

HELENA in 1864

This map shows Helena as it was when it was first called "Helena" -- at the very end of October and beginning of November in 1864.

We started with a sketch probably drawn by George J. Wood, who, at the time, was about to run the town's first survey of streets and lots. We found more information in old photographs and written comments, and we followed hints in the present landscape. Then we put it all on a topographic base adapted from the City's pre-urban-renewal "orthophoto" of the area. We're reasonably confident that we got it right.

To get your bearings, look to where the brown lines (trails) cross the blue line (Last Chance Creek). That crossing is just outside the southeast corner of the present public library building, where you meet Pioneer Park as you walk south on the mall. In the autumn of 1864 there was a log bridge across the creek there -- Helena's first bit of public infrastructure -- and though there's no longer any sign of that bridge in photographs taken in 1865 or 1866 (and little sign of the creek), the east-west trail shown here had become "Bridge Street" in Wood's survey. Bridge Street became "State" Street when Montana joined the union in 1889, and if the west end of State Street hadn't been lopped off for urban renewal around 1970, it would run along the south wall of the library.

The north-south trail crossing the creek was named "Main Street" in the survey, and the part of it north of the bridge is still where it was in 1864. It's now the mall between the library and Anchor Park. The part south of the bridge was "West Main" because it had crossed to the west side of the creek. West Main became the road to Unionville, and so it remained until urban renewal -- the only change being that its intersection with State (Bridge) Street had been offset farther west when the nucleus of Pioneer Park was established after 1935.

The trail dropping in from the north, west of the creek, was the local end of a trail that ran toward Silver City and the Mullan Road and ultimately to Fort Benton. It was the "Benton Trail", the camp's lifeline. The local end became "Clore Street". The stretch of Clore north of its "T" intersection with Bridge (State) is now part of the much-wider Park Avenue right-of-way, but the stretch to the south is still there at its original narrow width, running from the "Pioneer Cabin" south past Reeder's Alley (though sharing the name "Park" with the highway-like street now running parallel below it).

The other bits of trail shown on our map are guesswork. There must have been a trail running south, east of the creek, toward the spring at the foot of Acropolis Hill which seems to have been the camp's most reliable source of pure drinking water (Wood was to place "Water Street" there); and the Bridge Street trail ran uphill toward Dry Gulch and connections to the Prickly Pear diggings and the Big Belt country and other points east. It was also the route by which alluvium from Dry Gulch was hauled over to Last Chance to be washed for gold. There was seldom much water in Dry Gulch, but there was gold enough to justify lugging part of the landscape over the hill.

Wood's "Main Street" got that name because it's where most of the cabins (little orange rectangles) were being built at the time he made his sketch. They were going up fast. A visitor in September is said to have found only one building here, an insubstantial shack built by the "Four Georgians" (we think it's the smallest of the three shown west of Main). By the end of October though, the arrival of chilly weather and increasing faith in the placer field (that gray smudge
(over)



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running downstream from the bridge) had touched off Helena's first building boom. Wood's sketch caught the start of the boom -- that string of cabins east of Main along what is now the west edge of Anchor Park -- but by the time he finished his survey four months later there were at least a hundred more cabins here, most of them on his new lots south of Bridge. He barely kept ahead of the builders.

That little yellow spot which looks like a bug on our map, just west of the creek (and near the west end of the present Colwell Building), is the probable site of the Four Georgians' placer gold strike on July 14th, 1864, which gave the camp its reason to exist. More digging, upstream and down, proved the extent of the best paydirt. It's said that the bits of gold were coarsest at the south end of the smudge, just north of the crossing and under the present Library, and that they got steadily finer northward (see page 8 in this series, for our guess why). It's said also that there was relatively little gold south of the crossing, and that this is where the dirt hauled over from Dry Gulch was washed.

All of that digging drastically changed the gulch-bottom topography long before anybody got around to mapping its contours, and aside from guessing the likely 1864 location of the creek channel, we made no attempt to reconstruct the pre-smudge lay of the land. Our contour lines are drawn from a map made just before urban renewal, after a century of digging, cutting, filling, building and rebuilding.

Urban renewal was about to add a few drastic changes of its own. Our map shows the tapering west end of Fire Tower Hill before it was cut off to make space for Cruse Avenue, which, like South Park, is much too highway-like for its context. The missing terrain seems to have been pushed south, and a slice of Acropolis Hill pushed north, to make a platform which carries Cruse and its connectors over what had been a small-scaled and closely-built neighborhood.

The gulch bottom's pre-1864 vegetation was as quickly and thoroughly disrupted as its topography, but we can probably assume that the same mix of deciduous trees and shrubs that still grow along the bottoms of Oro Fino and Grizzly Gulches and in the "canyon" of Last

Chance Gulch (see page 18) kept lining the creek northward well past the top edge of our map -- and there's reason to think that there were pines growing down there as well (They're mentioned, for example, in at least one old account).

Any pre-existing trees or shrubs along the creek north of the canyon would almost certainly have vanished before the end of 1864, but along lower Dry Gulch a few survived long enough to be photographed -- among them our notorious "hangman's tree" a rather handsome old Ponderosa Pine with a trunk diameter of at least three feet, as estimated about five feet from the ground. It stood a bit southwest of the present intersection of Hillsdale and Blake Streets.

Also standing long enough to show up in photographs were pines scattered on Quarry Hill and northward along the divide between Last Chance and Dry Gulches -- and then we have a hint left by George Wood himself. He gave practical, site-referential, names to some of his streets -- Bridge Street, Water Street -- and the surviving piece of his most southerly east-west route, at the foot of Acropolis Hill, is still called "Pine Street".

In any case, the wild pines and Douglas-firs on our hills have a story to tell, and we'll give them a page or two of their own, later in this series.

Ponderosa Pine,
Mount Helena
Park



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.