located in the riverboat town of Demersville, which faced being eclipsed by the new town. When rumors circulated the railroad would be delayed by two years, the Inter Lake wrote, "We understand that a meeting was held in Collapstown, formerly known as Kalispell, for the purpose of building a fly screen over the town." One enterprising farmer mowed hay in the deserted street right of ways.

But the tracks reached downtown on December 31, 1891 and Demersville became the loser. At one point 12 of its buildings could be seen moving across the prairie to the new town.

The town soon boasted major brick structures, including the Conrad Bank, the Whipps building, and Henry Good's complex that included Montgomery Wards.

ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

The Northwest Montana Westerners kicks off the year with a look at the early days of Kalispell.

Bruce Guthrie, who leads the Northwest Montana History Museum's popular downtown walking tour, will describe the birth of the town.

Kalispell was created in 1891 from nothing. With the Great Northern Railway scheduled to enter the Flathead Valley, the Townsite Company and founder Charles Conrad bought 900 acres of farm land. The company began

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When the railroad main line moved to Whitefish in 1904, the town continued to grow. Between 1900 to 1910 it doubled in size, jumping from 2,500 people to 5,000. It would take another 50 years to reach 10,000, Bruce notes.

He will cover the unique stories behind individual buildings, including the original Glacier Park painting in the Eagle Store store, now Rocky Mountain outfitters. The Kalispell Mercantile has signature masonry work, and the McIntosh Opera House continued in business even after its stage burned in 1927.

About the Presenter



Bruce Guthrie came to the Flathead Valley in 1997 on a one year leave of absence from his teaching job in the Chicago suburbs to see what he thought of the place.

He has since taught at Flathead High School, FVCC, and Jeddah International School in Saudi Arabia. In retirement he is busier than ever, researching about the early Flathead Valley, and teaching at FVCC's Senior Institute in addition to online tutoring.

Historians, he notes, just don't know how to stop doing history.



FROM THE SADDLEBAG

By President Tim Christenson

Happy New Year! I'm not late: Here in NW Montana, we Westerners "let the ball drop" for our 10-month year at 7:00 p.m. on the third Monday of February. So, as Adam said to his wife, "It's New Years, Eve!"

As this fresh year comes into focus on the horizon, I'm delighted to saddle up (barring objection?) as the incoming sheriff of the Northwest Montana chapter of Westerners International.

If you've ever wondered what happens when a group of history buffs gather to swap tales of trappers, trailblazers, ranchers, renegades, and the occasional colorful character who defies categorization, you've found the right outfit.

Our chuck wagon is serving up a full plate of great presentations—stories stitched together from archives, attics, and the memories of folks who still remember when "going to town" meant hitching a team. My hope is that each month brings a spark of curiosity, a good laugh, and maybe even a new appreciation for the people who shaped this corner of the West.

We're kicking things off this month with Prof. Bruce Guthrie's presentation. Glenda and I partook of his walking tour last year, and I'll never look at Main Street the same again. If you think we've got troubles now, wait 'til you hear what earlier generations of Westerners overcame...and have handed down to us. It'll make you proud to be a local.

Future months will offer a look at Jack Dempsey's biggest bout (in Shelby?!); homesteading on the North Fork; Montana's first humans; the 150th anniversary of Little Big Horn, and more.

So dust off your boots, bring a friend, and join us as we explore the history beneath our feet. It's going to be a lively ride.

Whoopee ti yi yo!

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull



Kalispell Historic Inventory binders at Library

In a back room on the second of the County library are shelves of loose-leaf binders that hold secrets about ordinary houses in Kalispell.

Your house might have once been home to the “Poet of the Rockies.” Or it might have been the local headquarters for the Oriental Trading Company which imported Japanese railroad workers. Or the homeowner might have been a former inmate at the Montana State Prison who seduced, and then married, the wife of the warden.

The volumes are the Kalispell Historic Architectural Inventory. The original 1980 effort was only short summaries with limited information about the homes.

But in 1992, local historian Kathy McKay sat down with a century worth of local newspapers and assembled the history of nearly every home in the Kalispell city limits. The histories were supplemented with information drawn from Polks' City Directories, the Kalispell Fire Department's reports of house fires and records from local house movers.

The results are nearly type-written narratives on each house and business.

The narratives are arranged by street name and house number. Some include house plans.

The documents are open to the public, and the library has a copy machine and a scanner.

CALLING ALL VOLUNTEERS

The monthly Westerners presentations may seem to happen seamlessly, with only glitches weather related. But there is a fair amount of work involved.

Arranging for speakers is often a challenge, as well as preparing and distributing the publicity. Just keeping track of members takes time.

However none of us are getting younger, and the effort can seem overwhelming at times. That is why we are asking for volunteers.

When you renew your membership this month, add a note about how you can help. The work is monthly and doesn't take up too much time. It is mostly a manner of remembering deadlines.

We appreciate whatever you can do. Thanks.

DUES REMINDER

It is time for the annual renewal for members. Please support our organization and its goals by paying at the February or March meetings.

The renewal form is included in this month's mailing.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Here are a couple downtown questions: Which building had a swimming pool? And which had a shooting gallery (the firearms type)?

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

FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **March 16:** “Shelby’s Folly” by Tim Christenson. The Jack Dempsey boxing match of July 4, 1923.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS



- **February 20**

Free open house at the Northwest Montana History Museum to gather input on the update of its permanent exhibit, *On a Passing Frontier: The Earliest Stories from Northwest Montana*. 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

- **March 6**

The History Book Club discusses *The Boxcar Librarian: A Novel*, by Brianna Labuskes. Wednesday 2 p.m. at the Northwest Montana History Museum.

- **May 26**

Downtown Kalispell Walking Tours begin. Ticket sold at the Northwest Montana History Museum. Cost is \$20 for adults, \$18 for veterans, senior and students, \$15 for those 10 to 17 years old, and \$10 for kids 4 to 9.



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. Presenters and local authors may be selling and signing their books.

To prevent strangers from wandering in, the Museum front door will be locked once the presentation starts. Those arriving late can call the number posted on the door.

THE MYSTERY OF THE FLATHEAD VALLEY'S LOST TRADING POST

Where was the 1819 Hudson's Bay Company's Howse House?

Four years after Lewis and Clark left Montana, the Canadian Hudson's Bay Company established a trading post somewhere between Somers and Kalispell.

The problem is – no one knows exactly where.

The story centers around Joseph Howse, who was sent to spy on the Hudson's Bay Company's competitor, the upstart North West Company.

Howse had emigrated from southern England in 1795 and apprenticed with the fur-trading company at York Factory on the semi-arctic Hudson Bay.

His first assignment centered around Edmonton House, now a major city in Alberta. He then crossed the Rockies through a pass now named after him. It was the Hudson's Bay Company's



Joseph Howse 1810

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first expansion west of the Continental Divide. A river and peak also bear his name.

Despite Howse literally putting his name on western Canada, little is known about him. Only a handful of his reports survive and his maps were later sold and then lost. Most of what we know about him comes from the journals of Canadian fur trader David Thompson.

Thompson was the first European to explore the Columbia River from source to the ocean and founded outposts across eastern Washington and western Montana.

Thompson had broken his leg early in his career and during his two-year convalescence he taught himself to use the sextant. The Indians called him “the Stargazer.”

His feats were largely forgotten until a century later, when a Canadian cartographer wondered why his maps of the Columbian River basin were so accurate, and dug up Thompson’s papers.

Though Thompson had originally signed on with the Hudson’s Bay Company, in 1794 he joined other disgruntled fur traders who had formed the rival North West Company.

Though competitors, the two companies sometimes had adjoining trading posts. These posts were typically known as “Houses,” though occasionally they were fortified.

The Hudson’s Bay Company was especially interested in Saleesh House, a fur trading post Thompson founded in 1809 near present-day Thompson Falls, Montana. They sent Howse to investigate.

We know Howse left Edmonton in 1810. According to one account, he had two canoes and nine men. Others reported 17 people, including four Cree Indians. He later provided a brief summary of his journey, which involved heading down the Columbia, then branching off to paddle up the Kootenai River to near present-day Libby, working his way to the Clark Fork and the lower Flathead River.

A later letter confirmed he had set up business somewhere north of Flathead Lake. There has been some speculation he actually reached Lake Pend Oreille, but that is generally rejected.

Howse returned to Edmonton in 1812 with 36 bundles of furs worth £1,500. Later he mentioned he had also accompanied a group of Flatheads to the three forks of the Missouri between December and February during his stay in the Flathead Valley.

Ironically, Thompson took off the summer of 1811 on his historic trip to the mouth of the Columbia River.

With almost no contemporary information to work on, the actual location of Howse House has remained a mystery.

In 1962, Barry Braunberger and Twain White explored a possible site in the Lower Valley. Braunberger was an optometrist interested in history, and White was an amateur archaeologist who ran the Lookout museum on Flathead Lake.

Working off the premise that Howse had arrived by canoe, they focused on the mouth of Ashley Creek where it enters the Flathead River, south of Creston. The barrel of an early gun had been found on the site, and there were some chimney remains. However their digging recovered little beside arrowheads and carved stones used to anchor fish nets.

Based on the premise that Howse came by horse, Thompson Falls native Carl Haywood picked another spot. His logic is spelled out in his book, *In Search of Howse House* (2013).

In particular, Haywood felt the Ashley Creek was prone to spring flooding and too marshy for a trading post.

He favored a location on the west side of the valley. It would have been near the junction of two major Indian trails, he noted. One trail followed the present Highway 2 from the west into the Valley, and the other headed north up the present Highway 93 toward Eureka and the Kootenai River.

Based on writings by the Valley’s earliest pioneer, Haywood narrows the location to an area near the present Rocky Cliff Drive, west of the FedEx complex.

In particular he quotes Emma Ingalls, who wrote a paper, *Over Trails of the Past*, in 1945. She

placed the trading post on property in the area originally owned by Eugene McCarthy. Ingalls and McCarthy were both early pioneers. She and her husband had published the Inter Lake in Demersville in the 1890s and McCarthy was a contractor during the building of the Great Northern Railway in 1891.

She wrote, “The remains of the old trading post established in about 1808 were still in evidence.” But McCarthy had, “Tore down the old chimneys and filled in the excavation, and where this historic building once stood, Mr. Griffith has a grain field.”

There is logic to the site. The Lower Valley is blocked by several wandering sloughs in the area north of Somers. Until Highway 93’s modern fill, the early road into the valley hugged the hillside. And the Valley’s first settlement is thought to have been at Ball’s Crossing, just to the north.

Not knowing the present location of early Hudson's Bay Company trading posts is hardly unusual. Some were located by tribal members or fur traders who remember visiting them as youngsters. But the location of Thompson’s Saleesh House at Thompson Falls has never been nailed down, and remains a source of local contention.

In September of 1812, Howse returned to England. He had become fluent in the language of the Cree, who occupied much of western Canada. Using his reputation as a linguist, he was able to pursue life as a gentleman and scholar. His *Grammar of the Cree Language* was published in 1884. Other papers contained information on the Kootenai language, and the Salish language of the Flatheads. His advice was sought by the Royal Geographical Society and the Church Missionary Society.

There is evidence that Howse left an Indian wife behind.

On the other hand, Thompson brought his Cree wife, Charlotte, with him when he retired to eastern Canada. Bad investments and health problems left him broke in later years.

To the end, Thompson remained a strong critic of the decision to surrender western Washington State to the United States. He always felt the Columbia River should be the international border.

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