



## DOWNTOWN HELENA'S OLD IRON

Along with locally-quarried stone and locally-made brick, you'll see locally-cast iron as you walk around in Helena's old downtown. You'll see it most often at the street-level fronts of our 19th-century commercial buildings, where it lets stores and other walk-in businesses be as open to the street as the Montana climate will allow. Iron beams resting on skinny cast-iron piers turn the first-story facade into an open frame which can be filled with glass (see page 11 in this series). Upstairs the facades are built of brick and stone.

But then there's the aptly-named Iron Front Building – still the centerpiece of the 400 block. We've drawn its facade here as it looked when it had its original roofline ornament and what appears (in old photographs) to have been its original configuration of storefronts. It's iron from top to bottom – four stories worth, cast at Helena's Stedman foundry and bolted together in 1888. We're not sure of its original color, but one of the nice things about cast-iron is that it can be painted any color. Those old black-and-white photographs suggest a number of possibilities. We chose one we like.

It's Helena's (maybe Montana's) greatest single show of architectural cast-iron. Other 19th-century cities had their cast-iron districts (New York's "SoHo" is probably the best known) full of such facades, but most have been lost. We're lucky here to have kept our single example, a real gem.

If it wasn't called the Iron Front, you might think (at first glance anyway) that it's a masonry facade. Those iron pieces were usually cast to resemble stonework (scarcely less true in Soho than here) and some will insist that they were painted to further mimic stone. It was less a matter  
(over)



of fakery though than of uncertainty about how iron, a material new to such use, ought to look when it shows up on a facade. Designers of Iron Fronts, heir to a masonry tradition, stuck with the good looks they knew (Our Iron Front was designed by the local firm of Heinlein and Mathais, who also designed the Masonic building on Broadway and Temple Emanuel on Ewing).

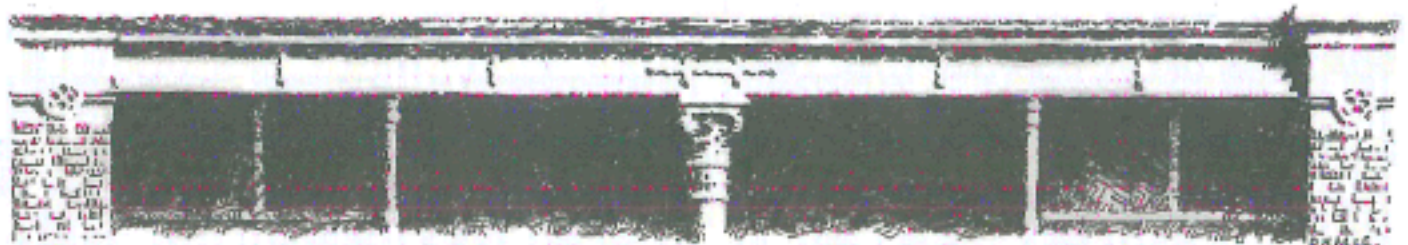
Iron was quick to suggest a look of its own however, evident in downtown Helena wherever it shows up as a horizontal beam spanning one of those open, glassy storefronts, a job for which it was particularly well suited and which began to set it apart from references to masonry tradition.

Cast-iron piers supporting the beam still almost always expressed, in one way or another, the traditional three-part division of a column -- base, shaft, capital -- even though they were skinny and usually flat-sided and weren't really pretending to be masonry anymore (they just wanted to look good, like the ones on the Iron Front building) -- but, that long horizontal beam overhead didn't have such a time-proven look to draw upon, so it just looked like a plain iron beam.

That was perfectly fine for designers who liked how the beam solved, once and for all, the problem of opening a storefront to the street, and who had always tried to show how their facades were pieced together. So, they were glad to show the beam up there plainly and honestly doing its job, bolts and all.

Those bolts in fact, with their associated structural metal-work, were often made to draw attention to themselves, resulting in some interesting, one-of-a-kind, visual mixes. The Parchen Building on Broadway (drawn at left and below) is a fine example. That iron pier with its classical capital holds the ends of two long beams tied together (visually at least) by a bit of iron strap that appears as decorative as it is functional. Then there are the beams at the Dunphy Block on the south mall (drawn above) whose entirely functional bolts are made obvious by behaving also as flower-like decorations. Something similar happens at the Harvard Block (right) up on the corner of Sixth and Warren.

It happens all over downtown. It's the charm of those old facades that they make such a show of how they're put together and what they're made of. Along with all that beautiful brick and stone, it's fun to look for the iron -- up close at a walking pace, as it was meant to be looked for.



## The Sesquicentennial Project

2014 will be Helena's sesquicentennial year, its 150th year. How'll we mark it? The best way, we think, is to celebrate what's authentically peculiar to our town -- to sharpen our sense of place.

We won't define "sense of place", beyond saying that it acts much like a sense of humor. Either you "get" a place or you don't. If you get it, it's engaging and invigorating and good for the imagination. You'll want to savor it.

We get Helena, so, from now to the sesquicentennial, we'll publish these free bits of information, one page at a time, about Helena's architecture, landscape, weather, history, whatever tickles our sense of place.

Look for these pages. Pick them up. We can't say how many there'll be, but we'll number them. Keep them and you'll build a trove of well-mulled Helena lore.