

HELENA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

(as described in Helena’s historic district nominations to the National Register of Historic Places)

Originally an area used as Native American hunting grounds, Helena, Montana started as a gold camp in 1864. A major strike brought miners to stake their claims along the gulch that had been dubbed Last Chance. Montana’s resource-based economy was reflected by the early businesses that occupied the downtown gulch, and grew in accordance with the health of the mining and agricultural industries. Buildings erected in Helena as the economy soared or flagged gauged the underlying economic health of the community.

Log cabins initially characterized the southern portion of downtown. By February 1865, 700 people were reported to reside in Helena, and some 200 houses were completed or underway. At the height of the gold stampede, population estimates reach as high as 8 or 10 thousand. Businesses opened in tents, wagons and log buildings. Nearby hillsides were logged to build flumes, and cabins for homes and stores.

Gold production in Montana reached an all-time peak in 1867 with placer mines in Helena and other leading gold fields accounting for much of this production. By 1868, local sawmills, brickyards, stone quarries and iron foundries were all in operation, rapidly transforming the Last Chance camp into a respectable town. The Gulch grew increasingly commercial and residential neighborhoods developed to the east and southwest of the mining district.

Helena soon filled the head of its original gulch and spilled out onto the adjoining valley shoulders, its narrow lots packing commercial and then residential buildings into a dense, flammable tapestry. Horrific fires swept the town in the 1860s and 70s, resulting in increasingly fire-resistant construction and practices, the most dramatic symbol of the still surviving fire lookout above downtown. Beginning as a flimsy overlook in 1869, the Helena Fire Tower was replaced in 1874 with a timbered structure that was greatly strengthened in 1886. Today it is the symbol of the city, signifying the community’s dedication to the concept of mutual support and resilience in the face of adversity.

During the mid 1880’s large business blocks drew the downtown focus to northern Last Chance Gulch. Reflecting dramatic changes in the economic sector following the arrival of the railroad and corresponding surges in population and capital, buildings of 4, 5, and 6 stories created an urban atmosphere downtown. The northern end of the commercial district developed later and was not as densely built up as the south and central portions of downtown.

The People

Long before the area was discovered by trappers and miners, early Native Americans travelled through the area. The discovery of gold in 1864 began Helena’s mining boom, following gold strikes in Bannack and Virginia City.

Mining and economic opportunity in Helena drew many individuals from highly divergent backgrounds. Late 19th-century U.S. census rolls listed an array of ethnic diversity including

Asian, English, Irish, Italian, Prussian, German, and Scandinavian residents. People from like backgrounds tended to settle close together, often maintaining their customs and language. Throughout the town distinctive socio-economic patterns emerged.

Frontier America demanded resources of all kinds, in particular, human labor. Vast railroad construction programs, water ditches, mines and their huge machinery needs, wagon roads and similar ventures required human muscle in the days of emerging mechanization. China, with its unending labor force, was a natural source of that muscle and Chinese people eagerly sought employment in America, the ‘golden’ land. Large work parties were recruited under contract by Chinese investors and hired out throughout the West. Smaller groups and individuals specialized in reworking placer deposits and operating laundries, restaurants, and shops. Helena had a Chinese population of several hundred in the 1870s through the 1920s, the bulk of which settled in the older sections of town near the mouth of southern Last Chance Gulch. Much derided by ‘white’ society, the Chinese experienced pronounced social insularity. Extreme linguistic and cultural differences between European and Chinese peoples were loaded onto physical distinctions to engender prejudice. A fierce competition for jobs heated the issue and helped foster immigration policies that virtually barred Chinese families and then laborers from relocating, making settling in the United States out of reach for most.

Regardless of racial tensions, the Chinese and their non-Chinese neighbors conducted business together in Helena for several decades. True to the national pattern, Chinese owned laundries, shops and restaurants operated at the south end of the gulch for many years. Some Chinese owned property and were accounted for - although in a separate section - in local property tax rolls like everyone else. One distinction evidenced in these records was the number of hogs owned by the Chinese - far more than other groups - and the Chinese were devoted gardeners, as shown by their plots on early maps. Thus, food production and supply were connected to Chinese livelihood and they were often employed as cooks. Such domestic enterprises, filling roles eschewed by white males, got the Chinese in trouble with the growing local female labor source. Working women protested low prices at Chinese laundries, for example.

Few people of Chinese decent stayed on in Helena, even after death. Representatives from the ‘old country’ visited the Chinese section of Forestvale Cemetery on occasion to gather up remains for re-internment in China. What the Chinese left behind was their works: miles of railroad lines, roadways like that over Priest Pass, tunnels, mountain-hugging water ditches, vast placer workings and other feats of backbreaking labor - monuments to a sturdy people’s indomitable will.

Remote from the established reservations and not particularly attractive to Native American culture, Helena offered little to that culture’s history. The gold discoveries brought European traditions to the gulch and they developed virtually without cross-fertilization. Early accounts of Native and Anglo interaction are limited.

Rare photographs show tipis erected on the slopes north of town and local lore recalls an intermittent Native community on lands between Prospect and the airport. Native peoples were increasingly recognized as a nostalgic totem during the rise of tourism in the 1920s, a phenomenon that accelerated with highway traffic throughout the mid 20th Century. Not until the social upheaval of the 1960s did Native Americans mount a counter-attack on their institutionalization in the form of protests and developing means of engendering Native pride.

However, at this same time Helena was busy with Urban Renewal, a federal redevelopment program whose objective was to clear the decayed - yet historic – area of the city and relocate largely its impoverished populations. Many Native Americans simply moved away.

The quiet endeavors of individual Native American families took root in the city. An early superintendent of schools, Helen Piotopowaka Clarke, was the well educated daughter of a Blackfoot woman. Many mixed-race individuals contributed to the area's development throughout the twentieth century. The 1970's saw the advent of an institution called the Helena Indian Alliance, a non-profit and long-standing support organization for Native peoples that was energized by local individuals of Native American ancestry. The work of Eddie Barbeau flourished in the post-60's era with "Indian Days" and similar celebrations of Native life-ways and traditions that embraced the entire Helena community. The 19th century based mind-set toward Native Americans began to crumble as a result and present day Helena embraces diversity.

African Americans constituted about 3 % of the population around the turn of the 20th century and a thriving black community was present here for many years. Fort Harrison, established in 1890, garrisoned black troops who chose to stay or had family in town. Many were employed in the service industry although there were professionals such as J. P. Ball Sr., a photographer and his attorney son, J. P. Ball Jr. There was no defined black neighborhood in the city (although a row of former black officers quarters still exists just outside the gate to the fort) and blacks lived in nearly every section of Helena. The African Methodist Episcopal Church at 5th and Hoback served as a social center and there were several black organizations supporting activities from baseball to debate. The black population of Helena diminished after the 1920's.

The promotion of the Great Northern Railway lines across Montana's hi-line during the early 1900's stimulated the founding of hundreds of new communities to the north and east, and renewed the flood of immigrants to Montana.

In 1910 the railroad imported some forty male workers of Japanese descent who were housed in railroad "warehouses," according to the U.S. Census, along the Northern Pacific tracks. Local residents report that some of these workers continued to live at the extreme east end of the depot area, even planting large gardens, hauling water from a spring (on the current site of Helena High School), and selling their produce locally until the onset of World War II.

Social Organizations

Social groups played an important role in helping to root the newly founded Helena community and encourage cultural development. Organized religious faiths were represented here by 1865 and historically held an important influence. Early religious groups erected churches, schools, orphanages and hospitals.

Fraternal organizations played a significant role in early Helena history; the dominant fraternal group was the Masonic Order who embraced a moral code dedicated to betterment of themselves and society. Ethnic fraternities also drew large memberships, offering a place for members to preserve many of their customs, and helping preserve Helena's rich ethnic diversity during the early years.

Opportunities for socializing were provided by the hundreds of saloons which have flourished in Helena since the town's beginning, many of which also offered billiards, darts and other pastimes. For more well-to-do members of society, the Montana Club was founded by wealthy stockmen and mine owners.

The Catholic Church played a major role in the settlement of Montana and the west, starting churches, schools, hospitals, asylums, social organizations, and many other social services. Other religions also made a large impact during Montana's frontier years, but the majority of the population immigrating to the state were Catholic. By 1900 the Catholics had erected 5 churches and established 12 different organizations to provide a multitude of services for organizations.

In 1924 the principal of Helena High School, in an attempt to redirect student energy from a fist-fight tradition, planned to organize a "hard times day" with students parading in ragged clothing through town. Amended at the suggestion of the school to be a historical parade, the event blossomed into a tradition lasting to the end of the century and beyond. Themes in Montana's history from prehistoric times through the present are the subject of floats and other offerings, many of them enacted. The original route down Helena Avenue was relocated downtown when the King and Queen of Norway reviewed the spectacle from their stand in Women's Park. Interrupted only by WWII, the Vigilante Parade continues to be a major event in the city, bringing youth and history together in a celebration enjoyed by the entire community.

Economic History

In a statewide context, capitalists and members of the business community invested heavily in Montana commerce, leaving tangible evidence of their investment activities in the buildings they erected. Capitalists such as T.C. Power, Charles Broadwater, the Kleinschmidts, Anton Holter and many others held diverse investments, which typically included livestock, mining, transportation and real estate properties. These individuals were representative of many pioneering businesspeople who arrived during the gold rushes, and made fortunes by supplying the mining communities and investing in Montana's emerging industries. However, they left more than the ordinary legacy, shaping the future course of Montana by financing numerous entrepreneurial ventures, which soon formed the footings of the local and state economy in their highly successful careers.

During the territorial period, six banks were established downtown by 1867 and the first Lewis and Clark County Courthouse was established. By 1868, Helena's proximity to major transportation routes and centrality within Montana's rich, south central mining district, led to its preeminence as a center for transportation, trade and finance. On a national level, Helena's status as a financial center for outlying towns and mining districts, and its important role as a liaison between the Territory and the federal government was reflected by two key decisions. The first, in 1875, located one of only five federal assay offices here, becoming the first institutional building. Secondly, in 1921, the Federal Reserve Bank established a branch bank in downtown Helena.

By 1875 most of the placer mines were exhausted and it appeared the road to riches on the mining frontier was not in manual labor, but investment in land or other business ventures. Many of Helena's legendary millionaires got their start in the placer mining era, and quickly

invested in large mining conglomerates, real estate, and other developing enterprises in the growing city.

The south-central portion of Helena was the first, permanent residential neighborhood and commercial district to develop adjacent to the diggings of the Last Chance gold strike. By the late 1870s and early 1880s this area had achieved the status of the preferred area to live; many of early Helena's important business people and professionals had built their homes along Broadway, State Street and Rodney Street. The Catholic Diocese established an extensive complex consisting of schools, dormitories, a cathedral, and a hospital during the Territorial period.

Helena's Jewish businessmen played an important role in encouraging the growth of industrial mining in Montana by providing investment capital needed to develop the local quartz gold deposits. They occupied positions of importance in Helena with the largest percentage of Jewish men earning their livelihoods as merchants and traders in wholesale and retail trade, serving as distributors of manufactured goods to people both in Helena and the surrounding mining camps. Banking services established by Jews enhanced Helena's position as the commercial and banking center for western Montana and promoted permanent settlement of the city.

Most mining boomtowns like Bannack, Diamond City, Nevada City and Virginia City faded as the placer gold dwindled, but Helena was a significant transportation and trading center and lucky to be located on the projected route of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Partly because of this fact, the territorial capital moved from Virginia City to Helena in 1875 and Helena also was chosen as the site for a federal assay office. Placing this important landmark in Helena, and its designation as a stopping point along the Northern Pacific, helped guarantee the town's future.¹

By the later 1880s and early 1890s, Helena's economic prosperity climaxed. An exclusive residential district was under construction on the west side of town and some of the more financially successful south-central residents chose to relocate.

Helena became known as the Queen City of the Rockies for its high style architecture as the railroad made possible the importation of new building materials and larger storefront display windows. The old false front first generation buildings that had survived the major conflagrations from the 1860s and 1870s along the gulch downtown were extensively remodeled in the 1880s and early 1890s.

The number of businesses remained fairly constant through the economic depression of the 1890 when the bottom fell out of the silver market after the United States government suddenly devalued the price of silver by the repeal of mandatory government silver purchases. Helena was economically dependent on the silver mines located south of the community in Jefferson County.

The Silver Panic of 1893 had severe repercussions for western mining states and put a damper on construction, but business continued and economic fortunes in the district rose again by the turn of the 20th century. This was largely due to the city's evolution from a mining town susceptible to rapid fluctuation in prosperity to a more stable political center. Through the 1890s, Helena

remained a hub of trade and travel but was increasingly geared toward service industries that supported mining and agricultural towns throughout central Montana

Helena's vigorous growth history did not stop with the Silver Panic of 1893 which provided a break in the reliance on the mining industry, thereby encouraging more diverse development of area industries. The focus of activity shifted away from the south end of downtown, toward more open areas in the central portions of the downtown gulch.

Agriculture came to a play a larger role locally and regionally, and state government became a strong presence in Helena. Bursts of building activity through the early 20th century reflect the strong local and state dependence on resource development, and economic vulnerability resulting from swings in national markets for these commodities. This activity also reflects broad social changes in both a local and statewide context – i.e., increased building coinciding with the expansion and promotion of western rail lines, the attendant homesteading influx, and the subsequent deflation of the state economy during the droughts of the 1910's and early 1920's, and the impact of the Great Depression on Helena and Montana. Individual investors continued to erect buildings, but on a more modest scale than the prior decade.

The enactment of the Enlarged Homestead Act in 1907 initiated an economic and population boom throughout Montana. Helena once again enjoyed economic prosperity. The Homestead Boom ended with the American declaration of war against Germany in 1917. Despite high expectations for the Railroad Addition, Helena Avenue never quite became a major thoroughfare. The boom years of the 1910s and the regional depression in the 1920s and into the 1930s saw the declining depot area still supporting many of the same businesses. Throughout the country the Great Depression took its toll on communities, including the depot area, where growth stagnated.

In the years immediately following the 1935 earthquakes, the community sought to rebuild and stabilize itself. Few new construction projects were begun, mostly due to the economic depression that continued to plague the nation. Adding to the depression in this community so dependent on the railroad was the increase in trucking operations that severely diminished the railroad's freight business. The onset of World War II signaled a change in the social and economic demeanor of the community, and the end of the war witnessed a revitalized nation. The agricultural market rebounded, and a new sense of optimism swept the nation. The optimism of the post war era was short lived in the area around the railroad depot, however, and the bottom dropped out of the area's economic base when passenger service to Helena was suspended in 1971.

Architecture

Helena has a rich architectural heritage dating from the first wave of crude mining era buildings through to modern design. Indeed, historical architecture defines the city in many ways. Riches, poverty, individual pride in property and community ethics have worked together to retain much of what was built here.

Residential buildings are among the city's oldest structures, though some early commercial buildings remain. A log cabin dating from 1865 stands at Reeder's Alley (itself an 1870's to 80's

vernacular commercial gem) and represents the few hundred crude huts first constructed along the placer diggings during the first few months of Helena's permanent occupation. Sawn lumber was quickly made available to build small clapboard homes, some of which survive but rapidly accumulating wealth attracted professional builders skilled in design. A series of formal styles populated the "Gulch" and its environs as early as 1868 when a Gothic Revival home on Broadway was built and commercial structures reminiscent of the Mississippi Valley's French colonial traditions appeared, probably transported from Virginia City sources.

In rapid succession came the Victorian group: Italianate, Second Empire, Stick and Eastlake, Chateausque, Romanesque Revival and other romantic variants spread along the ridgeline above downtown during the 1870's and 1880s. These domestic structures were built of stone, brick and frame - locally quarried and hewn. The commercial center was favored by ever more elaborate and soaring Italianate, Renaissance and emerging Queen Anne types, again of local materials. By 1890, several architects were at work in the city producing formal designs of high quality and builder-developer relationships were in play. This period saw the advent of Queen Anne, Richardsonian Romanesque, Colonial Revival and Shingle Style homes as well as a plethora of large commercial blocks, each distinctive and elaborate, freely incorporating historical European elements. This formal architecture had been joined by industrial complexes associated with the mining development as well as breweries, warehouses and other specialized properties.

After 1893 construction fell off dramatically but Helena's high architectural standard still produced quality works. Twentieth century trends appeared in the form of International, Prairie School and Art Deco styles along with the eclectic suburban renditions of Tudor, French Chateau, English Cottage, Mission, Pueblo and other revivals. Nationally known designers such as Cass Gilbert and William Purcell made contributions here; Gilbert's Montana Club, a mini-skyscraper, is notable. Helena's skyline was defined by the stunning Helena Cathedral and Carroll College buildings early on; the Moorish-Arabesque Algeria Shrine Temple arose in 1920.

America's Foursquare, Craftsman, Bungalow and Prairie types also dotted residential areas. Commercial Deco and eclectic examples sprang up downtown as terra cotta, textured brick and other modern materials. Structural systems came of age including Neo-Greek Revival, and Beaux-Arts Classicism, the latter most adeptly represented by the Montana Statehouse and the Horticultural Building at the State Fairgrounds, an area where monumental agricultural structures were concentrated. Two impressive brick railroad depots were also constructed.

Mid-20th century Helena saw the development of outlying suburban development that filled in larger holdings of Victorian isolates at its periphery. 'Strip' commercial areas sprouted along transportation arteries and the rambling Ranch Style assumed domestic command. Smaller specialized business structures were deployed of varying quality and appearance as the community took to the highways. The stylistic contributions of Urban Renewal and renewed economic vitality toward the close of the 20th century were muted displays of the monolithic box.

Post Modern examples took root. A new development in the Great Northern yards contributed some of the late century's best architecture. Elsewhere, morphed by the plasticity of stuccoed insulation construction, commercial buildings became expansive representations of past designs -

a vaguely Italianate prominent among them - and domestic Neo Victorian and Neo Craftsman erupted in the boom period from 1990 into the 21st century. New domestic concepts, sculpted and individualized, appeared, particularly in outlying neighborhoods scattered throughout the surrounding hills, thus continuing Helena's tradition of architectural quality, experimentation and timeliness.

Transportation

Helena was not much more than a fledgling gold camp when an act of Congress granted the Northern Pacific Railroad the quarter-section of land that would one day be known as the "Railroad Addition." The arrival of the railroad in June 1883 sparked an economic boom in Helena by providing markets through the Midwest and Western United States. Almost overnight, the numbers of people and goods flowing into town increased many-fold. Within the decade, the town's population quadrupled to over 13,000. The growth in population included many families, women and children, and created a sharp demand for housing resulting in construction of multiple-family dwellings adjacent to the commercial areas of the city.

The era is characterized by the expansion of the business district on Last Chance Gulch, a drastic increase in the city's population, and a boom in mining and agriculture in the rural areas surrounding Helena. The railroad depot served as the hub of the district, funneling all passengers through it to the commercial area south of the tracks. Businesses established in the depot area revolved around visitors to the capital city, travelers awaiting the next trains, and small business owners and residents who either kept the shops in the district or worked for the railroad.

The depot was an important facility not only because of the numbers passing through it, but also because it offered visitors the first impression of the territorial capital city. The site selected for the depot was then a mile and a half out of town. Helena Avenue had been surveyed and graded, beginning at the upper end of Main Street. Passengers arriving at the depot would be able to look straight ahead to Last Chance Gulch. Soon after the arrival of the first train, a wood-frame depot that included a telegraph office and a baggage room had been completed and later moved a short distance to the west in anticipation of the construction of a more substantial building. Presumably the Panic of 1893 affected these plans.

It wasn't until after the turn of the century that the Northern Pacific went ahead with its plans to construct a new depot for Helena. Just after the turn of the twentieth century, the original wooden depot, one of three designed for the Northern Pacific by the later famous architect Cass Gilbert, was moved to Lyndale Avenue where it stands today as an apartment building. The present Union Station, designed by renowned railroad architect Charles A. Reed, still functions as the center of the district.

Suburban development in Helena was, as it was around the globe, facilitated by mass transportation in the form of streetcar lines beginning in 1886. Horse-drawn first, then steam; then, in 1890, an electrified system operated under a series of private companies vied (inefficiently) for lines and contracts throughout town. "Trolley" lines originated from a large garage located near the present Lewis & Clark Library, ran to the railroad depots and extended through the neighborhoods far to the east and west. The State Nursery, Fort Harrison, and the East Helena smelter were served by the streetcar lines. Given this easy means of commuting,

people built homes farther from downtown, allowing expansive lots and sprawling houses to dot the open countryside. Such mobility freed the population from the rigors, expense and inconvenience of the horse and buggy and allowed greater interaction and commerce. Here as nearly everywhere, the trolley lines ran until gasoline power shouldered streetcars out. Helena decided to abandon its lines in 1927.

In the 1950's Helena's community leaders undertook a major tourism marketing plan centering on local history. Tour guides, promotions, events and displays covered the historic downtown and even Main Street, so named since the earliest days of the city, stepped back in time to become "Last Chance Gulch." A non-profit group, Helena Unlimited, was formed to lead much of the promotional efforts, including the development of a touring tram to drive visitors through the historic areas of town. Known as the Tour Train, this apparatus began service in 1954 and continues to this day as Last Chance Tours, its programs operating regularly scheduled open trams and chartered busses.

The County Courthouse and the State Capitol

On the 5th of July, 1887 in a brief ceremony before the onset of court business, area judges and attorneys dedicated the new Lewis and Clark County Courthouse. Designed by Hodgson, Wallingford and Stem of Minneapolis, it was an impressive Richardsonian Romanesque pile of granite and sandstone noble enough to also serve as the Montana Statehouse for nearly twenty years. It was built overlooking Last Chance Gulch (on lots riddled with underground mines as if to signify the civilizing of a rugged era) and its soaring clock tower dominated the skyline until savaged by the 1935 earthquakes. To this day, the Courthouse is the seat of County justice, respectfully restored and upgraded to modern standards.

The State of Montana was accepted into the Union in 1889, and Helena achieved the status as the permanent state capitol in 1894 after a hotly contested election. Promoters of Helena had extolled the virtues of the community with great pride, including "their" Mount Helena Park.

Although Montana became a state in 1889 and Helena was designated the state capital in 1894 after a corrupt, chaotic political process, it was years before a proper statehouse was built. The 1895 legislature appropriated funds for a million dollar capitol building. That was before the contractors, architects and certain lawmakers were accused of plotting to skim a large portion of that into their own pockets. Disgusted, the following legislature dropped the price to a mere \$350,000 and selected architects Bell and Kent to design a building. The cornerstone was set on July 4th 1899 and the work was completed three years later. The Capitol was soon added onto, and artwork in the addition by Charlie Russell joined that of other accomplished muralists and sculptors gracing the building and its grounds. "Improvements" to the building damaged the interior over the years but a major restoration in the late 20th Century returned much of the Capitol's early grandeur while installing modern systems.

Water

The need for water to wash minerals from the gravels of the gulch took precedence over drinking water, and the supply in the gulch was extremely limited. In 1865 the Yaw Yaw ditch was built from Ten Mile Creek and a new source of water flowed in from the west, around the base of

Mount Helena in an open, wood-stave lined ditch. When placer mining ceased, the Hale reservoir captured water on the east side for distribution to residents. In 1886, the various water systems were purchased and consolidated by the Helena Water Works, a New York based firm. With a push to begin developing the west side, improvements to the Ten Mile supply and construction of the Woolston reservoir #1 began and had a 2.1 million gallon capacity when completed.

In September 1887, the city approved placing 126 fire hydrants and within a year no less than 600 men were employed laying pipe for the new Woolston system which was turned on in April 1888. In 1911, the system, water rights and real property was purchased by the City of Helena. Woolston reservoir #2 was added to the system in 1931, providing an additional 3 million gallons of storage. Both reservoirs hug the ground in a basin between Daisy Hill and Mount Helena, at the eastern side of the park.

Parks

Heleneans appear to have been interested from an early date in parkland designation; areas were mapped on surrounding mountains by 1890 that were to become town parks. The Helena Improvement Society was organized in 1898. In their annual report of 1900, President H.L. Glenn spoke of the achievements for the year and said, “We believe a place the size of Helena, and containing the refinement, intelligence and wealth that our city does, will very soon see the necessity of acquiring parks, improving our streets and generally beautifying the town.” Trees and flowers were planted, school grounds improved, boulevards created, public grounds expanded and parks encouraged.

In 1905, the Helena city council adopted a resolution authorizing the mayor and city clerk to file on 160 acres in what was to become Mount Helena Park. Other tracts of former homestead land were deeded to the city in 1905, and property was added to the park until it reached about 680 acres. The patent was official, and signed by President Roosevelt in October 1907.

Hill and Womens Parks were donated to the city in 1913 as one large parcel that was later divided by the construction of Fuller Avenue in 1918. Hill Park was the first park to be developed in downtown Helena. Mixing conifers and deciduous trees and shrubs, and the creation of open lawn spaces ornamented by statuary, especially fountains, was typical of the period. In 1920 the Daughters of the Confederacy erected a stone fountain in memory of the Confederate soldiers who had died during the Civil War. The fountain was designed by George Carsley, a prolific, early 20th century local architect.

The creation of Beattie Park in 1930 had a profound effect on the overall appearance of the area around the Great Northern Railroad depot, which had by this time become run down and unsightly. This park transformed what had once been a crowded commercial block into a neighborhood gathering place.

Earthquakes

Compounding the impact of the floundering economy, a series of earthquakes struck the city of Helena in October 1935 and had a significant impact. Starting with a small tremor on October 3,

the city suffered through a devastating series of several hundred earthquake shocks in the month of October 1935 including three damaging earthquakes on October 12th, 18th, and the 31st. The first tremors caused relatively little collateral damage to the city, and no injuries were reported. On October 12, the *Helena Independent* reported more extensive damage to buildings. By the 18th of October, when a second major shockwave and aftershocks devastated parts of the city, the newspapers accounts were much more serious, noting the deaths of several people and the devastation to many parts of the city, including the Northern Pacific Depot area and the south-central area. A third major quake on October 31 caused even more damage, especially to those buildings affected by the earlier events. The earthquakes contributed to changes in the appearance of the affected parts of town as some buildings were razed and others simply repaired to maintain their original functions.

Urban Renewal and Model Cities Programs

Infrastructure improvement programs of post-war America culminating in the Great Society of the 1960's, among other things, promised to revive decaying cities and towns. Simply described, this urban renewal methodology was to clear and redevelop exhausted commercial districts. Well funded and specifically targeted, it began extensive changes through the heart of nearly every major city in the nation. Alarmed by this and previous transportation programs that had devastated the character of many localities, the U. S. Conference of Mayors demanded more precise and careful federal planning to reduce wholesale removal of areas that had defined their communities. One result was the National Historic Preservation Act that required due diligence in finding alternatives to the removal of historic structures. It was brought into play when Helena was a successful applicant to the Model Cities program created in 1966 that funneled federal investments into blighted areas. This worked, to some degree, to retain a collection of Helena's fine architecture - but it removed a great deal, too.

Despite continued efforts to create revenue producing commercial activity in Helena, nothing seemed to counter a profound drift toward decay and even abandonment of downtown property. The region's economic malaise, rooted far back in the Silver Panic of 1893, seemed impossible to enliven. The economy and the development underway was moving outward, not reviving the city center. In 1967 city leadership sought the federal programs being offered and a major reversal took place.

Demolition removed 230 buildings; 71 of them were commercial structures. All of the area on which Helena was originally founded was cleared. Significant structures – the Pittsburgh Block, Novelty Block, Merchant's Bank, Marlowe Theater, Homer Block, Bristol Hotel, Electric Block, Curtin Building, Helena Brewery and many more - fell to the revised vision of Last Chance Gulch. Lack of available capital, poor structural condition and a new street layout were among the destructive factors. New structures, parks and parkways took their place. Surviving were the historic Securities Block, Power Block, Boston Block, Iron Front, Bluestone, Atlas Block, Diamond Block and others favored by circumstance, condition and location. In the end, a new downtown, still historically endowed but forever altered, grew with new vigor on the valley floor.

All this was accompanied by a great public debate and a rush to accomplish historical research. Large sections of downtown were listed on the National Register of Historic Places (although the

nomination required alteration after many historic buildings were removed). In retrospect, the historical documentation was incomplete, the attempts at mitigation insufficient and the demolitions cut too deeply into Helena's historical fabric. Had the projects taken place a decade later when concepts of rehabilitation were more mature, more of the old city would probably have survived.

What was done was a product of its time but it is to the credit of the community that as much of historic Helena remains standing today. Without a doubt, the revitalization that was sought was achieved to a great degree. Downtown Helena rebounded from the decline that seemed so resolute and still strives to maintain the spirit of that rebirth through the institutions founded in the flurry of urban renewal. Cooperative marketing through festivals, events and promotions manifest the sense of shared destiny that characterizes the nature of downtown and it is from downtown that much forward-looking initiative is generated.

1970's to Present

The 1970's also saw a new economic boom that resulted in a significant amount of subdivision activity with the platting of new subdivisions along the north and south sides of the city. Numerous Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) were created for the first time. However, energy costs increased and interest rates sky-rocketed; the national economy saw a recession and Helena was not immune from the economic downturn during the 1980's.

Economic prosperity returned in the 1990's and continued in the early 2000's, resulting in annexations and significant residential subdivision activity along the southeast and north sides of the city, extensive commercial development along the city's north and northeast sides, some redevelopment at the north end of downtown, and a new interstate interchange. Helena began as a boom town and has seen a series of cyclical economic changes that continue today with another national recession.