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Montana's Gold and Silver Boom – 1862-1893

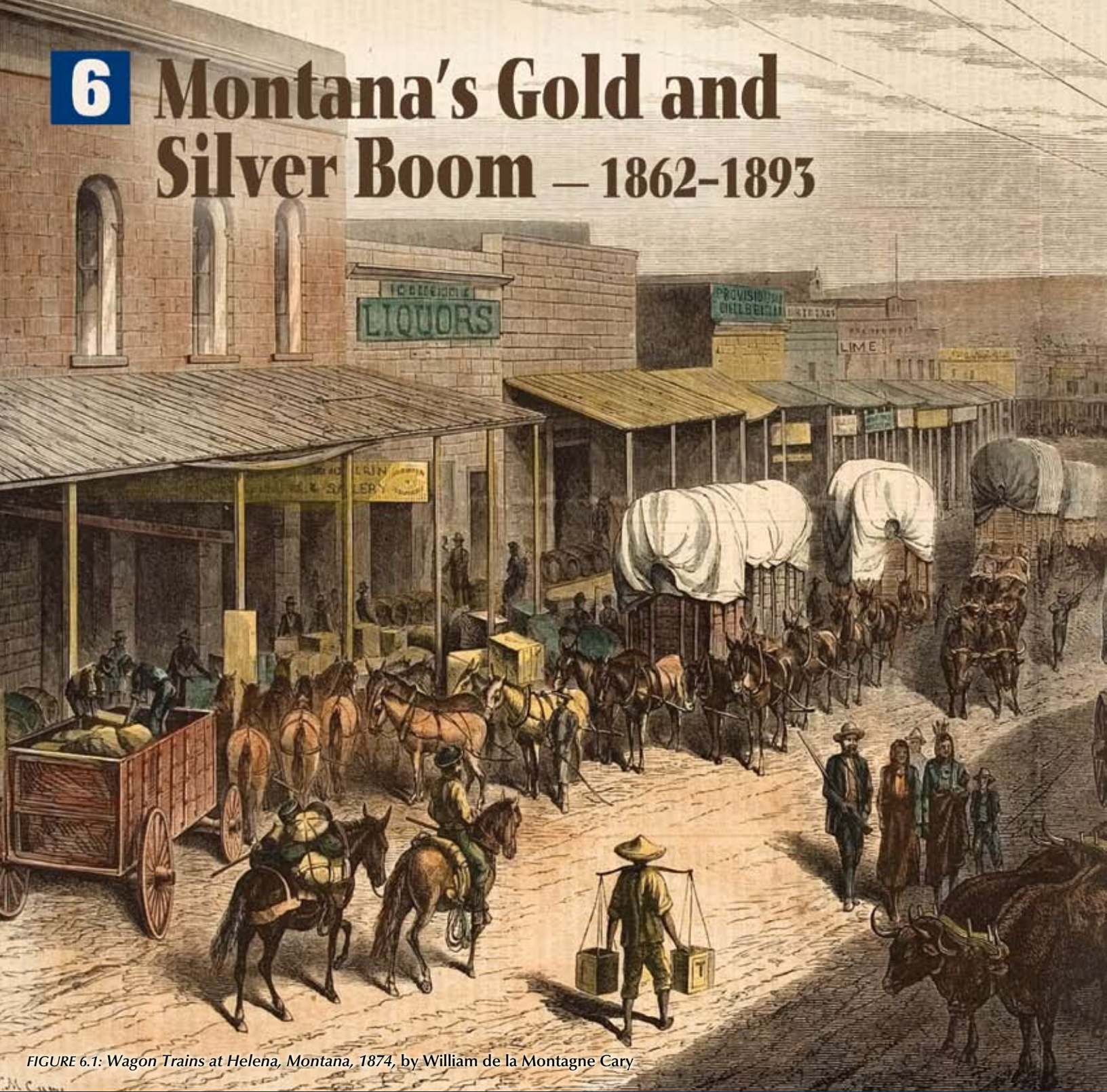
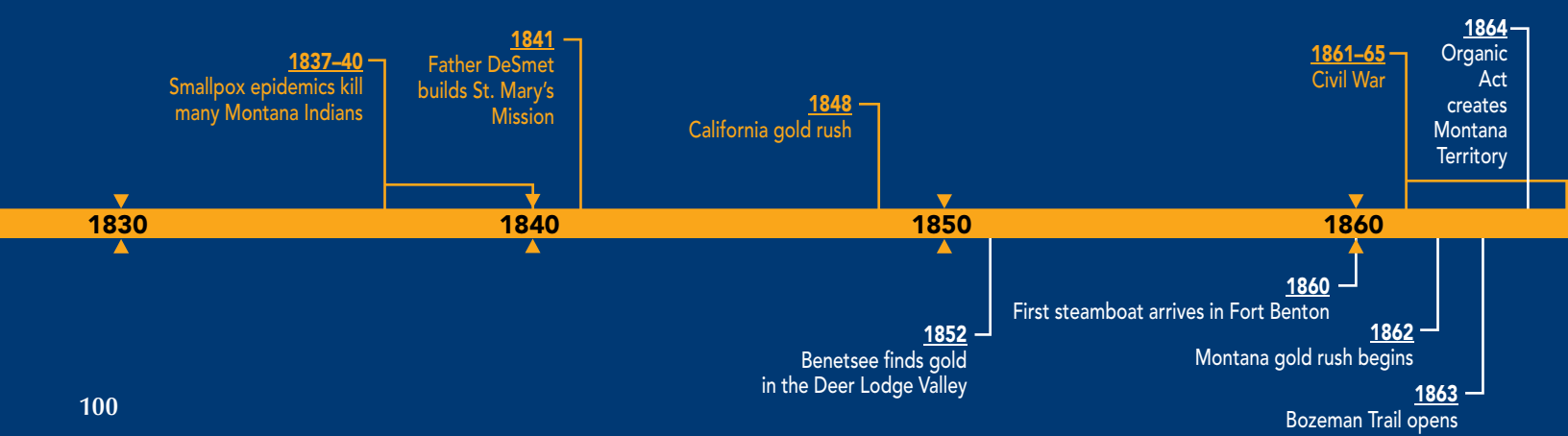


FIGURE 6.1: Wagon Trains at Helena, Montana, 1874, by William de la Montagne Cary



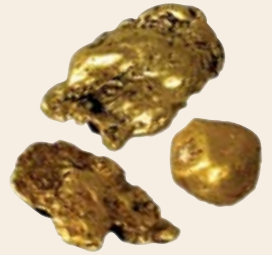


READ TO FIND OUT:

- How new ideas change the landscape
- How the gold rush changed Montana
- The difference between placer mining and quartz mining
- Why mining camps needed to establish Montana Territory

The Big Picture

Gold discoveries triggered a flood of new people into Montana. They used and thought about the land in an entirely different way than the Indian tribes who had made their homes here for thousands of years.



Of all the words spoken throughout Montana's past, you could say that one word has changed the landscape more than any other: "Gold!"

The discovery of gold in Montana in the 1860s brought thousands of people of many cultures and backgrounds to the Rocky Mountains. These newcomers held different beliefs than the people who lived here. They had a different economy—based on gold instead of furs or trade goods—and they used different methods of transportation. They brought fears and expectations that they had formed long before they got here. They imposed their ideas on the land and on one another.

They also adapted to their new land, just as everyone throughout time has done.

The discovery of gold changed the landscape of Montana. Mines multiplied in the gulches. Towns sprang up nearby. Farms spread through the valleys. Ancient trails and pathways became wagon roads.

Gold also created a new economic pattern in Montana: the **boom-and-bust cycle**. Each gold discovery brought sudden activity followed by decline, then a period of quiet, and then a sudden burst of activity again in another location. This boom-and-bust cycle defined Montana's economy during the Gold Rush Era, and it continued to shape life in Montana and all across the West for the next 100 years.

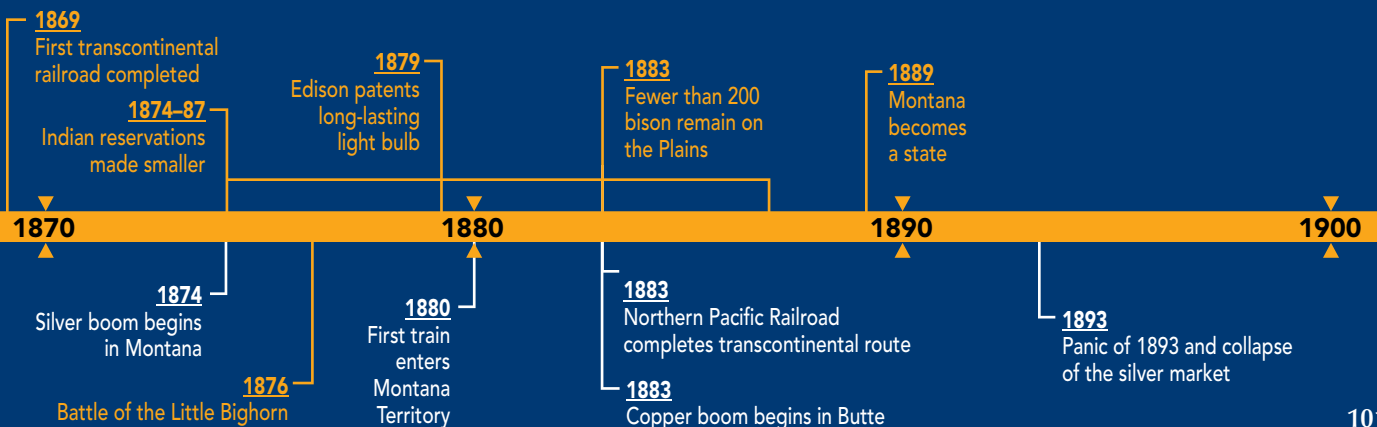




FIGURE 6.2: One of Montana's first gold camps, the town of Pioneer City grew up to supply and support the prospectors and miners around Gold Creek in the Deer Lodge Valley. Like many gold camps, it was quickly abandoned when the gold played out.

First Gold Rush in the West: California, 1848

The first gold rush in the West started in California in 1848. One man discovered gold at Sutter's Mill, and nearly 250,000 people dashed to California to seek their fortunes.

The pattern repeated across the West. **Prospectors** (people who search for gold)—usually young, eager, restless men—fanned out into the creeks and gulches of mountain ranges. Merchants and farmers rushed in after the miners to sell them supplies, food, and mining equipment. Each major gold strike triggered a new wave of people. Prospectors worked an area until it **played out** (no longer yielded gold) and quickly moved on. By the 1850s some of them had made their way to Montana.

Three Major Strikes in Montana

In the early 1850s a fur trapper called Benetsee (his Métis name was François Finlay) discovered a small

amount of gold in the Deer Lodge Valley—not much, but enough to start people talking.

A few years later, brothers Granville and James Stuart found gold nearby. But they ran out of salt and lost four horses in a Blackfeet raid, so they decided to keep moving. When they returned, they staked a claim on a spot they named Gold Creek and wrote to their brother in Colorado, urging him to come north. No gold discovery remained a secret long. That letter sparked a small stampede into Montana.

Grasshopper Creek Made the City of Bannack

On a hot July day in 1862, a prospector named John White and his partner William Eads found gold along a tributary of the Beaverhead River (in southwest Montana). The grasshoppers were so thick that the miners named it Grasshopper Creek. Their excitement attracted miners from the whole region. Four hundred people flocked to the scene that summer.

Soon miners had marked out and claimed the entire length of Grasshopper Creek. They built a little town and named it Bannack City after the nearby Bannock Indians. By the following April, 1,000 people lived there.

Grasshopper Creek produced \$5 million in gold dust (worth \$90 million today) in its first year. It also produced some outrageous rumors. Some said they could pull up a sagebrush plant, shake the roots out over a pan, and collect a dollar's worth of gold.

Claims like this lured all sorts of people with high expectations. They

discovered that mining required endless toil in harsh weather—"grueling labor even to men used to hard work," as prospector Ed Morsman wrote in a letter to his family in 1865.

Many spent all they earned just to get by, or arrived at a discovery too late to stake a good claim. As James Morley wrote in his diary in 1863, "Labor is abundant and many are disappointed." These disappointed latecomers fanned out across the landscape, seeking their own **bonanza** (rich mineral deposit).

“Emigrants are pouring in and the whole country is one bustle of excitement.”

—JAMES MORLEY (C. 1863)

Alder Gulch: Almost an Accident

In May 1863 two prospecting parties left Bannack to search for gold in the Yellowstone River region. This was Crow territory. The Crow had little patience for gold prospectors because they trespassed on Crow land but offered nothing of value to trade. They chased off the first group. When they met the second party of prospectors, the Crow took their horses and equipment, turned them around, and sent them back where they came from.

This second party included a man named Bill Fairweather. On their way back to Bannack, Fairweather and his companions camped along a stream in the Ruby River Valley that was tangled with **alders** (thick bushes). After supper Fairweather scratched at the bedrock with his pocket knife to see if he could find "enough money to buy a little tobacco." Moments later he shouted out, "I've found a scad!"

A "**scad**" meant "a lot." The next day they recovered \$200 worth of gold (\$2,900 today). Within a few months thousands of people flooded into Alder Gulch to take part in Montana's richest gold discovery. By the year's end the gulch had become a string of towns 14 miles long called "fourteen-Mile City." The biggest town was called Virginia City.

Last Chance Gulch: Just About to Give Up

As always, as soon as Alder Gulch was fully staked with miners' claims, rumors began to fly about gold somewhere else. Among those who raced after such rumors were four men who later were called the "Four Georgians" because they used a gold-panning technique called the "Georgian method."

FIGURE 6.3: By the end of the 1860s, Alder Gulch looked like this. Hydraulic mining had eroded the soil down to bare rock, most of the trees were cut down, and wooden **flumes** (channels) redirected the stream water to the mining operations.





FIGURE 6.4: This is the gold pan that Bill Fairweather's partner, Henry Edgar, used to wash gold out of Alder Creek. A pick and a pan were the gold prospector's most important tools.

FIGURE 6.5: Many miners, like Walter Corwin pictured here, sent photographs home to their families. Corwin's photo may have worried his family—there are a lot more rocks than gold in this picture.



After several disappointing months of prospecting, the Four Georgians decided to try their luck on a little gulch in the Prickly Pear Valley. That little creek, they decided, would be their last chance.

On July 14, 1864, they began working the gulch. Bonanza! They found gold plentiful and easy to remove. By fall, more than 100 cabins teetered on the hillsides on either side of Last Chance Gulch. On October 30 the community named their new town Helena. Over the next four years, Last Chance Gulch produced \$19 million worth of gold (approximately \$221 million in today's dollars).

Hard Work and "Slim Pickin's"

While prospecting for gold in frontier Montana may sound exciting, **placer mining** (separating loose gold and nuggets from dirt, sand, and gravel in a creek bed) actually required many hours of backbreaking work. Men moved huge piles of dirt, sand, and gravel by the blister-making shovelful. On cold days they frostbit their toes and froze their fingers in the icy streams. On hot days they sweated through attacks of mosquitoes and deer flies.

Popular images show grizzled, old prospectors with white beards, but the truth is that mining was young men's work. Most were under age 30. As miner John Grannis wrote in his diary, "a year's hard work in the mines has made me feel ten years older."

For all that work, very few miners struck it rich. Most labored long hours for a couple of dollars' worth of gold a day. As eight-year-old Homer Thomas wrote to his grandmother, in 1864, "there is plenty of gold but it is hard to get hold of it." Miner Abram H. Vorhees wrote back to his hometown newspaper, "The expenses, toil & **privations** [hardships] incident to a trip to the mining region are not justified by the real condition of things here." He went on to say that "not one miner of a thousand [gets] rich."

Immigrants Flood In

By the late 1870s mining camps dotted nearly 500 Montana gulches. Wherever a miner struck gold, a little mining city sprouted. Some of these cities died almost as quickly, too, as people rushed off to another discovery.

No other strike ever became as well known as Bannack, Alder Creek, or Last Chance Gulch. But together, all the gold strikes changed Montana history. They kept bringing people into Montana. People spread out in towns, camps, and on farms across the landscape. After the gold rush years, Montana was no longer the homeland of American Indian tribes alone.

Within four years (1862–66), Montana's placer mines produced more than \$90 million in gold (equal to approximately \$1.1 billion today).

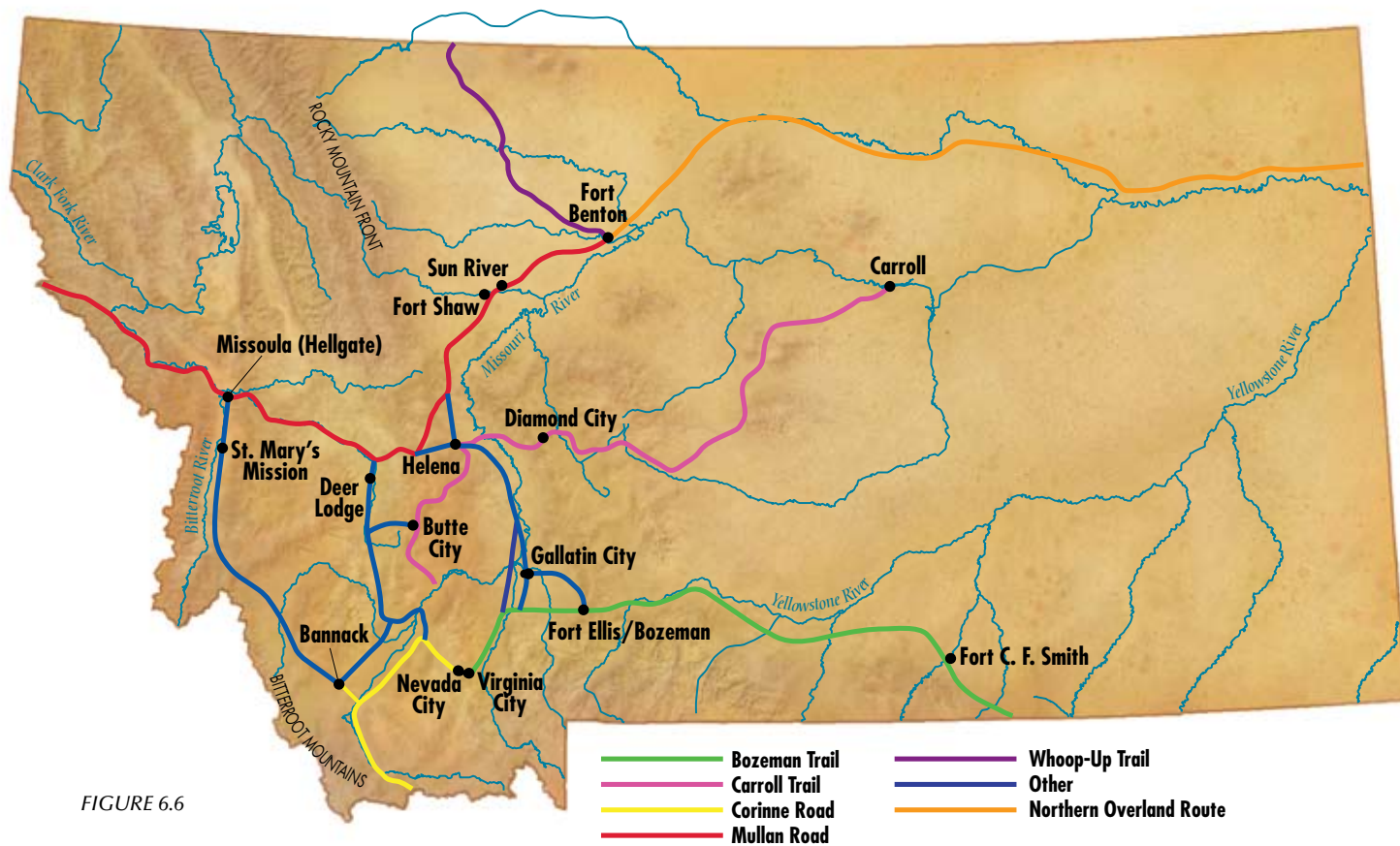


FIGURE 6.6

Major Gold Rush Towns and Trails

Five Major Routes into Montana

Immigrants came to Montana by steamboat, in wagons, on horseback, and on foot. Those who could afford it rode into Montana by steamboat up the Missouri River to Fort Benton. From there, people and supplies still had a long way to go by stagecoach or wagon to the mining camps. Steamboats traveled only during the high-water months.

The first steamboat arrived in Fort Benton in 1860. The town boomed as a transportation hub for the entire Upper Missouri region. Every road led to Fort Benton. Passengers, mining equipment, household goods, food, and other supplies arrived in Fort Benton by steamboat. Freight wagons and stagecoaches met the people and supplies and funneled them in every direction. Then the boats headed back downstream for St. Louis, loaded with bison hides, furs, gold, and travelers returning east.

The four major overland routes were cheaper than traveling by steamboat—but more difficult. The overland roads followed traditional pathways that native people had been using for thousands of years.

From the west, miners and supplies coming from other gold rushes traveled the **Mullan Road**, a 624-mile dirt track from Walla Walla, Washington, through the Deer Lodge Valley, to Fort Benton.

Up from the south, people followed the **Corinne Road**,

River Travel Was Not Always Easy

“July 16, 1869: We rushed out on deck, the boat trembled like a leaf suddenly struck, then with a gurgle sank to the bottom of the river and turned partly on its side . . . Our provisions are almost gone . . . Our Knabe piano and household goods are all in the water.”

—SERENA WASHBURN, RECOUNTING HER VOYAGE UP THE MISSOURI RIVER ABOARD THE STEAMSHIP LACAN



FIGURE 6.7: Before railroads, steamboats were the best way to get heavy equipment to Montana. Each steamboat could carry 300 passengers and 200 to 300 tons of cargo. Steamboats turned the town of Fort Benton into a bustling business center and transportation hub for the entire region.

FIGURE 6.8: Steamboats traveled at about the speed of a brisk walk. The 2,300 miles from St. Louis to Fort Benton took almost two months. Low water, shifting sandbars, and even crossing herds of bison delayed steamboats.



connecting Corinne, Utah, with Virginia City. So many wagon trains traveled this route that, according to the Jesuit missionary Father Pierre-Jean de Smet, “not a blade of grass can shoot up on account of the continual passing.”

Some people used the **Bozeman Trail**, a shortcut that branched off from the Oregon Trail at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, and ran north and west, right through Crow and Sioux territory. Sioux objections to the trail soon escalated into war (see Chapter 7).

Across the Dakotas from the east came the **Northern Overland Route**. It followed ancient trails across present-day North Dakota and entered Montana near Fort Union and the Missouri River.

Life in the Gold Camps

Montana’s first mining camps were ramshackle clusters of tents, lean-tos, and crude log cabins with dirt roofs. They were boisterous, dirty, smelly, and loud. Dusty streets turned to knee-deep mud in rainy weather. Horse manure was a part of daily life. Sanitation for humans was not much better. In Bannack, butcher Conrad Kohrs let his hogs forage on Main Street.

Still, the camps quickly took on a settled appearance. Merchants built stores, hotels, and saloons to serve the miners. Some people called this “mining the miners” because the merchants pursued the miners’

money as eagerly as the miners pursued gold. Selling merchandise was usually more profitable than mining. It was easier work, too.

In its first year Virginia City had a grocery store, a bakery, barbershops, dry-goods stores, blacksmith shops, a newspaper, a post office, a telegraph office, the gold **assayer’s** office (the assayer determined the value or quality of gold), several churches, and a school.

In every town the saloons and dance halls served as social centers for the young, single

men who made up most of the population. But mining towns offered other forms of entertainment, too. Along the muddy streets of the gold camps, you could find prize fights and literary societies, gambling houses and opera companies, social clubs, singing classes, and French lessons.

Two years after Virginia City started, the town advertised two theaters that offered plays, acrobatic performances, and live music year-round. Seven years after Helena was first settled, there were 200 pianos in town—all brought by wagon.

Mining camps relied on **freight trains** (strings of freight wagons pulled by teams of oxen or mules) for necessities, too. At first, most of the miners' food was shipped in by freight train. Coffee, sugar, flour, bacon, beans, and salt made up a miner's diet. Potatoes and dried fruit were rare treats. Food was expensive because shipping prices were so high. Later, as farms and ranches spread into the valleys, they supplied welcome vegetables and beef to the towns.

Bad weather and other transportation problems sometimes caused food shortages. In 1864 early snows cut off food supplies and caused

First Thanksgiving in Gold Country
“Our first Thanksgiving day dinner in the territory in the fall of 1863 was one of the most memorable dinners I have ever attended. Henry Plummer, desiring to be on good terms with the Chief Justice, Mr. Edgerton, and my husband . . . invited [us] to dinner . . . he sent to Salt Lake City, a distance of five hundred miles, and everything that money could buy was served, delicately cooked and with all the style that would characterize a banquet at ‘Sherry’s’ [a fancy restaurant]. I now recall to mind that the turkey cost forty dollars in gold [now equal to \$620].”
—HARRIET SANDERS, REMEMBERING LIFE IN EARLY BANNACK

FIGURE 6.9: Once you got to Montana Territory, your transportation problems were not over. It took four days to ride the stagecoach from Fort Benton to Helena—a rough and sometimes dangerous ride. Montana artist Charles M. Russell comically portrayed some of the hazards of the trail in *Bruin [bear] Not Bunny Turned the Leaders*.





FIGURE 6.10: Transporting cash and gold was difficult, slow, and dangerous. With no ATM machines, miners paid for their everyday expenses in gold. They carried gold in pokes and measured out tiny bits on pocket scales like this one.

FIGURE 6.11: Blackfeet camped near Mount Helena in 1874 saw placer miners destroy the creek beds that ran through their hunting grounds. As Helena and other mining camps became little cities, they displaced Indian tribes in their own land.



a “flour riot” in Virginia City. People panicked as the price of flour for a 100-pound sack rose to \$100—even \$150 (\$1,300 to \$2,000 today). A troop of men went door to door to collect all the flour in town and distribute portions to everyone to make sure no one went without.

Settlers Used the Land in a New Way

The gold rushes changed the way people used land in Montana. Because Indian people did not build buildings, the non-Indian settlers assumed the open lands were up for grabs. Private ownership of land was very important to the settlers. Owning and controlling land was one way of gaining wealth. This basic understanding of the land was very different from the way hunter-gatherers of the Northern Plains had used the land for thousands of years.

Towns sprang up in the middle of tribal territory, often at the crossroads of important Indian trade routes. Towns and mining claims cut off Indian peoples’ access to traditional lands and water sources. Emigrants carved wagon trails through Indian hunting grounds. Their horses and cattle grazed the roadside to dirt, which interrupted bison migration patterns. Farmers plowed up other bison grazing grounds. Domesticated animals spread diseases to bison and other wildlife.

Outside the mining towns, settlers carved fertile valleys into farms to raise crops and cattle to feed the growing communities. Farmers protected their crops with fences, controlled access to water, and claimed ownership over vast areas of Indian hunting and camping grounds. These farms had an even bigger impact on the landscape than the mining operations and the gold camps did.

Imagine how your community might change if thousands of new people moved into the area who did not understand the local people or their ways of life. This huge wave of new people affected Montana’s native cultures deeply.

Whenever conflicts arose, the settlers expected government soldiers to protect them. Increasingly, the settlers’ **prejudice** (a pre-formed negative opinion) against Indian people and their misunderstanding of Indian cultures, exploded into violence.

For example, in 1864 nearly 500 gold prospectors stampeded into the Sun River area in Blackfeet territory.

Most did not find gold and left right away. One group of miners stayed on, but they were not prepared for the severe winter. When cold weather hit, they nearly starved. A Piegan Blackfeet chief named Little Dog took pity on them and shared antelope meat with the miners. Despite the help they had received, several of the miners killed four men of Little Dog's band. After that, Blackfeet military groups chased off gold seekers who trespassed on their lands.

Settlers Also Adapted to the Land

When the settlers arrived here, they adjusted to their new circumstances. They built houses from whatever was available—usually logs. For roofing they lined up poles made from small trees and topped them with layers of dirt and sod.

In the first few years, there were no banks. People used gold itself as money. In 1865 an ounce of gold dust was valued at \$18 (about \$230 today). Miners carried their gold in **pokes** (little buckskin sacks). Every business had a little scale for weighing the dust.

People also adjusted their ideas to fit their new circumstances. For example, merchants opened their stores on Sundays—something they never would have done “back home,” where Sundays were saved for church. But miners worked every other day of the week, and most only came into town on Sundays.

Children were quickest to adapt to their new land. They did not carry their parents' attachments to homes far away. Instead they forged their own ideas and attitudes about the land and people that made up their world. They also enjoyed more freedom than they would have had in more established towns.

A Blend of Many Cultures

The landscape of Montana during the Gold Rush Era echoed with languages of every kind. In addition to Indian tribes who spoke many languages, there were French, Métis, Spanish, Canadian, American, and Mexican people involved in the fur trade. The gold

FIGURE 6.12: Far from home and lonely for their families, miners often indulged children, like this little girl, pictured here surrounded by a crew of miners working for the Bluebird Mine in Jefferson County, Montana.



camps attracted Chinese, German, Dutch, British, and Irish people. The accents of the southern Confederate and the northern Yankee echoed here, too, as people displaced by the Civil War streamed into Montana to build a new life.

Many Jewish people came west to the gold fields, mostly as merchants. African Americans flooded west, too. Some were freed slaves; some were northern free blacks seeking new opportunities. An African American woman, Sarah Bickford, later ran Virginia City's water utility.

One important group who added to the story of Montana was the Chinese community. In 1870 nearly 2,000 Chinese people—mostly men—lived in Montana's mining camps, making up about 10 percent of

the total non-Indian population. Yet their story is so seldom told that they are often called the "forgotten pioneers" of Montana.

Chinese settlers bought claims that other miners considered worked-out and recovered the gold that was left. Others ran restaurants, pharmacies, boardinghouses, stores, and laundries. They often sold fresh produce from their gardens. Some were doctors.

Most of Montana's Chinese immigrants came from a poverty-stricken region of China. They came hoping to make their fortunes in the West and return home. Some did return home; others stayed and raised families and continued to help shape Montana's cities and towns for many decades.

For some people, the multicultural mix of the gold camps added to their fascination with Montana. Many of the new settlers made friends with their new neighbors. Some married

people of other cultures and raised families. Others simply enjoyed the interaction. In October 1865, 1,000 Nez Perce, Salish, and Pend d'Oreille people camped near Helena on their way to hunt bison. Townspeople challenged them to horse races and riding competitions.

However, many settlers brought prejudices with them. They discriminated against people who were not like them. Some businesses hung out signs **barring** (forbidding) American Indians from entering. In 1867 thugs murdered a black man in Helena to

Virginia City: An 11-Year-Old Remembers

"Almost every evening the miners cleaned their sluice boxes with a tin contrivance called a scraper. Much fine gold was left in the cracks of the boxes and around the edges. Often after the miners had gone into their cabins for supper, Carrie Crane and I would take our little blowers and the hair brushes, which we kept for the purpose, and gather up the fine gold. We took it home, dried it in the oven and blew the black sand from it. Sometimes we would find that our gold dust weighed to the amount of a dollar or more . . . Once I bought my father a present of a shirt, which cost \$2.50 in gold dust, the only kind of money that I ever saw in Virginia City."

—MARY RONAN, WHO MOVED TO
ALDER GULCH WITH HER FAMILY IN 1863

Remembering the Chinese in Virginia City

"Moy Si was our age, twelve or something like that. We got her to sing for us one time and we wanted her to sing in Chinese. She finally said she would and we got busy. There was a vacant building east of the old Madison House. It is gone now. We got cordwood, sticks and planks and made seats around and we sold tickets for ten cents apiece to hear Moy Si sing. We thought of course that she was going to sing in Chinese. Well when she got us there and started out, we picked the song 'The Bird in the Gilded Cage.' She sang it loud and clear but it wasn't in Chinese. I tell you we didn't hear the last of that."

—WILEY DAVIS, WHO GREW UP IN VIRGINIA CITY

keep him from voting in an election. In some towns, black children were not allowed to attend white schools.

In many places the Chinese were burdened with extra taxes, run out of mining camps, robbed of their claims, and sometimes attacked or murdered. In 1882 the United States passed the Exclusion Act, barring Chinese laborers from entering the country. (This law lasted 60 years.)

Law and Order in a New Land

If you were starting a new society in a new place, what rules would you want to have? The miners brought their rules with them from other mining camps. As soon as miners staked their claims, they set up miners' courts to make sure their claims were protected. They elected judges, a recorder to keep track of claims, and (sometimes) a sheriff to enforce the laws. They could not rely on far-away governments to help them.

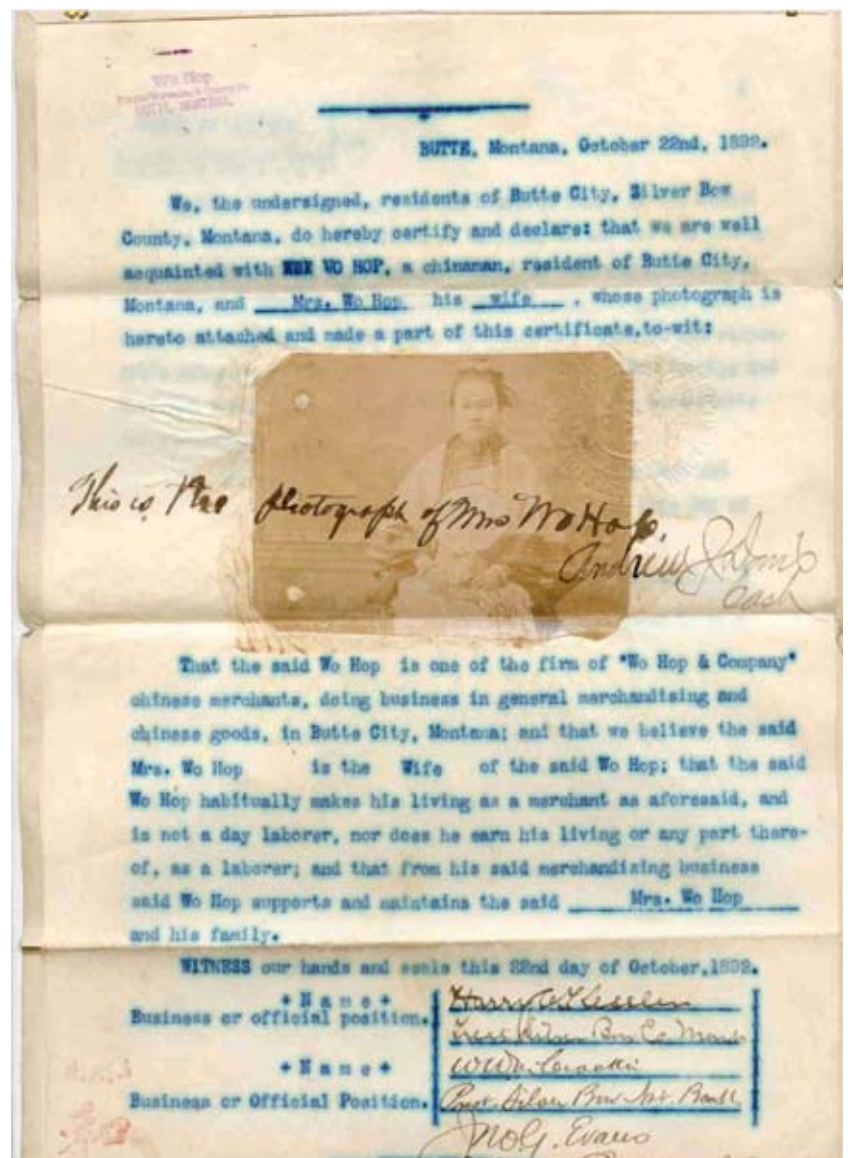
The miners' courts settled all kinds of cases from business **disputes** (arguments) to murder trials. A jury usually decided ordinary cases. A criminal case often attracted the entire community. Sometimes the whole crowd served as jury and also decided the sentence. Usually, court was held on Sunday so everyone could come. But the miners' courts were not equipped to handle the violence that came to the gold camps.

Frontier Justice and the Vigilantes

The gold fields attracted all kinds of people, including criminals. One of Montana's most famous criminals was the handsome, charming Henry Plummer. Plummer was elected sheriff of the Bannack District. He gathered a secret group of followers around him who were suspected of robbing stagecoaches of their gold shipments and murdering miners carrying gold.

Citizens shuddered at the violence. They were all new to the area. Few people knew one another. Besides, they just wanted to work their claims. Then, in December 1863, a well-liked young Dutchman named Nicholas Thiebalt was murdered. The community rose up in outrage. Organized crime, they decided, required organized crime-fighting.

FIGURE 6.13: After the Exclusion Act barred Chinese laborers, Chinese merchants and their families had to carry papers to prove they had a legal right to remain in the country. Below is a portion of the document carried by Mrs. Wo Hop, wife of a Butte merchant.



THIS UNREPRESSED VIGILANTE WARNING, PRESENTED TO AUSTIN LYNCH BY DR. CLARENCE OF WISCONSIN, CAUSED THE LYCHING OF CON MURPHY, NOTORIOUS OUTLAW AT HELENA, MONTANA TERRITORY IN 1884.



FIGURE 6.14: How would you like to receive this vigilante warning? It was sent to Con Murphy, a notorious horse thief and jail escapee. In January 1885 sheriff's deputies arrested Murphy, but a crowd of vigilantes seized him and hanged him from a railroad trestle outside Helena. Vigilantes went beyond the law to enforce their own idea of law and order.

A group of men investigated, and within a few days they accused a man named George Ives of the murder. A crowd of 1,500 gathered on Nevada City's main street for Ives's trial. A young attorney, Wilbur Fisk Sanders, carved an unforgettable place in Montana history by volunteering to prosecute Ives. Judge Don Byam sat in a wagon, and a jury of 24 men stood in a half circle around a big log fire. The air prickled with danger. Outlaws in the crowd fingered their handguns, eager to see Ives go free.

The jury found Ives guilty. In the silence that followed, witnesses heard several clicks as men in the crowd cocked their weapons. Sanders boldly faced them down. He said to the jury, "Men, do your duty." Ives was hanged that night. This dramatic event led members of the community to form a Vigilance Committee (**vigilance** means keeping a careful watch). These men, called vigilantes, hung 24 men in the next month (including Sheriff Henry Plummer).

Vigilantes were key players in the turbulent early days of the mining camps. Right or wrong, vigilantes acted as a kind of police force in a region hundreds of miles from official law enforcement. The new communities of Montana cried out for their own permanent—and accountable—government.

Montana Builds a Territory

As towns grew up, people needed public services like roads, schools, mail delivery, and law enforcement. They needed a tax system that would pay for these services. They needed laws, police, and record keepers to help people sell businesses, protect property, and settle estates. They needed a government.

Before 1864 the land now called Montana was part of Idaho Territory. Its capital was Lewiston—across the Bitterroot Mountains from Bannack and Virginia City. Lewiston was too far away to provide government services to the gold camps of the Northern Rockies. The new settlers believed that this wealthy region could develop faster if it were its own territory.

FIGURE 6.15: By 1870 the vigilantes had executed 50 men in Montana's gold towns. That year vigilantes hanged these two men, accused of attempted murder, from Helena's hanging tree before a crowd of 300 people. In 1875 a local minister chopped down the hanging tree.



The Government Needed Montana's Gold

Montana Territory was born in the fourth year of the Civil War (1861–65). The Civil War was a long, bloody, expensive conflict that killed 620,000 soldiers. The federal government (the Union) fought against 11 southern states (the **Confederacy**, which means an alliance of states). The main issue was whether states had the right to **secede** (separate) from the Union if they disagreed with U.S. policies like ending slavery.

Community leaders in the gold camps and mining towns knew that the federal government needed gold to fund the war. Gold from other discoveries across the West already was going to help the South. President Abraham Lincoln did not want southerners to control the West and its gold. Congress sponsored special wagon trains from northern states into the West along the Northern Overland Route to encourage northerners to move into the gold fields, too.

In 1863 President Lincoln sent a well-respected lawyer named Sidney Edgerton to Idaho Territory to be chief justice. Edgerton immediately saw how valuable these remote gold fields would be to the Union. He also agreed with the other settlers: the gold camps needed their own territorial government.

In January 1864 Edgerton boarded a stagecoach bound for Washington, D.C., to ask Congress to create a new territory. He carried \$2,500 in gold nuggets sewn into the lining of his coat—"immense nuggets wherewith to dazzle the eyes of Congressmen," he wrote later. He knew that dazzling

Montana Stole Land from Idaho

Have you ever wondered why Montana is shaped the way it is? What about that funny panhandle on the top of Idaho? At first Congress drew the western boundary of Montana Territory along the Rocky Mountains. But Sidney Edgerton knew that the Bitterroot Mountains were impassable in winter. He coaxed Congress to move the border 130 miles west to the crest of the Bitterroot Mountains so the Bitterroot and Deer Lodge Valleys could be closer to territorial government. Idaho protested, but the settlers (and Edgerton) got their way.

FIGURE 6.16: The government provided military protection for a series of wagon trains into Montana along the Northern Overland Route so that more Union sympathizers could get to the gold fields. President Lincoln did not want gold going to help the South during the Civil War.



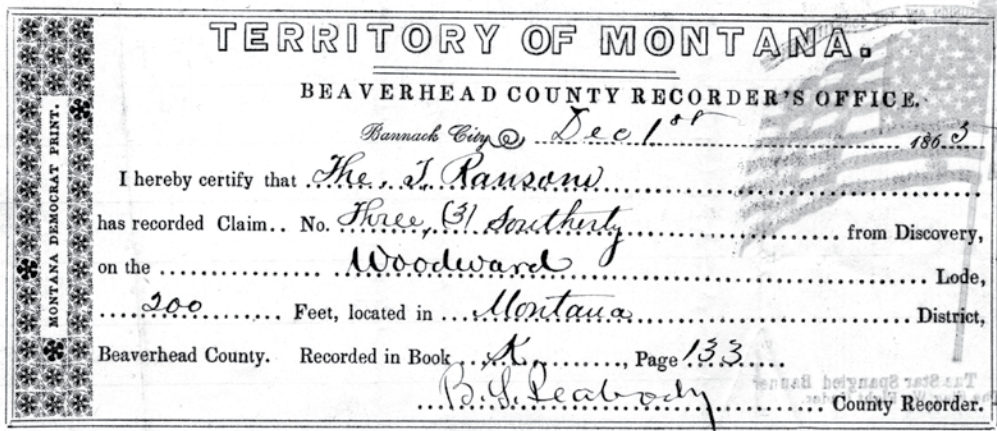


FIGURE 6.17: One thing the new territorial government did was to create counties, which recorded miners' claims with certificates like this one, issued to Hank Palmer on September 2, 1865, in Beaverhead County.

who liked it because it came from a Latin (or Spanish) word meaning "mountainous country." He may not have known that the Spanish already called this region *Montaña Relucientes*, a Spanish translation of what some American Indians called the Rocky Mountains, "Shining Mountains."

What Is a Territory?

A territory was like a junior state—the first step toward statehood. A region qualified to become a territory of the United States when its non-Indian population reached 5,000. When its non-Indian population grew to 60,000, the territory could apply for statehood.

In a state, people elect government leaders. But the federal government appointed leaders to run territories. The president of the United States appointed a governor, a territorial secretary, and three judges who would make up the territorial court (similar to the supreme court of a state).

The voting citizens of the territory (non-Indian male citizens over age 21) elected representatives to their **legislature** (the branch of government that passes laws) and one territorial **delegate** (a representative of the people) to the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. This territorial representative could present the territory's needs to Congress, but he could not vote. Territories did not have a representative in the U.S. Senate.

An important thing to remember about the new Montana Territory is that while it claimed Indian lands, it did not include Indian people. They were expected to obey territorial and federal laws—and many Indian people lived in mining communities—but they had no representation in either the territorial or federal government.

This meant that American Indians could be punished—even put to death—for breaking a territorial law. Yet territorial laws did not protect Indians from crimes that whites committed against them. Many conflicts arose between Indians and the newcomers over land, hunting rights, the use of water, and the right to travel through certain areas.

congressmen with gold would convince them to create a new territory in the gold fields.

On May 26, 1864, Congress passed the Organic Act, the law that created the Montana Territory. President Lincoln immediately appointed Sidney Edgerton the first governor of Montana Territory.

Montana got its name from an Ohio congressman

The Civil War Shaped Early Montana Life

The Civil War was far away, but it influenced life here in many ways. People on both sides of the war felt passionately about issues like slavery, states' rights, and freedom. They named Confederate Gulch, Yankee Flats, and Unionville to express their sentiments. Southerners first named Alder Gulch "Varina," after Varina Davis, the wife of Jefferson Davis, who was the president of the Confederate States. Northerners changed the town's name to Virginia City.

When President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, many southern sympathizers rejoiced, to the horror of Union loyalists. Young Mollie Sheehan of Virginia City danced for joy with her classmates—until she got home and received a stern lecture from her Unionist father.

Civil War politics continued to drive the political life of Montana Territory. Most of the new Montanans were Democrats, and many of them were loyal to the South. The president and his administration were Republicans. They appointed many northern Republican governors. Some Republicans, like Governor Edgerton, would not compromise with Democrats at all because they thought all Democrats were traitors.

After Edgerton, most of Montana's territorial governors were strangers to Montana and totally unfamiliar with its land, people, and problems. This made citizens feel that their government did not represent them very well. All this led to many fights over politics in Montana. It took

FIGURE 6.18: You call this a governor's mansion? This simple log home was the residence of Sidney Edgerton, Montana Territory's first governor, in 1863. Edgerton's niece, Lucy Darling, also used this cabin as Bannack's first schoolhouse.



“April 15, 1865—News this morning of the assassination of President Lincoln. Such a general feeling of Horror, grief, indignation I never before witnessed and never expect to witness again. At 10 o’clock stores closed. Billiard Saloon closed. During the day a couple of men arrested at Camp Douglass for expressing joy at Lincoln’s death.”

—JAMES KNOX POLK MILLER, A CLERK IN VIRGINIA CITY, WRITING IN HIS DIARY

a long time for Montana—and the rest of the nation—to recover from the trauma of the Civil War.

Gold Led to Silver

By the early 1870s most of the loose, relatively easy-to-get gold in the streambeds was gone. Miners knew that rich **veins** (layers) of gold lay deep within the cliffs and rocks of mountainsides. Getting at that gold would require a different method of mining altogether.

How would you get gold out of a rock mountain? Gold and silver lie in veins that are **embedded** (set solidly) in the surrounding rock. Usually, the rock around gold is quartz, so recovering the gold from the rock is called **quartz mining** (hard-rock mining).

Quartz mining required large, expensive equipment that was difficult to transport and required many workers to operate. Placer mining could be done by individuals, but only big businesses could tackle quartz mining. Big companies formed to bring in mining equipment and hire workers.

The miners dug deep shafts and tunnels into hillsides. They dug **ore** (rock containing precious metals) from inside the shafts and sent the ore out in buckets or carts pulled by mules. These loads of ore went to a stamp mill, or dry-crushing mill, which usually stood near the mine. The stamp mill was a huge rock crusher that turned cabbage-sized rocks into fine sand.

At first stamp mills only crushed the rock so it could be shipped to other places for **refining** (separating precious metal from rock). Later, mine workers washed the crushed rock with chemicals to refine it further before shipping out the gold ore.

Some stamp mills also yielded other precious metals like silver, copper, and zinc that appeared in the same rock as the gold. To early gold miners those other metals were a nuisance, but later they became even more important than gold.

The problems of transportation plagued the quartz miners. In 1864 a mine owner named Turnley bought a ten-stamp quartz mill and tried to ship it to Grizzly Gulch (near Helena). The first train it was on was burned by robbers. The wrecked mill was repaired and shipped by steamboat to Fort Benton, but the steamboat broke a shaft.

The crew finally unloaded the mill at Cow Island, 120 miles downstream from Fort Benton. Then Turnley had to hire a freight train to haul the stamp mill in pieces to Grizzly Gulch, where it arrived—a year and a half after Turnley bought it—costing more in freight than the mill had cost to purchase. Quartz miners, merchants, and most travelers could not wait until railroads came to Montana.

Butte and the Silver Boom

In the 1870s Butte's placer gold mines began to dry up. Miners deserted the camps for richer grounds. By 1874 so many claims had been abandoned in the West that Congress passed a law requiring miners to perform a certain amount of work on their claims before January 1, 1875, or lose them. Many just let their claims expire.

Not Bill Farlin. On New Year's Eve 1874—the day before the deadline—Farlin went back to one of his old claims near Butte. Here he had found quartz rock bearing silver, gold, and copper nearly ten years before. When Farlin sank the first shafts into the hillside, he struck a silver vein that was rich beyond belief.

Dying as a gold camp, Butte sprang to life again as a silver camp. Miners scrambled to attract investors to help them build new mines. Workers from around the world flocked to Butte. Railroad companies started competing to lay the first track into Montana. Other silver-mining towns sprang up—Granite, Castle, Philipsburg, Elkhorn, Glendale, Neihart, and Hecla.

In 1876 the United States Mint began buying Montana's silver to **mint** (make) into coins. Across America, coins made from Montana silver jingled in people's pockets. By 1880 Montana was producing more silver than gold.

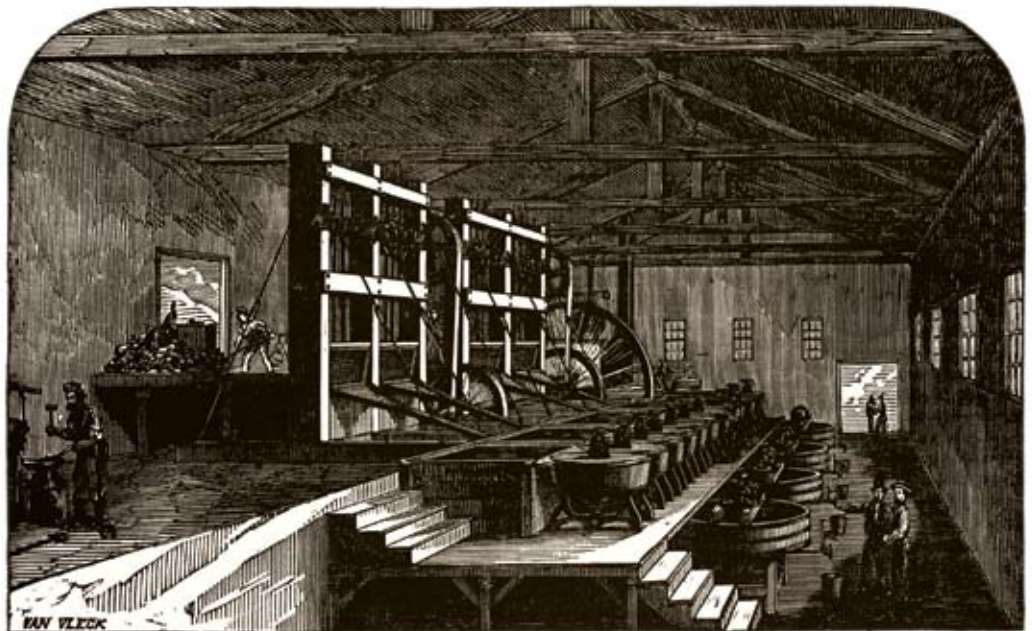
Then, in 1880, the first railroad entered Montana Territory—the Utah and Northern Railroad (see Chapter 9). The Great Northern and the Northern Pacific came by different routes a few years later. Once railroads arrived, mining companies could bring in heavy equipment. They could ship ore and other raw materials back to eastern markets far more quickly. Large-scale quartz mining developed in Montana only after the railroads came.

Boom to Bust: The Pattern Continues

Silver mining repeated the same boom-and-bust cycle that began with placer gold mining. Silver discoveries created a sudden burst of economic activity and triggered a new flood of immigrants into Montana.

But the boom lasted less than 15 years. In 1893 the government canceled its silver contracts, and the silver market collapsed. Overnight,

FIGURE 6.19: Stamp mills, like the one shown below, were large machines that lifted heavy steel blocks and dropped them onto the ore to crush it. The crushed ore was then passed through screens to settling vats, where it was washed with chemicals to isolate the precious metals. Each stamp weighed between 500 and 750 pounds—the most a pack animal could carry.



Granite: The Town That Might Never Have Been

Charles McClure, a foreman at the Hope Mine at Philipsburg, just knew that an outcropping of rock on nearby Granite Mountain would contain silver. He gathered together some St. Louis investors and began exploring the mountain. The investors quickly lost interest, and they cabled McClure to stop operations at the new mine. The telegram took a while to reach him. As he read it, a new shift had just begun setting up for work. McClure watched them set and blow the last shot of powder. The fuse lighted, the last shot fired, and a shower of silver ore rained down on the muckers' planks. In one blast Charles McClure became one of the richest miners of his time. Granite Mountain produced more than \$50 million in silver.

FIGURE 6.20: When the silver crash closed down the Bi-metallic and Granite Mountain silver mines, 3,000 people left Granite in one day. "It was the most complete desertion I have ever seen," one witness said. When silver prices rebounded three years later, Granite's mine complex became the biggest silver mine in the world—for a time. Only two people lived in Granite when American painter Muriel Sibell Wolle (1898–1977) painted this image in 1954.



silver mines across the West closed. Many of Montana's silver-mining towns were abandoned as people fled to find new jobs. People left furniture behind, curtains in the windows, and children's toys in the yards.

Just a few years later, silver prices rebounded. Some of Montana's silver mines sprang to life again. Ghost towns once again became bustling communities. The lives of mining towns always relied on prices and conditions determined far away.

Like the placer gold rushes, the silver boom changed Montana in many ways. It drew huge investments from people outside the region. Silver connected Montana's economy with the nation's economy. Montana became strongly influenced by people and corporations far away from here. This pattern of influence by outside interests continued long after the silver boom was over.

Two Ways of Life Converge

In the 30 years after prospectors struck gold in Montana, mines, towns, road networks, and steamboat ports developed across the territory. The nation's economy came to rely on the wealth of Montana's resources. In

1870 there were 20,595 non-Indian settlers living here, with more arriving every day. By 1890 the number of non-Indian settlers had risen to nearly 143,000. The settlers celebrated the growth—to them, every new town, school, mine, or church spoke to Montana's bright future. But as the newcomers put down roots, Montana's Indian tribes looked for ways to protect their territory.

How It Worked

Placer Mining Required Simple Tools and Hard Work

Placer miners used simple tools. They purchased no land and needed little money. All they needed was a pick, a shovel, a pan, some water, and plenty of muscle.

Miners looked for places where **erosion** (the wearing away of soil and rock by ice, water, or wind) might have washed gold nuggets or flakes out of the hills and into the streambeds. The term *placer mining* comes from the Spanish word *placer*, meaning “sand bank.”

Picking and panning: The placer miner explored a creek bed or gully, driving his pick into a sandstone ridge looking for color. At the creek’s edge he dipped a ridged pan into the gravel, swirled the dirt and gravel around in the water, and checked the bottom of the pan for gold flakes or nuggets. Because gold is heavier than dirt and rock, it sinks to the bottom of the pan while the sand and stones wash off the top.

Staking a claim: When a miner found some gold, he posted a notice claiming a certain length of the creek. This was called staking his claim. The claim gave him the right to work that stretch of gully and to keep whatever gold he found there. The claim also guaranteed access to water from that creek to use in his mining operation. Water was critical to placer mining.

Rocker and sluice: If a spot looked promising, the miners shifted to larger operations so they could wash the dirt and gravel faster. They used simple tools, water, and gravity.



FIGURE 6.21: Gold panning was the simplest way to remove loose gold dust and nuggets from a streambed.



FIGURE 6.22: A rocker was a good two-man method for removing loose gold from dirt and gravel. One man shoveled dirt and gravel while the other worked the rocker.



FIGURE 6.23: When all the easy gold was taken, miners turned to larger-scale operations. They built wooden flumes to transport water from a nearby creek. The water poured through a sluice box, where it washed the heavy gold from dirt and gravel. Think of all the shoveling it took to placer mine this way.



FIGURE 6.24: Hydraulic mining tore apart the landscape. Water from a high-pressure hose blasted dirt, gravel, and gold into a sluice box. The hose was connected to a flume, which brought the water to the claim from a nearby creek.

The rocker was a large wooden bucket that rocked back and forth like a cradle. Miners shoveled dirt into the upper end, poured water over it, and rocked it back and forth. The finer material washed through a hole in the bottom, and the gold collected in ridges, called cleats, along the bottom of the rocker. The rocker was a good two-man method. With one fellow constantly shoveling gravel and the other rocking the rocker, a pair could process 200 buckets of gravel in a day.

If there was enough water nearby, the men built a **sluice** (a long wooden trough with an open top and cleats along the bottom). They shoveled dirt and gravel into the top end and let water wash the rocks and mud out the lower end, leaving the heavier gold behind in the cleats. Sometimes they added mercury to the sluice, which chemically attracted the gold particles.

Hydraulic mining: When the easy pickings were gone, they turned to **hydraulic mining**—using pressurized water to cut into a hillside to wash dirt and gravel down into a sluice box. This took cooperation from several workers. They built canals and ditches to bring water from a stream to the mine site. The water would be collected into a hose that was wide at the opening but narrowed as it went downhill so that by the time the water came out the other end, it was highly pressurized. It was like mining with a fire hose. Hydraulic mining was fast and efficient but extremely damaging to the land. It tore off topsoil and left barren, gravelly hillsides.

CHAPTER 6 REVIEW

► CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Locate: (a) Bannack; (b) Gold Creek; (c) Alder Gulch; (d) Last Chance Gulch
2. Identify: (a) John White; (b) Benetsee; (c) Bill Fairweather; (d) Henry Plummer; (e) Bill Farlin; (f) Charles McClure; (g) Sidney Edgerton
3. Define: (a) boom-and-bust cycle; (b) placer mining; (c) hydraulic mining; (d) quartz mining; (e) vigilantes; (f) assayer
4. What were the three major gold strikes in Montana in the mid-1860s?
5. What were the four overland routes into Montana? Why did people use them instead of taking the steamboat up the Missouri River?
6. Describe a mining town. What kinds of people lived there, and what kinds of jobs did they have?
7. Why were Vigilance Committees formed?
8. Why did President Abraham Lincoln want to control the West and its gold?
9. Why did the main methods of mining change in the early 1870s?

► CRITICAL THINKING

1. Compare the people who came to Montana for fur trapping and trading to those who came in search of gold. How did fur traders and Indians view land use compared to miners?
2. Placer mining and quartz mining are very different. Compare and contrast the two methods' advantages and disadvantages.
3. The Five Themes of Geography include human-environmental interaction. How did the new settlers modify, depend on, and adapt to the new land?
4. Imagine trying to decide whether to join the gold rush. What factors would enter into your decision?
5. The miners and settlers who came to Montana were less likely to cooperate with Indians than the fur trappers were. What differences in their circumstances and expectations might explain this fact?

6. Vigilance Committees were formed to control crime in the early days of mining in Montana. Were these groups a good idea? Do you think communities today should form their own committees to control crime? Why or why not?

► PAST TO PRESENT

1. Many people moved to Montana in the 1860s because of the gold rush. Why do people move to Montana today?
2. Why do you think gold was valuable? Is it still? Why does it change in value?

► MAKE IT LOCAL

1. What towns in your area, if any, began because of the gold rush? Are there ghost towns near you? Why were they abandoned?

► EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Write a report, or create a PowerPoint presentation, on the history of one of the early mining towns. Do people still live there today? Why or why not? What do they do?
2. Make a movie acting out some of the earliest forms of mining.
3. Make a poster comparing different kinds of mining.
4. Make a diorama of an early mining town or of a rocker and sluice.
5. Make a map showing where various minerals are found in Montana.
6. Research the story of Lucia Darling, Mary Ronan, Elizabeth Chester Fisk, Harriet Sanders, or another woman who came to Montana as part of the Gold Rush Era.
7. Research the lives of Chinese miners during the Gold Rush Era.
8. Learn how to pan for gold.

Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana-Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

Chapter 6

- FIG. 6.1** *Wagon Trains at Helena, Montana, 1874*, lithograph by William de la Montagne Cary, MHS Mus.
- PAGE 101** Gold nuggets, MHS Mus. Wells Fargo Bank Montana Gold Coll.
- FIG. 6.2** Detail of photograph of Pioneer City, M.T., 1883, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-1098
- FIG. 6.3** Hydraulic mining in Alder Gulch, M.T., ca. 1869–71, photo by W. H. Jackson of the Hayden Survey, MHS PA, Mines and Mining
- FIG. 6.4** Placer mining pick and pan, MHS Mus. 1987.81.02 (pick) and X1972.01.04 (pan)
- FIG. 6.5** Walter S. Corwin, photo by E. H. Train, Helena, MHS PA, Mines and Mining
- FIG. 6.6** Major Gold Rush Towns and Trails, map by MHS, base map courtesy NRIS
- FIG. 6.7** Fort Benton Levee, M.T., 1878–79, photo by W. E. Hook Sr., MHS PA, Stereograph
- FIG. 6.8** *The Benton Steaming Past the White Cliffs of Montana, 1878*, Gary R. Lucy, Gary R. Lucy Gallery, Washington, Missouri
- FIG. 6.9** *Bruin Not Bunny Turned the Leaders*, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, by C. M. Russell, 1924, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, OK, 0157.909
- FIG. 6.10** Miner's gold poke (1978.38.01) and pocket scales (X1987.01.52), MHS Mus.
- FIG. 6.11** Indian Camp with Mt. Helena in the distance, ca. 1874, photo by Bundy & Train, Helena, MHS PA 953–370
- FIG. 6.12** Bluebird Mine, ca. 1900, MHS PA, Mines and Mining
- FIG. 6.13** Mrs. Wo Hop document, Butte–Silver Bow Archives
- FIG. 6.14** Vigilante warning 3-7-77, Montana Territory, 1884, MHSA SC 953, fd.2
- FIG. 6.15** Execution of Compton and Wilson on Helena's hanging tree, 1870, photo by M. A. Eckert, MHS PA 948–120
- FIG. 6.16** Col. James L. Fisk's expedition enroute to Montana from Minnesota, 1866, MHS PA
- FIG. 6.17** Beaverhead County mining claim certificate, MHSA
- FIG. 6.18** Bannack residence of Montana's First Governor, 1865, photo taken in 1907, MHS PA 940–707
- FIG. 6.19** Stamp Mill, engraving from *Supplying the Mining World: Mining Equipment Manufacturers of San Francisco, 1850–1900*, by Lynn R. Bailey (Tucson, AZ, 1996), p. 13, MHSL
- FIG. 6.20** *Bi-metallic Hoist in Granite*, by Muriel Sibell Wolle, 1954, MHS Mus.
- FIG. 6.21** Panning gold in Alder Gulch, M.T., ca. 1869–71, photo by W. H. Jackson of the Hayden Survey, MHS PA
- FIG. 6.22** A gold rocker, Oren Sassman, *Metal Mining in Historic Beaverhead* (MA Thesis, Montana State University, 1941), Plate XI, MHSL
- FIG. 6.23** Confederate Gulch in the 1860s, MHS PA
- FIG. 6.24** Hydraulic mining near Nelson Gulch, ca. 1905, photo by Calso, MHS PA