



BONNER MILLTOWN HISTORY CENTER AND MUSEUM

“Keeping our local area and timber heritage alive for the enjoyment and education of the public.”

Photo: The Black Bridge, community icon, turned 100 on Nov. 9, 2021. The story of its resurrection from a decaying, river-unfriendly structure to an award-winning hybrid bridge is found on page 4. Photo courtesy of the Bonner Milltown Community Council.

We dedicate our 2021 newsletter to the memory of Jimmie Willis, one of the founding fathers of the Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum. A more complete story is on our website: www.bonnermilltownhistory.org. Post your own memories and tributes on the Bonner Milltown History Center Facebook page. We miss you, Jimmie.



Jimmie Willis

The Jimmie stories flowed fast and free at the December 2021 meeting of the Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum, and again at Jimmie’s famous coffee “hour” the following Tuesday. They provided some of the most moving conversations we’ve had at the History Center.

at the end. Jimmie graduated from Bonner School in 1947, part of Elmi Kuney’s eighth-grade class that produced a colorful wood-bound history book of Montana. The class presented it to county superintendent Winnafern Moore, who said it was “proof that Montana children are receiving sound teaching in the history of their state along lines that give them a keen and patriotic interest in its character and development.”

The lessons stuck with Jimmie beyond his career of more than 40 years in the shipping department at the Bonner mill. He helped start and curate our History Center and Museum and he became our hometown connection and our institutional memory. It was his vision to launch the ever-popular Tuesday coffee gatherings. His death was a blow to this community, to his legion of friends and family, and to fresh-cookie lovers everywhere. Simply put Jimmie, as a sharer of Bonner-Milltown history and culture, was irreplaceable. *Continues on page 6*

We lost Jimmie Willis last May. He was at St. Patrick Hospital but his heart was always in the Bonner and Milltown area. He was born in a log cabin in Milltown on Nov. 24, 1930. He didn’t have a birth certificate until he applied for one when he retired from the mill. He chose his own first name, complete with the “ie” at

Tuesday morning coffee by Andy Lukes

Every Tuesday morning from 9:00 to 12:00 at the Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum you are invited to enjoy coffee and conversations and view various artifacts of Bonner’s colorful history. The BMHCM is located in the Bonner Post Office building which makes it a convenient stop for those interested in learning more about both the past and present Bonner community.

Drop by for a few minutes or stay longer to learn

about the 26 businesses that now occupy the old Bonner mill site. Each Tuesday’s coffee is hosted by a volunteer resident or a person with strong ties to the community. When you walk through the door on Tuesday, your questions are the priority of those 6 to 8 persons who regularly attend. Those regulars are proud of the various contributions of the Bonner community and enjoy sharing those experiences over a cup of coffee.



Roundtables return after COVID delay

On a mid-March day in 2020, the chairman of the St. Ann's Better-Than-Butte Pasty Dinner and we reached a decision: we should postpone our scheduled Roundtable and dinner in case this COVID situation gets really serious. 686 days later we're happy to announce that Roundtables will resume on January 17, 2022. Oh, that's unless this Omicron situation gets really serious.

The 2022 program lineup

January 16: UM history professor Leif Fredrickson and students. "The Mullan Monuments: History and Memory." 2-4 pm, KettleHouse Taproom, 605 Cold Smoke Ave., Bonner MT.

In 1916, historians and boosters began erecting statues of John Mullan across Montana. More than 50 years earlier, Lieutenant Mullan and his men spent four years building a military wagon road across the Rocky Mountains, connecting the heads of navigation on the Missouri and Columbia rivers. The road became an important trade route for burgeoning gold camps and trade towns in the inland Northwest. Missoula was one of those towns, and it became the first place to erect a monument to Mullan in October 1916. Thirteen more followed in Montana and Idaho, including one at the mouth of the Blackfoot River in October 1917. The statues were funded by some of the states' most powerful men and their unveiling attracted considerable media attention. The statues reflected a desire to remember an individual who had shaped a region. But they also had much broader meanings, reflecting ideas about race and anxieties about a rapidly industrializing society.

February 20: District Judge and longtime resident Dusty Deschamps. "The history of Marshall Grade, Bandmann Flat, and the Deschamps family in Missoula." 2-4 pm, KettleHouse Taproom, 605 Cold Smoke Ave., Bonner MT.

District Judge Robert L. "Dusty" Deschamps was a small boy in 1945 when his family moved to the Thomas ranch near the bottom of Brickyard Hill. At one time the Deschamps ranch covered all of Bandmann Flat up to the Milltown Dam Overlook, and from Brickyard Hill to the top of Mount Jumbo to Marshall Canyon. Dusty has lived and ranched there ever since and his stories of the history and memories of growing up in the area will fascinate you.

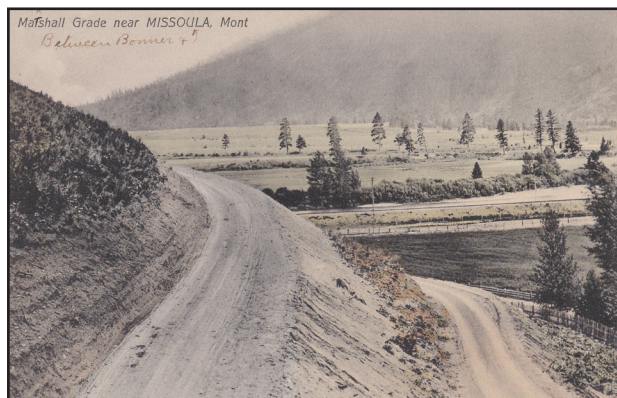
March 20: Mary Mulroney Pitch. "The Hammond-McLeod Family Tree." 2 pm, St. Ann Catholic Church, 9015 MT State Highway 200 E, Bonner MT.

Mary Pitch of Helena grew up in Missoula. She's a grand-daughter of Walter McLeod, the successor to his father Herbert's presidency of the Missoula Mercantile. Mary will trace her family tree to, among others, the Hammond brothers, who started and managed the first lumber mill in Bonner in the late 1800s. She has fond memories of her aunt, Georgina Fenwick, who shortly before she died in 1976 wrote a glowing account of her childhood in Bonner in those years for *A Grass Roots Tribute: The Story of Bonner, Montana*. Followed by the annual Better-Than-Butte Pasty Dinner.

And this year an Encore Roundtable!

April 10: Millowners Mike Heisey, Steve Nelson and/or Mike Boehme give an update on developments at the mill and the new ownership of the houses. 2-4 pm, KettleHouse Taproom, 605 Cold Smoke Ave., Bonner MT.

Since acquiring the shuttered Bonner Mill in 2011, the new owners have revitalized it into a thriving business community. Learn about progress made since our last update in the Roundtable presentation "The New Mill" in January 2016 and an update on the historic sale of the Bonner houses to private owners. Visit our website www.bonnermilltownhistory.org and click the link Roundtables to view "The New Mill."



Bruce Doehring provided a copy of this postcard of Marshall Grade in 1907. Be sure to attend the February Roundtable when Dusty Deschamps delves into the history of this important landmark and the surrounding area.

Bonner Junction sign donated by Taylors by Kim Briggeman

We received a special visit and gift on Friday, Dec. 3, from railroad history gurus Bill and Jan Taylor of Missoula. They presented us with a 9-foot “Bonner Junction” sign that stood for decades on the south side of the Milltown Reservoir on the Milwaukee Road where its Blackfoot branch began in 1911.

Bill: “A wye track came across what you call the Duck Bridge, and then up the valley. They had plans at one time to build all the way to Great Falls and never did, but it was used throughout its career by the mill and the ACM logging operations.” The Blackfoot branch operated until 1972, when Anaconda Forest Products sold out to U.S. Plywood/Champion International. The Milwaukee quit operations on its mainline in March 1980 and turned over the signs along its route to a scrapping company.

Thanks to the Taylors for the donation, and thanks to our own Dennis Sain for facilitating the sign exchange. It will occupy a place of honor above the front door in the History Center.



The Bonner Junction sign was located at the wye track that crossed the Clark Fork at the “Duck Bridge” and continued up the Blackfoot Valley crossing the Blackfoot at the north end of the mill. Photo Bill Taylor

New ownership for the “B Hill” by Minie Smith

Recently the property on Bonner Mountain that hosts the “B” and the mill’s water tower for fire suppression, once owned by Plum Creek and most recently owned by The Nature Conservancy, has changed hands once again. The ownership has passed to the owners of the mill, Bonner Property Development, LLC. It comes with a conservation easement held by Five Valleys Land Trust to protect the public access to the area. Many local people use the area for walking and there are excellent views of the Milltown State Park.



Dennis Sain and Bill and Jan Taylor display the Bonner Junction sign that Taylors recently donated. Photo: Judy Matson

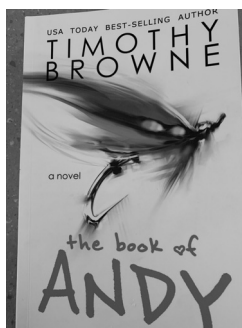
The Book of Andy features local setting

By Kim Briggeman

Author Timothy Browne came home for his fifth novel, setting it in the Bonner, Blackfoot, and Missoula areas with some help and advice from the Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum. Browne is a Bonner School and Missoula Sentinel graduate (1977) whose first career as an orthopedic surgeon and medical missionary took him and his family around the world. *The Book of Andy*, released July 31, 2021, came on the heels of his four-book Dr. Nicklaus Hart Series and preceded *Larimer Street*, which came out in early December.

Filled with imaginative scenes and plot twists, *The Book of Andy* presents the first-person story of Andy Strobel, a loner who works for a company in “Riverside” that pumps out septic tanks. A heroic rescue from the Clark Fork River near Marshall Canyon changes his life. In one memorable instance Oprah Winfrey and her camera crew visit Andy’s single-wide trailer by the tracks in Milltown. In another he finds a 22-pound (!) gold nugget near Johnsrud Park.

In Tim Browne’s words: “*The Book of Andy* is for everyone who feels that life has beat them down . . . for anyone who prays for a breakthrough. Fans of *Walter Mitty*, *A River Runs Through It*, and *Forrest Gump* will enjoy this humorous family saga of finding faith, love, and contentment.”



The Book of Andy is available online or at the Bonner Milltown History Center in Bonner for a donation to the History Center of \$20. Also in stock at the History Center is *A Grass Roots Tribute: The Story of Bonner, Montana*.



Milltown's "Black Bridge" reaches 100 by Kim Briggeman and Judy Matson

The new bridge across the Blackfoot river at Milltown is now open to traffic, according to an announcement yesterday by the county commissioners. The old bridge was closed last February and a detour was made necessary. Another bridge several hundred feet north of the present structure was used. ... Work on the bridge is not quite finished, but it has reached a stage where traffic may be resumed. – The Missoulian, Nov. 10, 1921

We drove it, we strolled it, we biked it and jogged it. Some jumped and even dived from its sides. But few thought of the Black Bridge of Milltown as a community treasure until we almost lost it.

November was a milestone month for the county bridge over the Blackfoot River, these days the uppermost of five in the bottom half-mile. With little fanfare, the steel two-span bridge was opened on Nov. 9, 1921, to the Model T's and International Harvester Speed Trucks of the day. It replaced a failing wooden three-span built 14 years earlier to accommodate the filling reservoir behind W.A. Clark's hydroelectric dam.

More than eight decades later, on Nov. 3, 2008, dignitaries including Gov. Brian Schweitzer and U.S. Senators Max Baucus and Jon Tester gathered with community members to mark the "re-birth" of the bridge and dedicate it to the youth of the area. By then it was for foot traffic only. A local grassroots effort led by a group calling itself the SOBs, for Save Our Bridge, had convinced Missoula County to find an innovative way to do just that: remove the piers from the original bridge and from the old two-span from midstream but restore the iconic end sections to make it a single span. Leading the first walk across that day were the SOBs, followed by Bonner School eighth graders.

Come hell or high water, the old lady was good to go for another hundred years.

A bridge is born

A century ago a steel bridge was a welcome necessity for travelers who'd spent most of 1921 navigating the rough approaches to a detour bridge. The new span replaced its "rather fragile" predecessor through which the county's 15-ton tractor had broken in April 1919, blocking the Yellowstone Trail to and from Missoula for 10 days.

On the last day of 1920 Missoula County commissioners awarded the Security Bridge Co. of Billings a \$100,000 contract to build a replacement. Work began in February. The new bridge consisted of two 166½-foot steel spans with concrete flooring on concrete piers. It required some 225 tons of structural and reinforcing steel, along with 40-foot concrete approaches.

The project soon ran into issues. In mid-February, three prominent men from the Blackfoot Valley appeared before county commissioners Charles Prescott, G.F. Peterson, and Fred Watson to protest what they called the closing of the road between Missoula and Bonner. Charles Jakways of Ovando, Blackfoot stage driver Robert Phelps, and Potomac rancher Albert Hall complained that Security Bridge had failed to build and maintain adequate access roads to the detour bridge to the north.

Little is known about Phelps, the stage driver whose work depended on getting to Missoula. Albert Hall's Montana roots dated back to the 1880s when he arrived from New Brunswick and helped drive down some of the first batches of logs for the Big Blackfoot Milling Company. By 1890, when he married Ida McDonald in Potomac, he was a well-known rancher, and his descendants remain deeply entrenched in the Potomac Valley.

Jakways played a largely overlooked role in the development of this part of Montana. According to his obituary in 1927, he opened the Bonner station of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1886, part of which still stands. Jakways later moved to Ovando where he ranched, opened a mercantile, and engaged in the growing business of telephones. In 1904, using fenceposts and trees, he and partners strung line from Ovando to Drummond as the Big Blackfoot Telephone Company, the main telephone provider in the area today. When Joseph Dixon of Missoula took his seat as governor of Montana in 1921, he appointed Jakways state game warden two months after Jakways lodged his complaint about the county bridge at Milltown.

"It is extremely dangerous to attempt to drive an automobile over the road to Bonner," the Blackfoot contingent told county commissioners. The *Missoulian* agreed, pointing out this was the main tourist highway in Montana and "must be kept in shape for travel." Commissioners said the matter was in the hands of the Bureau of Public Roads and the State Highway Commission but agreed the Security Bridge Co. should make the road passable.

"At the present time it is said that the detour is deep with mud and filled with boulders," the newspaper reported a week

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The Black Bridge was built on the Yellowstone Trail in 1921 to replace a wooden one damaged in the 1908 flood. Closed to motorized traffic in 1978, its end appeared near in 2005 because of its decayed condition and piers in the Blackfoot River.

Donated items 2020-2021 compiled by Minie Smith

Since 2020 a number of items have been donated to the History Center, for which we are grateful. Most recently, the Bonner Junction sign from **Bill and Jan Taylor** (see story page 3) and a collection of Odd Fellow materials from **Chuck Teague** who grew up in Piltzville.



Chuck's grandfather, Paul Teague, was the Grand Master of the IOOF lodge in Bonner in 1911. He moved from Missouri to work for the Big Blackfoot Milling and Lumber Co. He later worked as the janitor at Bonner School. The IOOF lodge was located in the Bonner Hall at the north end of Bonner. The building also housed Bonner's first school in 1889 and later the Blackfoot Fire Protective Association, among other things.

We also received a wooden box of wonderful information and pictures from the **Ranta** family of Bonner through their friends **Elaine and Leo Nagle**. Kim Briggeman kindly inventoried the box which contained old photos of Bonner and Milltown, Anaconda memorabilia including a list of Anaconda employees from 1912-1960, a Finnish calendar from 1940, and copies of the Bonner School "Whirlpool" of 1928 with an article by Emil Petaja, a Bonner School graduate who became a prolific science fiction writer and contemporary of Ray Bradbury in San Francisco. Emil wrote the tribute to Hazel Karkanen for *Readers Digest* in 1979.

There were numerous engineering booklets belonging to Oliver Lord, who was married to Peggy Ranta's mother, and who worked for the Anaconda Company in the 1930s. The donation also included a labeled, framed 44" McKay photo of the mill in 1918 (which is really neat!).

In addition, Elaine Nagle donated a collection of articles, "Recollections of Teaching" collected by the Western Montana Retired Teachers Association and largely about the Blackfoot and Bonner in 1989 as a Centennial Project.

Trudy Mizner donated three lumber/logging books by Ralph Andrews: *Glory Days of Logging*, *Timber!*, and *This was Logging!* **Bill Taylor** donated a collection of papers and articles relating to the Shay-type Willamette #5 and Jack Hoover of Great Falls. The Shay-type Willamette #7 is being restored at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula (see article below). Both engines were part of the ACM logging operation in the Blackfoot.

Helen Steele, Fred Guenzler's daughter, donated a program

Items sought for restoration of engine #7 by Larry Ingold

We are on a quest for several items missing from # 7. We need the *Air Brake Gauges*, there are two of them. The next is the *Steam Gauge*, which would have been a 400 LB gauge and most likely said "Willamette" on the face. The other *Builders Plate* may also be out there somewhere.

which accompanied his funeral service last September 25 in Florence. Fred had worked first for the Anaconda Company as a log truck driver in the Blackfoot. He then operated heavy equipment for ACM in Western Montana and Idaho for ACM for 21 years, later buying his own equipment from Champion and maintaining roads for Plum Creek and the Forest Service until he retired at age 80. He died in August just after his 92nd birthday.

And from **Dennis Sain**, a copy of the *Railroad Telegrapher*, June 1962. The cover shows a Great Northern train shuttling a Shay-type Willamette engine (#5) to Great Falls. An accompanying publication of the Great Northern Railroad, *The Goat*, gives more details of that engine, then owned by Jack Hoover of Great Falls, including its projected life on the ranch of another collector Mr. Mehmke. Dennis also donated a copy of *Forest History* which has on the cover engine #5 when it was working for ACM. It includes correspondence from the editor to Mr. Hoover regarding this engine. In addition, Dennis donated a February 1986 copy of the *Montana Champion* which details the closing of the mill at Frenchtown.

Dennis also brought in copies of an article by Robert Dundas in *Tall Timber Short Lines* (Summer 2005) on the Heron Lumber Company which operated on the Flathead Indian Reservation in the 1920s. The multiple copies of the article are a donation from the Northern Pacific Railroad Historical Association which held its meeting in Missoula in September 2021 (see story page 7). **Minie Smith** also donated a copy of the *Mainstreeter*, the publication of the NPRHA. The issue has numerous articles on Missoula and Bonner.

Glenn Max Smith brought in two framed color photos of the ACM ambulance at the Bonner Mill, made available by **Bill and Jean Walker, Bill Hillard**, and **Murry Elliot**. It was a ca. 1936 Ford truck.

From the **Home Waters project**, two books for the Center: *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* by Norman Maclean and *Home Waters* by his son John Maclean (see story page 8). Another book, *The Book of Andy* by Timothy Browne was donated by the author (see story page 3). **Dick Black** donated a copy of Bob Bateman's book *The Big Blackfoot Railway*.

Lee Legreid donated photocopies of ads from various lumber magazines from 1919 and 1949, and a page from the *Timberman* of 1919 which details the 1919 lumber cut in Idaho and Montana.



We're always on the lookout for *photos of # 7*, which, even in the background, can help show details. Any *paper records of use or work on the locomotive* are helpful.

Folks can contact me at Anacondalumber.7@gmail.com



Memories of Jimmie compiled by Kim Briggeman

“He had the ability in all his interactions to make people feel comfortable, and he had the ability of listening and actually thinking about what other people were saying, which is a really unique thing to have in a person,” Andy Lukes said.

Tuesday coffees were an example of that.

“Really, he did more listening than talking,” Andy said. “He



Hal Padden, Rick Swanson, Andy Lukes, Robert Dunlop, Dick Anthony, Rick Fred Beyer, Glenn “Hooligan” Smith, and Lou Kamrud shared memories of Jimmie at a recent Tuesday morning coffee session.

was interested in people, interested in the subjects that they had.”

Hanging with Jimmie

Rick Swanson was also a Milltown boy, a year ahead of Jimmie in school. In high school they rode the bus to and from Missoula, then walked to Grizzly games.

“We enjoyed that ‘cause in the fall, you know, all the different leaves and colors and everything,” Rick said.

After high school it wasn’t unusual for Jimmie and Rick to travel to places like the Lewis and Clark Caverns, Glacier and Yellowstone parks, or go camping up Rock Creek. “We were always together,” said Rick.

In fact, the two men met their future wives while cruising the drag in Missoula.

Both men spent time in the service, Jimmie in the U.S. Army where he was stationed in Berlin, Germany. By 1959, Jimmie was 28 and working at the mill when he dropped out of Rick’s sight. When Rick returned from the service, Jimmie was married to Karen Elstone, a union that lasted 47 years until Karen’s death in 2006. They’d been to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where her parents lived at the time.

“That’s where they went and got married,” Rick said. “I didn’t even know it.”

Jimmie and Karen raised their boys Scott and Randy in the fifth house past the post office/history center in Bonner, what locals still call the old Peterson house. Jimmie said it was a wonderful place to raise kids, but if you set a glass of water on the nightstand in the winter you’d find it frozen the next morning.

A tradition begins

Even as removal and cleanup of the Milltown Dam neared in 2007, Stimson Lumber Co. began closing down the Bonner mill and houses after more than 120 years of operation. Judy Matson and Minie Smith, who met while members of the History and Culture advisory committee of the Milltown Superfund Redevelopment Working Group, realized the urgency of preserving Bonner’s story.

“Minie and I were willing to help but we were not from here, so we didn’t have the history,” Judy said. “Jimmie was really our first contact. He would always say, ‘Oh, I don’t really know,’ and then he’d start telling you all these wonderful things.”

Jimmie contacted others with mill and Bonner connections to form what became the Bonner Milltown History Center committee. The first History Roundtable, “Working at the Mill,” was held at St. Ann Catholic Church on Jan. 25, 2009. It was one of three held that winter and the concept caught on. It continues today, though interrupted in 2020 and 2021 by the COVID pandemic. The first Roundtable since then is scheduled for Jan. 16, 2022 (see the lineup page 2). It will be the 33rd all told and, sadly, the first one without Jimmie.

He was one of the first ones there in November 2009 when the History Center moved into its home in the Bonner post office building. Jimmie started the Tuesday morning coffee



Jimmie patiently teaches the fine art of dialing a rotary telephone to a Bonner School first grader.

gatherings and made them his own. His homemade cookies and the priceless banter of former mill and woods workers drew crowds that didn’t always fit comfortably into the small space. It was Jimmie’s idea to host Christmas parties which featured his cookies and lots of reminiscences.

“He was always looking for ways to bring people in,” Judy said. “And I’m tearing up just thinking about him.”

Continues on page 7

Jimmie, continued from page 6

His legacy lives on. In the months since Jimmie's death, Andy Lukes and other volunteers have kept the Tuesday morning gatherings going, and they remain the History Center's most popular and maybe its most important feature.

Thanks for the memories

Even as he approached his 90th year Jimmie had a knack for remembering and generously sharing details that took you back to early days in Milltown, Bonner, and Missoula.

"He had a memory that wouldn't quit," Glenn (Max) Smith said.

It was Jimmie who told us of the circus or carnival that came to Milltown when he was young. It set up across the Northern Pacific tracks where the community garden and blue water tower are today. That was on the road to the dump, where people in days of yore disposed of their garbage by throwing it down the bank of a channel in the reservoir.

In later years, Jimmie and other retirees in a group that called itself the Piltzville Walkers were at the forefront of a Save Our Bridge movement. Its success, with the blessing of Missoula County and some innovative engineering, kept the Black Bridge across the Blackfoot River at Milltown from extinction (see story page 4).

We all recall Jim's role and patience at the Bonner first-graders' history walks. He greeted the 6-year-olds at the History Center or the lobby of the post office next door, and showed them one by one the foreign motion of dialing a rotary phone. In the most recent walk, before COVID shut down the history walks and History Center, he devised a way to connect the phones so kids could make actual calls to someone outside the post office.

Happiest Birthday, Jimmie

Jimmie was a social man and after he lost Karen to cancer in February 2006 he found various ways to keep busy. If it wasn't with the History Center, it was with the Hellgate Lions Club, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, in his own well-kept yard, with his boys Scott and Randy and their families, or as a vocal fan of the Montana Grizzlies football and basketball teams. COVID in 2020 shut down most of those activities and probably affected

Jimmie more than most. As his 90th birthday approached, Tuesday morning coffee regulars such as Bob Starr and Dick Anthony hatched a plan to throw Jimmie a surprise party, and social distancing would be observed.

On Nov. 24, cars and trucks carrying some 40 well-wishers gathered around the corner from the Willis home in Bonner Pines. At the designated time they paraded in a line down the street in front of his house, honking and waving and catching Jimmie by total surprise. When Glenn Smith arrived he didn't see the others around the corner and thought he'd missed the party. He pulled up across the street from the house and Jimmie came out.



A surprised Jimmie at a drive-by party for his 90th birthday.

"What in the devil are you doing parked here?" he asked. Max sputtered out an answer but was rescued by the arrival of the noisy procession.

"Then he realized what was going on," Glenn said. "My personal thoughts on that are, we were in the middle of COVID and to wish a guy happy birthday under those conditions like we did, I think was pretty impressive."

It had to be one of the more extraordinary birthday parties in Bonner history and there were few dry eyes in the crowd. Jimmie, of course, invited them all inside but they had to decline.

"Everybody who came had a mask on, and I got so excited I forgot to put on my mask," he told Judy Matson later.

Judy, who could stay for only a short time, talked to Jimmie afterward.

"You know how genuine Jimmie was," she said. "He told me, 'You know, that was one of the nicest things people have ever done for me.'"

"In a long life of memories it was, I think, one that would stand out."



Northern Pacific Railway Historical Assoc (NPRHA) train convention by Dennis Sain

Just over 200 people attended the 36th annual convention of Northern Pacific train enthusiasts. The NP Railroad line ran from Minnesota to the West Coast along the northern states. The convention, hosted by Missoula's own Bill and Jan Taylor, authors of many Montana train books, was held at the Missoula Holiday Inn on September 21-25. The convention was in conjunction with the Missoula Model Railroad Club's annual train show/swap meet held the following Sunday, September 26.

The five-day NP convention featured many informative reports on local Montana train interests including a report by

BMHCM's own Dennis Sain, who told of the Anaconda Copper & Mining (ACM) logging railroads in Western Montana. Larry Ingold, head of restoration on the Bonner Mill's #7 Willamette Shay-type locomotive, spoke about the historic locomotive that was featured in the movie *Timberjack*.

Montana Rail Link (MRL) presented a video presentation of its railroad achievements. On-site tours were held at the NP Depot and car shops, the 4-6-0 steam locomotive, and outdoor displays including #7 at the Historical Museum at Fort Missoula.





Keeping great memories alive

Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Hooligan – mixed with reality

By Glenn "Hooligan" Smith

A f t e r
122 years
of operation
the grand
old Bonner
s a w m i l l
c o m p l e x
c e a s e d
o p e r a t i o n s

knock on the back door leading into the kitchen area of the Hotel Margaret. Mrs. Koch, a cranky cook and baker there, made the biggest chocolate chip cookies ever, but had zero tolerance towards panhandlers and other freeloaders. Whenever she saw a group of juvenile freeloaders at the back door she would grasp a broom and swing it at them like a baseball batter. Her husband Henry was just the opposite and would share those delightful cookies with us, making the fearsome broom encounter worth the risk.

and gently slipped into history on Wednesday, May 21, 2006. Four generations of mill workers worked here and raised their families, generating countless memories. It was a place where most employees believed in an “Honest Day’s Work for an Honest Day’s Pay.”

Our childhood memories together with countless other memories from Bonner and surrounding areas must never be forgotten. Thanks to the efforts of two amazing ladies and our entire team of BMHCM members, this goal is being met.

My first introduction to this huge lumber mill with rows of meticulously maintained employee houses came in the spring of 1950. My family moved here from Deer Lodge, Montana, at the request of the Milwaukee Railroad. My stepdad would maintain the 2-8-0 oil-fired class “C” locomotive at the maintenance facilities located just east of Bonner between the Hwy 200 railroad crossing and the now removed railroad bridge DD-302.

Another amazing member was Jimmie Willis, who wanted to host a coffee day on Tuesdays where retired mill and forestry workers could gather and share their stories surrounded by the lumberjack memorabilia at the History Center. A delightful part of these gatherings is the vast assortments of cookies, cakes, and other culinary delights made from old country recipes. Lefsa and smoked fish together with Swedish potato sausages have also charmed our appetites.

Harry S. Truman, current, and Dwight David Eisenhower, newly elected, were Presidents of the United States and Mr. H. F. (Jack) Root was manager of the Anaconda Company’s Bonner Lumber Operations when I met Bill Walker, my friend of more than 70 years.

Today as the year-end holidays draw closer, it is my desire to bring Old Country Norwegian rosette cookies to one of our coffee meetings. My wife Sharon and I lost her recipe for these rosettes so we stopped at the History Center and explained our dilemma to Minie and Judy. They immediately looked into their collection of Scandinavian recipes and found exactly what we were looking for.

Together we set out to discover why our elders lived and socialized the way they did. First of all we wanted to know why a few men dressed up in their finest suits and gathered in the local taverns to drink whiskey. To us, whiskey must be a delightful elixir with indescribable taste. Our curiosity led us to a hidden stash of Wild Turkey in a nearby wood shed. My first shot was as close to a near-death experience as I ever had!

These are only a few of the thousands of childhood memories and adventures which occurred in Bonner and surrounding areas. Now if only we could recreate the sounds of chirping footsteps on a 1950s wooden sidewalk covered with fresh snow, our Christmas holiday memories would be priceless.

Another death-defying and challenging memory was to



BMHCM awarded grants by Judy Matson

Although things slowed down at the BMHCM in 2021, they didn’t stop entirely. In the fall we received two grants.

Home Waters

Funded by a Home Waters: Primary Sources and the Places of Montana grant, Kim Briggeman, BMHCM, and Dylan Huisken, Bonner School social studies teacher and former Montana Teacher of the Year, are teaming up to create a project fostering both a sense of place for the students and lasting historical interpretation for residents and visitors to the area

The grant is inspired by the classic *A River Runs Through It* by Norman MacLean and the recently published *Home Waters* by Norman’s son John MacLean and offers online training

and a \$750 stipend. The Home Waters grant is administered by the Museums Association of Montana (MAM), a non-profit, professional organization whose goal is to strengthen all of Montana’s museums. BMHCM is a member.

CARES

CARES grants (Montana Coronavirus Relief Social Services Nonprofit Grant) were funds available to Montana Non-Profits to offset the financial hardships encountered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. BMHCM will use the \$6,500 awarded to complete transcribing our valuable oral history and History Roundtable collections as well as funding exhibit displays and other day-to-day expenses. The grant was administered by Humanities Montana.



BMHCM and Milltown State Park present Labor Day program by Robert Dunlop

The histories of Milltown State Park and BMHCM are forever entwined and the two groups enjoy close collaboration in interpreting the area's history. The Labor Day Event is the most recent.

Several members of the BMHCM were available to answer history related questions at the Milltown State Park event on Sunday, September 5. The appropriate theme was labor due to it being Labor Day weekend. BMHCM exhibited many items from the Center. Milltown State Park displayed numerous photos of the confluence area taken over many years.

The program ran from 11am until 4pm with many being there ahead of time and some lingering afterwards. People came and went at their own discretion. I think the average attendance at any segment might have been 50-60 people although it is hard to count as many were taking the old Blue Shop Tours of powerhouse artifacts led by Park Ranger Ben Dickenson and other staff. Many more people attended as groups came and went over the course of the day.

The program was emceed by Park Superintendent Mike Kustudia. Kim Briggeman told about The Mystery of the Wobbly 'Massacre' leaving the question, "Did it really happen?" for those in the audience to form their own opinions. Ellen Baumler gave a short talk concerning Untold Stories of Montana Minorities. Jessica Martin, a well versed park AmeriCorps member, gave a short history about the Milltown Dam site and Mike Kustudia did as well.

None of the talks were exceedingly long and were broken up

pleasantly by labor songs sung and played by Scott Crichton, retired director of ACLU Montana. Folks walked around and enjoyed the sunny day at this, one the newest of the Montana State Parks. Audience participation was encouraged in all events: singing, talks, and tours.

It cannot be forgotten that the Dreamy Ice Cream truck was there and many took full advantage. Thanks to all who helped make this Labor Day a success.

If you missed it, the program, recorded by Missoula Community Access Television (MCAT) is available on our webside homepage: www.bonnermilltownhistory.org

Look for a joint Milltown State Park/BMHCM program on the bridges of the Blackfoot in 2022.



Scott Crichton singing Labor songs at the Confluence.

Mullan Road walks on Marshall Grade by Kim Briggeman

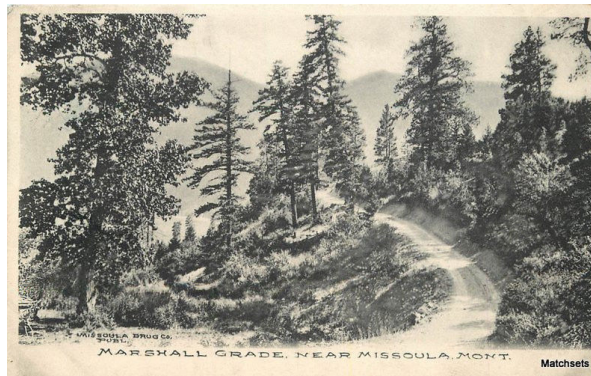
For a millennium and probably much more, Marshall Grade has been an obstacle for those traveling east of Missoula by foot, horse, wagon, or gas-powered vehicle. On Oct. 27 and Nov. 1, 2021, Kim Briggeman and the Bonner Milltown History Center led walks to the top that gave a notion why.

Sixteen people showed up for the first walk/hike, most of them from Missoula and the Bitterroot Valley. Our second expedition was made up of members of the History Center and spouses, six people in all. In each instance we parked at the bottom of Marshall Canyon and walked up a few hundred yards, where the old Mullan Wagon Road crossed the creek.

The east side is a well-defined road that leads up to McDowell Drive and past what was once a toll gate for Marshall Grade travel. The road on the west side, last used in the 1960s, is overgrown and required some bushwhacking. It goes to the top of Marshall Grade itself, above the immense cuts made in the hill to avoid the notorious higher road. Starting in 1880, the cuts were attempts to ease the way for wagons, the Northern Pacific trains, the Missoula-to-Bonner streetcar and eventually automobile travel on what became U.S. Highway 10 and Highway 200 East. The summit provides expansive views of the Clark Fork Valley, Bandmann Flats and the Canyon River

Golf Community, and a place to muse on the history of it all.

Both Meriwether Lewis in 1806 and John Mullan in 1861 made reference to the hill they were obliged to climb to get to the Blackfoot River, and where ancient American Indian trails converged. We were excited to walk in those footsteps in the autumn of 2021. Be sure to join us for our February 2022 Roundtable at the KettleHouse Taproom in Bonner when Judge Dusty Deschamps presents stories and histories of his homeland on and around the "notorious" Marshall Grade.



Mullan Road 1908

or so later. "It is thought that straw or sawdust placed in the road would make it passable." Word came in early March that Security Bridge pledged to make repairs as soon as possible, though it promised "little relief to automobiles until frost went out of the ground." The company said sledge hammers were being used to pound off the tops of high rocks but it was impossible to get gravel. Dirt fill quickly turned to mud.

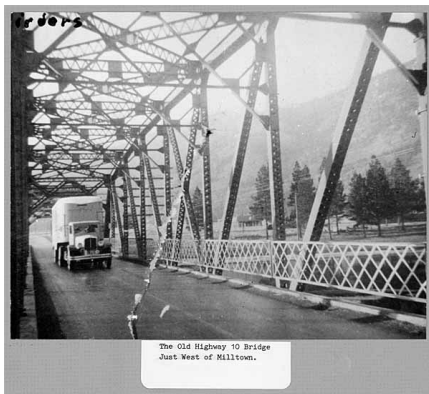
Construction of the bridge itself proceeded on pace, and on Oct. 18 came indications the project was winding down. Security Bridge Co. advertised in the *Missoulian* a pair of 8-year-old geldings, each 1,200 pounds, along with a double harness and wagon. In early November, even as the Higgins Avenue Bridge in Missoula was fully opened following a repaving job, the newspaper reported the approaches to the new Milltown bridge were to be completed within the week and the bridge would be opened for traffic "probably by November 10." They beat the prediction by a day. On Nov. 9, a warm and sunny Wednesday, county officials announced



that the Blackfoot River bridge at Milltown was open to traffic.

Into the future

For most of 30 years, the Black Bridge was the main state highway route. That changed in 1950 when Highway 10 was rerouted across a new bridge where the old Missoula-to-Bonner electric streetcar span stood. The Black Bridge remained structurally sound, but its roadway was just 18 feet wide, not enough for the postwar generation of cars and trucks. The new highway bridge was 30 feet curb to curb. Early reports were that the contract called for removal of the Black Bridge. But on June 16, upon making final acceptance of the bridge, the engineer for the Bureau of Public Roads said, "It is the understanding that the present bridge will be retained for local use." The Black Bridge would live on.



It remained open as a secondary crossing for vehicles until 1978 when, pocked with potholes, it was closed by the county to motorized traffic. It became the most popular walking/biking route between West Riverside

and Milltown/Bonner/Piltzville. Ironically, the 1970s were the decade of the Black Bridge's most widespread fame. Starting in 1973 and continuing for the next dozen springs, it provided a picturesque backdrop for the start of the Missoula "Marathon," a seven-mile run into Missoula that morphed into the current Missoula Riverbank Run around town. For years after the closure of the Western Lumber Co. mill on the west bank of the Blackfoot in the early 1930s, the river below the Black Bridge served as a swimming, fishing, and skating magnet for youth of the Milltown and Bonner areas. From 1931 to 1933 a hockey team played home games in the Garden City Hockey League on a rink below the bridge. The Milltown six were dubbed the "Flying Frenchmen" because they were made up mostly of Thibodeaus. By the early 1960s ice skating on the river was at an end for a number of reasons but other recreational pursuits remained popular. Jumping or diving from the bridge's railing, piers and even its top into the deep pool of water below was a rite of summer for many.

Dam removal and salvation

The decision in 2005 to remove Milltown Dam posed a dilemma for the Black Bridge, which was built during reservoir conditions. Its center pier that anchored the two spans wouldn't sustain the forces of a free-flowing river. An additional death knell was its impedance of the migration of bull trout. The confluence, after all, was named by the Salish "the place of the big bull trout."

The Black Bridge's importance as a pedestrian crossing and community connector was acknowledged by the decision to replace it with a new truss bridge with ironwood or concrete decking. It took a community uprising to convince the county that some vestige of the old black steel bridge should be preserved, even if it should cost more. Starting in late 2006 the Save Our Bridge committee gathered 550 signatures on a petition. "Save Our Bridge" bumper stickers began popping up and yellow ribbons appeared on the trusses. A large "Save Our Bridge" banner hung from the downstream side of the bridge, visible to passing highway traffic.

Missoula County engineer Tim Elsea devised a plan that retained the original nature of the bridge while meeting the requirement to remove the piers from the river. Elsea considered the original bridge design of two spans supported by a single concrete pier in the middle. His vision was to remove one span entirely and elongate the other one by cutting it in half and adding four 18-foot sections to the center span to reach across the river without a supporting pier in the river.

The idea resonated with County Commissioners Barbara Evans, Jean Curtiss, and Bill Carey and community members alike and was hailed not only as an engineering success but as a bridge to uniting community members at odds over the Superfund cleanup. Money was found to cover the additional million dollars required, bringing the price tag to \$2.6 million. Some of it came from new grants and some from reallocating

money which involved the community giving up some planned trail amenities.

A time to celebrate

Access to the bridge was closed for most of a year starting in December 2007 while the refurbishments took place. The ribbon-cutting was planned for Nov. 3, a Monday on the eve of election day 2008. Baucus, Tester, and Schweitzer were joined by Montana Attorney General Mike McGrath, Elsea, and county commissioners past and present, as well as representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency and the Natural Resource Damage Program. The Piltzville Walkers, the group of men and women from which the SOB's grew, were out in force as well.

A "Save Our Bridge" sign that Paul Layton and friends had strung from the railing a year earlier leaned against the same railing with a prominent "d" added at the end of the word "Save."

"We were able to preserve a historical landmark in our community," Layton said. "I guess we're so happy we could probably dance."

At the suggestion of longtime Milltown resident Jim Willis, the Bonner Community Council agreed to dedicate the bridge to the youth of the greater Bonner area.

"It's their bridge, and it's up to them to protect it," Willis said. "They use it more than anybody else, so I thought it should be dedicated (to them)."

Sadly, as is the case with many of the SOB members, the Laytons and Willis aren't around for the Black Bridge's 100th birthday. Peggy and Paul Layton passed away months apart in 2018 and Willis died last May.

Back into the future

In 2011 the Missoula City County Historic Preservation

committee honored the bridge restoration project with a Group Contribution Award. The honorees list is a roll call recognizing that great things can happen when everyone pulls together. Recipients for the award included Missoula County Commissioners; Paul Layton and the Save Our Bridge Committee; the Bonner Milltown Community Council; the Milltown Redevelopment Working Group; Missoula County's Elsea, Peter Nielsen, and Greg Robertson; Gov. Schweitzer; the EPA's Diana Hammer, John Wardell and Sandy Wardell; NRDP's Carol Fox, Rob Collins, and Doug Martin; Senators Baucus and Tester, and Mary Price of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

At age 100, the Black Bridge isn't so busy anymore. Kids still ride their bikes to and from school and people walk their dogs across and below it on a new river trail in Milltown State Park, sometimes stopping to rest and ponder on one of the bridge's benches. Cross-country runners from Bonner School gather with their coaches in mid-workout during the fall. A young woman embraces the solitude to practice hula-hoop meditation on the deck, and local search-and-rescue squads can be seen rappelling below the bridge in training.

It's a mile and a half walk to Bonner's new Kettlehouse Amphitheater, but on a busy concert evening the parking lot at the west end of the bridge is often full. It's a river bridge now, so no deep pool of water below to plunge into. And no 15-ton tractors are allowed onto the bridge to break through its deck of Brazilian ironwood.

"This community has been through a lot and will continue to go through a lot," Attorney General McGrath said on the bridge's "re-birthday" in 2008. The new bridge "is a symbol of the community coming together, and also a symbol for children for generations to come."

"There is," Baucus said, "a lot of power in a bridge."



The Black Bridge and reservoir were popular recreation spots. Photos in this story courtesy the Jack L. Demmons Collection and Kim Briggeman.

The Bonner spirit reaches far and near

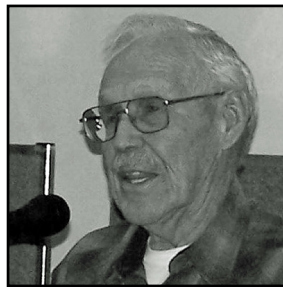
When you send a donation to the Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum, your money is put to work preserving the history of this unique place. Thanks to your generosity, we have been able to apply for and receive grants. Using our volunteer time and your donations as matches is essential to winning grants for excellent equipment for recording oral histories, for scanning photographs, and for purchasing proper storage materials to protect the items entrusted to us. These newsletters, postcard reminders of our Roundtable programs, and expenses related to permanently recording the programs and making them available online are all possible because of your generosity.

Underlying the dedication of our supporters and volunteers is the commitment of Mike Boehme, Steve Nelson, and Mike Heisey of Bonner Property Development, LLC to preserve the history of the mill site and surrounding area. Maintaining BMHCM would be impossible without their support. THANKS TO ALL!

J Randolph Alford; L.C. and D.E. Anderson; Willie Bateman; Dick Black; Mike Boehme, Steve Nelson, and Mike Heisey, Bonner Property Development; Bonner Development Group; Bonner Milltown Community Council; Bonner School; Kim and Linda Briggeman; Timothy Browne; Gerry and Mary Ann Buckhouse; Milt and Rosalyn Clark; Stan Cohen, Pictorial Histories; Maurice and Cathi Darrington; Bill and Sharon Demmons; Dusty Deschamps; Robert Dunlop; Judith Ellis; Murry Elliot; Don Felton; Friends of Two Rivers; Rick and Judy Gendrow; Brandy and Ty Goakey; Dean Goodrich; Joseph and Barbara Gorsh; Jim Hill; Bill Hillard; Historical Museum at Fort Missoula; Home Waters project; Cheryl Hughes; Humanities Montana; Cliff and Shirley Iverson; Leslie and Susan Iverson; Norman Jacobson; Tom Johnson; KettleHouse Taproom; Lee Legreid; Tony Liane; Land Lindbergh; Sheila Long in honor of Charlie Long; Andy Lukes; Iva Rose Mackenzie; Pat McDonald; Judy and Gary Matson; Eugene and Myrtle Miller; Missoula's Community Access Television; Missoula Rural Fire Dept.; Trudy Mizner; Montana Association of Museums; Elaine and Leo Nagle; Mike and Linda Nelson; Ed and Judy Olean; Stanley and Doreen Olean; Shirley Olean Olsen; Wally Otterson; Dave and Victoria Otto; Lavonne Otto; Our Savior's Lutheran Church; Ken and Maureen Peers; John Peters; Roy Plienness; Dennis and Anna Sain; Diane Sands; St. Ann Catholic Church; Nina Petroff Seaman; Joan McClelland Sipherd; Glenn Max and Sharon Smith; Minie Smith and Alan McQuillan; Mona Brian Smith; Dan Spencer; Bob Starr; Helen Steele; Rick and Pat Swanson; Bill and Jan Taylor; Chuck Teague; Leslie and Helen Treichel; Guy Trenary, River City Grill; Tuesday morning coffee bunch; Karl Uhlig; George and Kristine Unger; Alan and Karen Wagner; Bill and Jean Walker; Sandra Ferrell Wilborn and Roger Smith; Chris Weatherly.



Willie Bateman



Norman Jacobson



Bob Lamley

Willie Bateman, Norman Jacobson, and Bob Lamley have retired from active BMHCM participation. At the age of 90 or above, they no longer make the drive to Bonner for our monthly meetings. We miss them terribly, but take heart knowing their good advice and wonderful memories are just a phone call away.



BMHCM Is social!

The Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum has a Facebook page. "Like" us for occasional announcements and photos recalling our historic past.

BMHCM Volunteer Committee:

Kim Briggeman	Lee Legreid	Dennis Sain	Bob Starr
Robert Dunlop	Tony Liane	Glenn Max Smith	Rick Swanson
Judy Matson	Andy Lukes	Minie Smith	

The Bonner Milltown History Center and Museum is located in the Bonner Post Office Building

Physical address: 9397 Hwy 200 E., Bonner MT 59823 Mailing address: PO Box 726, Bonner MT 59823

Hours: Tuesday morning coffee, 9:00 - 12:00; Wednesday morning, 9-11:30

Email: bonnermilltownhistorycenter@gmail.com

Website: <https://bonnermilltownhistory.org/>