

# ‘We Are Learning to Do These Things Better’

*A Women’s History of Helena’s First Neighborhood*

BY ELLEN BAUMLER



Thanks to the efforts of local women’s preservation groups, remnants of Helena’s Last Chance gold rush—the oldest documented cabin (now known as the Pioneer Cabin), a cabin-turned-brothel (the Caretaker’s House), the city’s last Chinese dwelling (the Yee Wau Cabin), and 1870s tenements at Reeder’s Alley—survive today. George Mitchell was a longtime resident of the Pioneer Cabin. He is pictured here circa 1903 in a wagon by the small log cabin at right, where he lived until his death on January 15, 1938. The building at left was a “female boarding house,” or brothel (later the Caretaker’s House) during this time period.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Plac 2008-58.4



“WE ARE LEARNING to do these things better,” wrote Bessie Elma Rasmussen of Helena in 1940 about the preservation of Montana’s built environment. Her comment came on the heels of local success. The previous year, Helena women had organized and incorporated the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association, one of the first organizations of its kind in the state. Their aim was to save a remnant of the 1860s Last Chance gold rush. Thanks to the efforts of this and another group of women who formed the



Reeder’s Alley Corporation in the late 1950s, two gold rush-era cabins and 1870s tenements—the two parts of Reeder’s Alley—survive today. Collectively, these buildings represent one of the state’s oldest intact neighborhoods. As Montana celebrates its territorial sesquicentennial, the birth of its capital city, and the centennial of women’s suffrage in the state, the Reeder’s Alley neighborhood emerges as a site linking these milestones.<sup>1</sup>

“Preservation” was a term coined later in the twentieth century, but the first attempt at conserving America’s most significant historic buildings dates to the period before the Civil War. The first grassroots efforts were at Mount Vernon near Alexandria, Virginia, in 1858. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association formed to save this endangered landmark, and the group became an “acclaimed archetype of a successful, cooperative preservation organization.” By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women’s clubs and organizations across the nation assumed advocacy roles as they sought to improve their communities.<sup>2</sup>

The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution was one of these early groups. Women founded the organization in 1890 when the newly organized Sons of the American Revolution voted to exclude women from its membership. The Silver Bow chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was Montana’s first, organized at Butte in 1897. Helena’s Oro Fino chapter was the fourth, organized in 1903. By 1940, Montana had fourteen chapters, and its members were involved in numerous charitable, historical, and patriotic activities. DAR members were farsighted and their influence far-reaching. The Montana DAR’s early accomplishments included the first effort to place markers at historic sites and the state’s first preservation project: restoration of the Fort Benton blockhouse in 1907. The second preservation project was the purchase and restoration of the blockhouse at Fort Logan in 1924 by members of the Oro Fino chapter.<sup>3</sup>

These earliest preservation efforts provided valuable experience when Helena’s two gold rush-era cabins were endangered in the 1930s. George Mitchell was the last resident of one of the two cabins that sat along Clore Street (present-day Park Avenue). From at least 1903 until his death on January 15, 1938,

Mitchell raised chickens, sold eggs and poultry, and ran a coal and wood business at the rear of the cabin. Mitchell had no family, was an untidy housekeeper, and did not trust banks. He left all his earnings in dollar bills and loose change lying on shelves, on the cabin floor, and stuffed in socks, tobacco cans, and paper bags. He also reportedly left caches of gold in nuggets and ten-dollar gold pieces hidden in the walls of the cabin. After his death, locals heard of Mitchell's hidden savings and began to disassemble the cabin, log by log, in search of treasure.<sup>4</sup>

On December 15, 1938, nearly a year after Mitchell's death, Grace V. Erickson assembled a group of enthusiastic women at the Helena Chamber of Commerce. Erickson, the wife of former governor John E. Erickson, was an amateur historian and an active member of the local DAR chapter, serving as the organization's historical research committee chairwoman. Others who rallied at her side included

Katherine Prescott Towle and Lottie Rumsey Willett, also active DAR members and chapter officers. The women's innovative idea was to purchase and restore the Mitchell cabin and furnish it as a house museum. Mitchell's property included his cabin, a small house next door, numerous outbuildings, and nine adjacent lots. The city valued the property, slated for public auction, at \$450. Working through the chamber of commerce, the women hoped to raise the purchase price through public subscription. The opportunity to acquire the property was timely as Helena was preparing to celebrate its Diamond Jubilee in July 1939, and Mitchell's cabin—although its history was not yet fully known—was believed to date to the 1860s gold rush.<sup>5</sup>

The auction was scheduled for December 22, and the women had little time to raise funds. To gain community support, Erickson invited representatives of pioneer, civic, and fraternal organiza-

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**A year after George Mitchell's death, former Montana first lady Grace Vance Erickson assembled a group of enthusiastic women with the idea to purchase the Mitchell property and to restore and furnish the cabin as a house museum that they called the Pioneer Cabin. An amateur historian and an active member of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Erickson invited representatives of civic and fraternal organizations to attend the group's meetings. Many prominent descendants of pioneer families and dedicated locals joined the effort to raise the purchase price through public subscription. Erickson is pictured center, with her children, left to right, John, Ellen, Grace, Alberta, and Vance.**





**When the women began restoring the Pioneer Cabin in spring 1939, they had to clear out refuse that had accumulated in the cabin, outbuildings, and surrounding lots over the past seventy-five years. The April 20 *Helena Daily Independent* noted that they worked long hours: “We dropped up there . . . and harbored a secret thought that the women, having purchased the place, wouldn’t have the courage to go in and clean it up. But we underestimated the courage and determination of that particular group who have gone ahead and done a magnificent job without complaining to anyone for help. Really, the work they’ve done comes under the head of colossal.” Here, volunteer workers contend with some of the debris.**

tions to attend the group’s meetings. Mrs. Dolly Burgess, Mrs. Hugh Galusha, and Mrs. J. E. Bower came forward as custodians of a \$164 trust held by the chamber of commerce’s defunct women’s auxiliary. This initial donation served as motivation, and the women successfully raised the amount needed for the chamber of commerce to buy the property on their behalf. The law required incorporation for acquisition of property, so the group incorporated as the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association (LCGRA). The association’s mission was to “restore and preserve the historic spots and relics of pioneers and pioneer days of Last Chance Gulch.” Executive board members included Erickson as chairman; Mrs. Charles Reifenrath, vice chairman; Katherine Prescott Towle, secretary; Margaret Sieben Hibbard, treasurer; and Frank Bogard, director.<sup>6</sup>

The project—including the formal organization of the LCGRA—was among the first efforts of its kind in the state. The movement to preserve historic sites

was under way at the national level in the 1930s, and there had been a few projects undertaken in Montana, including the two early DAR projects at Fort Benton and Fort Logan as well as a local effort to renovate Helena’s historic fire tower in anticipation of the 1939 Diamond Jubilee. Yet it would be several decades before the federal Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and the Urban Renewal program catalyzed widespread interest in preservation. The Helena group’s effort came even before Charles Bovey began assembling his Old Town at the Great Falls Fairgrounds in 1940, a prelude to his work at Nevada and Virginia cities. Bovey’s large-scale project at Virginia City, spanning the period from the mid-1940s until his death in 1978, has been touted as one of the first preservation efforts in the West. However, the LCGRA’s effort foreshadowed Bovey’s landmark work.<sup>7</sup>

When the women began their restoration project in spring 1939, seventy-five years of refuse had accumulated in the cabin and in numerous outbuildings that





By 1939, the landscape of Helena had been changed by fires, earthquakes, and the passage of time. However, the Caretaker's House and the Pioneer Cabin still stood on Park Avenue (formerly Clore Street). The area is circled in this 1939 panorama of the city.

included a small house and workshop next door to the south, a stable, a chicken house, and three outhouses. “The building and surrounding lot was the graveyard of most of the debris in town,” the *Independent Record* noted, and “the ladies were continuously discouraged by remarks that it would be impossible for a group of women to clean up ‘that mess.’” They did it, however, without complaint. Wearing protective gauze masks, they dug into decades of debris and recovered many cast-off items left on the property, including a pierced-tin pie safe from the 1860s, a child’s first pair of shoes, and a spool bedstead. They furnished the cabin with these period antiques and with pieces donated by descendants of the cabin’s early residents and other Helena pioneers. Items included a chair made from an oxbow and a splintered kitchen cutting board, a framed mourning wreath made of human hair, and an 1850s “hat bathtub.” The Pioneer Cabin Museum

opened in July 1939, in time for Helena’s Diamond Jubilee celebration.<sup>8</sup>

The next project was to make the small house next door habitable. Through donations, volunteers’ labor, and Charles E. Warren’s carpentry skills, the house was wired for electricity, a bathroom installed, broken windows and rotted floors replaced, and rotted siding removed to expose the original hand-hewn log walls. Warren and his wife Emma moved into the house as caretakers of the Pioneer Cabin Museum in 1939. After her husband died in 1947, Emma Warren stayed on in the Caretaker’s House until 1958, cultivating the gardens and flowers she and her husband had planted to enhance the grounds. The small dwelling housed subsequent caretakers; the last, Jan Sinamon—remembered by several generations of Helena schoolchildren as a wonderful tour guide—retired in 2001.<sup>9</sup>



With the restoration, the histories of the cabin and small house slowly began to come to light. Montana Historical Society assistant librarian Anne McDonnell completed an inventory of artifacts and items on display and also gathered key reminiscences. These included the recollections of Sallie Davenport Davidson and Jeannette Argyle Parkinson, two of the first female residents of Clore Street.<sup>10</sup> Among the donations to the LCGRA was a manuscript compiled by Leona Carney-Fisher, great-granddaughter of Jonas and Louanna Butts, who were among the Pioneer Cabin's first residents. These three accounts provide the earliest histories and rich details of domestic life in the mining camp at Last Chance. A fourth manuscript, compiled by the Buttses' granddaughter Lulu Wallin, adds further details. The women's recollections not only paint lively scenes of travel west and life in the early gold camp, but they also confirm the building dates of the Pioneer Cabin.<sup>11</sup>

The Butts family's narratives describe how Jonas and Louanna Gist Butts, along with their three girls—Sarah Anne (seven), Derinda Jane (ten), and Arminda Ellen (fourteen)—arrived at Last Chance Gulch in spring 1865 to join Jonas's brother, Wilson Butts, at his mining claim. A veteran of the California gold rush, Wilson had arrived at Last Chance with the first miners the previous summer. As miners built the first cabins in anticipation of winter, Wilson followed suit. His one-room dwelling of hewn and unhewn logs is the back portion of the Pioneer Cabin.

Jonas, Louanna, and the three girls lived in their covered wagon until the brothers built a second cabin



Courtesy Robinson Family



Courtesy Robinson Family

**The first occupants of the Pioneer Cabin's front portion were Jonas and Louanna Butts. They arrived at Last Chance Gulch in the spring of 1865 to join Jonas's brother, Wilson Butts, at his mining claim. When the claim failed to support the family, Louanna's excellent housekeeping skills provided income. Miners gladly paid \$2.20 a pound for her butter.**

of hand-hewn logs, square-notched at the corners, in front of Wilson's. Early maps clearly show the Pioneer Cabin's two distinct parts. The brothers added a porch, later enclosed, that connected the two. Among the treasures the family brought with them was a large piece of window glass packed in sawdust. The glass window was the first on the gulch. The new "front room" served as parlor and bedroom for the family of five. The window and cabin were a local curiosity; "Indians still inhabited the area and often the girls and their mother were startled to see an Indian face peering in through the window, or to find an Indian at the front door asking for 'bicket,'" Lulu Wallin wrote. "Grandmother had nothing but some biscuits left from breakfast to offer them when they came begging and the biscuits made a big hit.

She tried to have some bread of some kind on hand always after for she was a little afraid to send them away without anything."<sup>12</sup>

The Butts brothers' mining claim, although well located, proved not very lucrative, and Louanna Butts helped the family survive financially. A tall, slender woman in her thirties, Louanna was very thrifty and stern with her children, but she was also an excellent housekeeper and a good manager. Louanna's milk cow, brought with her from Independence, Missouri, proved an invaluable investment. Louanna

quickly won wide acclaim as the best butter-maker in the region, and miners gladly paid \$2.20 a pound in gold dust for it. To keep the butter sweet, she stored it underground, covered in salt in heavy crocks. Evidence of an underground cellar at the Pioneer Cabin suggests that this was where the butter was stored.<sup>13</sup>

Rachel and William Davenport and their eight-year-old daughter Sallie settled in the cabin to the south of the Buttses in 1865. According to Sallie, the Davenports left Missouri during the devastation of the Civil War:

My father owned slaves and I have a faint recollection of our negroes leaving and going to Leavenworth, Kansas, and of soldiers coming, taking all our horses, and devastating our garden. The winter of 1863 we moved to Liberty, Missouri. Early in the spring of

1864, my father started to Montana on an ox train, arriving at Virginia City in September, 1864. There he passed the winter and came to Helena, in Last Chance Gulch, early in 1865. Just before father started to Montana, my older brother died—Rice—aged six years.<sup>14</sup>

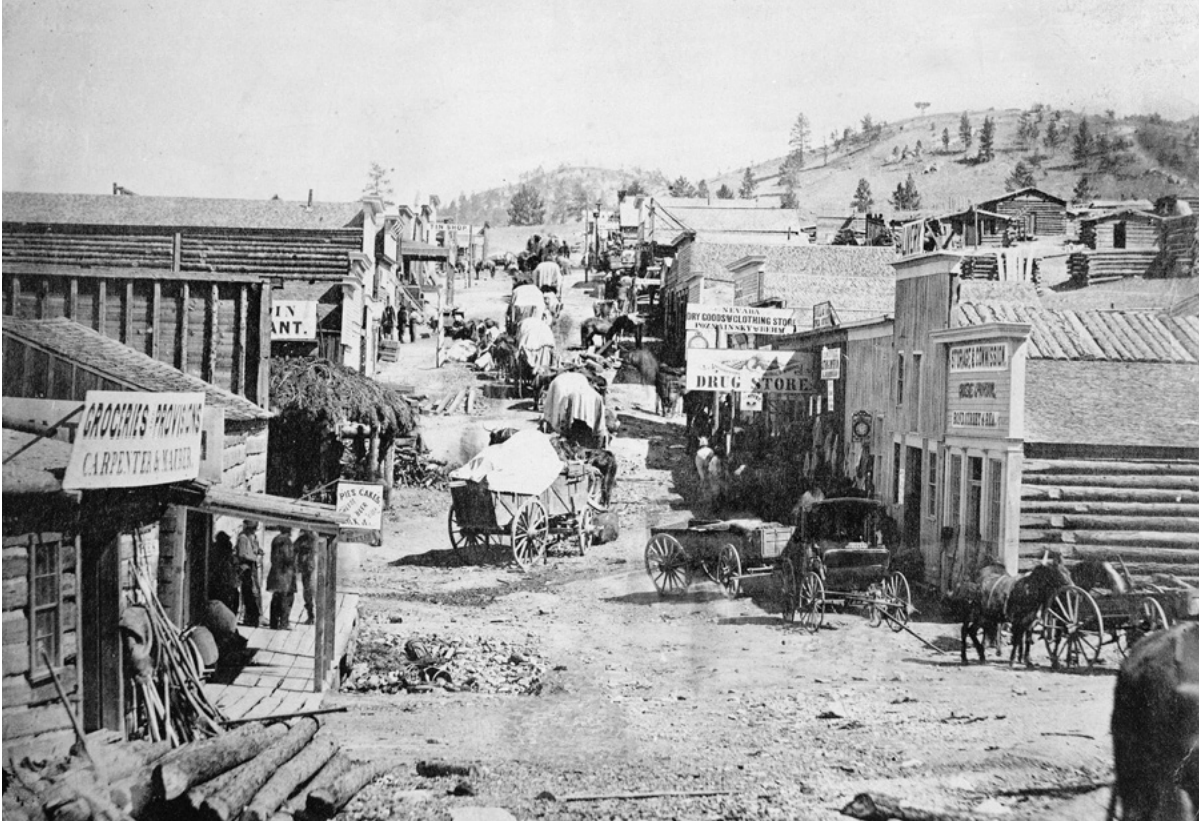
Further tragedy marred the Davenports' journey to Montana. At the end of March 1865, Sallie, her mother Rachel, two-year-old Willie, and ten-year-old Anna boarded the stern-wheeler *St. Johns* for the several months' journey to Fort Benton. The boat was heavily laden with freight and passengers. A measles epidemic spread among the children. There was no physician, and doctors at the forts along the way had no experience with children's diseases. All three Davenport children were very sick. Willie died as the boat docked at Fort Benton, and Anna was gravely ill on the journey by mule team to Helena. The family



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, 954-125

Grace Erickson took this photograph of the Pioneer Cabin on October 7, 1933. Newlyweds Stephen and Luella Fergus Gilpatrick were the second family to occupy the Pioneer Cabin. Luella planted the two locust trees on either side of the lane between the cabin and the small frame house that became known as the Caretaker's House. The trees were the first nonnative trees planted in Montana. The building to the right originally housed a Japanese brothel and was built after 1891.





The very first photograph of Helena, this image of Bridge Street was taken in 1865, the year that the Butts, Davenport, and Parkinson families arrived, and it shows the character of the mining camp when the families lived along Clore Street. As the community grew, the three families moved away—the Parkinsons in late 1865 and the Davenports in 1866. The Butts family stayed the longest, but when a hurdy-gurdy house opened across the street in 1867, they decided to relocate.

moved into the cabin William Davenport had prepared for them next door to the Butts family. Anna lingered until September 6. Sallie recalled that unhappy summer: “Mother had brought a washing machine with her, and in doing the washing she bruised one finger so she had a bone felon. I can remember her walking the floor with her hand bandaged, and my sister, Anna, always in bed.”<sup>15</sup>

Details of the neighborhood emerge through the recollections of Sallie Davenport and others. When flour was very expensive in the gold camp, Sallie remembered that a creative baker substituted brown paper for the bottom crust of his dried apple pies. Brown paper, however, was too expensive to wrap packages. “So the butcher gave you a pointed stick to put in your meat to carry it home. . . . I suppose there were no hungry dogs to snatch it from you, and flies were not considered unsanitary,” Davenport recalled. According to Derinda Jane Butts Tuttle, girls had few items of clothing, usually one good dress, a “second best dress,” several “dressing sacks,” and several aprons to save their clothing from becoming soiled. In the winter, several months would go by without

washing their hair for fear of catching cold. Fine-tooth combs took out the lint, and rubbing the scalp with salt and cornmeal added “some cleansing action.”<sup>16</sup>

Helena residents were aware of the violent undercurrent that characterized the early settlement. Clore Street resident Jeannette Parkinson encountered the evidence once when she and a friend took an early walk before breakfast. The two women laughed and talked as they came through the draws on the eastern outskirts of town: “Coming to one of these, their eyes idly followed its course, when they were startled at seeing what made them turn, and with not a backward glance, hurry homeward. They had caught a glimpse of a scraggly tree from which hung the body of a man. It was a gruesome sight and needed no explanation as to its being. Another lynching by the vigilantes—that was all.”<sup>17</sup>

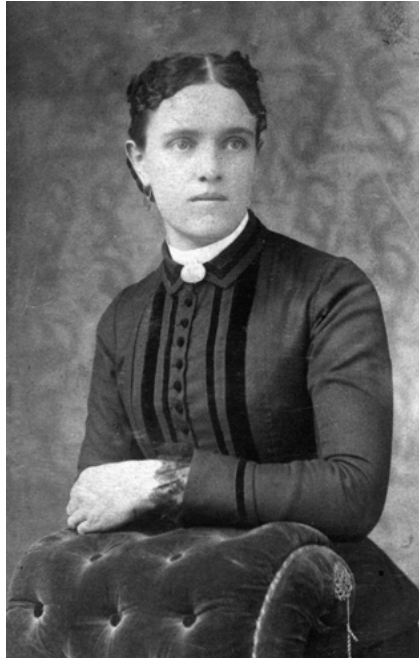
The cabin of Jeannette Parkinson and her husband William (which no longer stands) was south of the Davenports. The Parkinsons also arrived in the early summer of 1865. Jeannette, brought up in a wealthy slave-owning household in St. Joseph, Missouri, had married fifty-year-old William Parkinson in



**Accounts by Sallie Davenport Davidson, Jeannette Argyle Parkinson, and Derinda Jane Butts Tuttle (right) document domestic life in Helena and provide the earliest histories and rich details of the Pioneer Cabin and its neighborhood. Without these women's recollections, we would know very little about this time period.**

1862 when she was only seventeen. Parkinson piloted steamboats for the American Fur Company from 1853 until 1858, when he caught the gold fever with the discovery at Pike's Peak. Leaving the river behind, the captain headed west to Denver, bringing with him the first plow and garden seeds. He returned to St. Joseph, Missouri, and was stocking up on provisions to freight to Montana when he was smitten by tiny, dark-haired Jeannette Argyle, the daughter of a general store proprietor. Two months later, the couple married and set out for Montana by way of Denver.<sup>18</sup>

On the trip west, Captain Parkinson drove his freight wagon while Jeannette made the trip driving two high-spirited Thoroughbreds hitched to a fancy thousand-dollar carriage. The vehicle, outfitted with sterling silver appointments and plate-glass mirrors, was a wedding gift from her father. Jeannette, following southern custom, also brought her own cook, which considerably lightened her domestic duties. The party wintered in Denver, where the Parkinsons' son, Argyle, was born. In the spring, they again set out. When the Thoroughbreds became footsore in the mountains, a team of oxen pulled the carriage the rest of the way to Virginia City, providing comic relief to miners in the gulches. The Parkinsons wintered in Virginia City and moved on to Helena the next spring. After the family had settled into their tiny cabin, thirteen-month-old Argyle died. His was among the first burials in the mining camp cemetery. The baby's portrait, taken after his death, was reputedly the first photograph taken in Helena.<sup>19</sup>



Courtesy Robinson Family

Miners' cabins were intended to be temporary, and neither the Parkinsons nor the Davenports lived for long on Clore Street. Late in 1865, the Parkinsons built a house on Pine Street, the first frame dwelling in the new settlement. William Davenport made little on his Helena claim, so in late summer 1866 the family moved to the boomtown of Diamond City, where they kept a combination store, post office, and stage office. The Buttses remained the longest, but even they moved on in 1867. Jonas Butts was a strict Baptist, and when a hurdy-gurdy house opened across the street and the "music was going at all hours and often voices raised in song or in fighting were heard," he and his wife decided it was

no place to rear three girls.<sup>20</sup>

The Buttses sold their double cabin to newlyweds Stephen and Luella Gilpatrick, the daughter of well-known pioneer James Fergus. Luella's future husband had come west from Wisconsin in 1863 on an American Fur Company steamer and arrived at Fort Benton just after the Alder Gulch discovery. He headed there to try his luck. When prospecting yielded no great fortune, Gilpatrick worked a claim for Fergus and thus met his future bride. The Fergus family soon moved to Helena, where the couple was married on New Year's Day 1867 at the Fergus ranch in the Prickly Pear Valley.<sup>21</sup>

Gilpatrick, who later served as Lewis and Clark County sheriff, was the Oliver Express agent and with a partner ran Helena's first stationery store. It was Luella, however, who left a legacy at their cabin where they lived for several years. She planted two small locust seedlings that she had carried west in tomato cans, one at the cabin's southeast corner and one at the northeast corner. Although neighbors thought it a good joke that Luella nurtured the seedlings, one sturdy offspring still produces leaves north of the Pioneer Cabin's front door. Luella's two seedlings long provided the only shade in the neighborhood and became the parent trees of many in the region.<sup>22</sup>

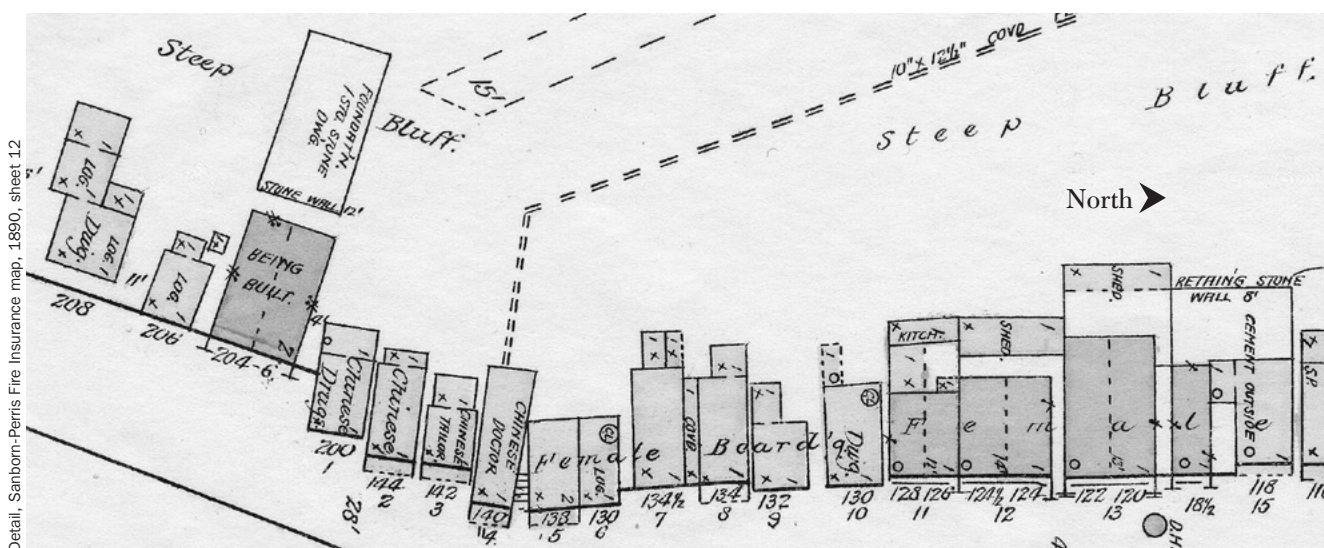
Louis C. and Theresa Henry took up residency in the cabin after the Gilpatricks. Louis, a well-known boot and shoemaker, was a Union veteran of the Civil

War who came to Montana in the mid-1860s, prospected at Unionville near Helena, and then returned to Minnesota for his family. When the LCGRA was collecting items for the Pioneer Cabin, the Henry family donated Theresa's sewing machine, brought with her up the Missouri to Fort Benton on the steamboat *Mountaineer*. Sewing machines were a rarity in Helena, and Theresa frequently loaned the small hand-operated machine to neighbors. After the Henrys, occupancy of the Pioneer Cabin and its two neighbors to the south becomes murky, and title history to the property is muddled until the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup>

Many newcomers flocked to Helena for opportunities beyond prospecting. Louis Reeder, a skilled brick and stone mason from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, helped to build the first permanent Lewis and Clark County Courthouse in 1867, and by 1872 he was investing in property. He soon owned a number of lots on Cutler Street, where he constructed a series of small tenements and bunkhouses that catered especially to single miners. When the complex was finished, there were some thirty-two brick-and-stone single units in a rambling collage of buildings. By 1884, the collection of buildings above and behind the early Clore Street cabins had been christened Reeder's Alley. Louis Reeder died in 1884 after falling from a scaffold. His estate, valued at eighty thousand

dollars, was in dispute by family members until 1908. Managers took care of the Reeder's Alley apartments, whose tenants continued to be predominantly single men. A few were miners, but more often they worked as teamsters, hotel porters, cooks, seasonal sheepherders, and laborers.<sup>24</sup>

Occupants of the Davenport cabin (the Caretaker's House) and the Butts cabin (the Pioneer Cabin) in the 1880s and 1890s were renters, and their individual identities are unknown. However, by 1884, several additions had expanded the Davenport cabin, and by 1888 its residents were women. The Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance map of 1892 labels the cabin "female boarding," denoting its use as a house of prostitution. By 1885, prostitutes had become a city nuisance, soliciting on the main thoroughfares, even peering in windows of businesses along Main Street. To alleviate this problem, the city passed an ordinance that year prohibiting all women from any kind of employment on Main Street. Public women displaced by the ordinance shifted their businesses to the dilapidated Clore Street miners' cabins that nestled against the hillside from Wall Street to the entrance to Reeder's Alley. At least twenty-two women worked and lived along the block in 1890. Although the Pioneer Cabin was never labeled "female boarding," its female occupant in 1890 supports the supposition that it, too, was red-light property. Today, the Davenport cabin is



Detail, Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance map, 1890, sheet 12

Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance maps show how Helena's red-light district grew during the 1880s. In this detail from the 1890 map, some cabins are labeled "female boarding," denoting their use as a house of prostitution. The map also demonstrates a trend that characterized western mining towns: Helena's Chinese settlement spread out and intertwined with the red-light district. Prostitutes relied on the cheap and hearty meals offered by noodle parlors and on birth control and remedies for venereal diseases provided by Chinese physicians and herbalists, while Chinese merchants relied on the women's patronage. The Pioneer Cabin is the structure on the far left labeled "Dwg" (dwelling).



Helena's only identifiable surviving remnant of what was once a thriving red-light district.<sup>25</sup>

As was the norm in western mining towns, the Chinese settlement spread out adjacent to the red-light district and to some extent intertwined with it. Most Chinese came to Montana initially to placer mine, leaving families behind, and therefore the population was overwhelmingly male. Chinese citizens in Helena owned property and paid taxes, provided domestic services, and operated laundries, restaurants, pharmacies, grocery stores, tailor shops, and mercantiles. During the nineteenth century, Chinese residents east of Clore Street cultivated extensive truck gardens watered by the stream flowing along Last Chance Gulch. Montana Territory's first federal census, taken in 1870, records the population of Helena at

about three thousand. Chinese residents made up 10 percent of the territorial population and more than 20 percent of Lewis and Clark County's residents. Today, the only Chinese-associated building still standing in Helena is the Yee Wau Cabin, which stands across the alleyway south of the Caretaker's House. Its date of construction is undocumented and its first occupants unknown, but by 1879 the Yee Wau brothers, who long operated a South Main Street grocery, owned and occupied the cabin.<sup>26</sup>

Chinese businessmen and public women had a symbiotic relationship; both were marginalized populations. Noodle parlors offered the women cheap and hearty meals, and Chinese merchants relied on the women's patronage. The log-cabin shops of a tailor, a druggist, and a Chinese doctor stood along Clore

Detail, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, H-3309



Today, nearly all of the buildings in Helena's Chinese and red-light districts have been demolished, but this detail from an 1890 photograph, taken by F. Jay Haynes looking northwest, shows the area when those neighborhoods were still thriving. In this detail, Clore Street (now Park Avenue) runs in front of the Caretaker's House and the Pioneer Cabin. Beside the Caretaker's House, Cutler Street leads up to the stone house in the top left; below it stand the multi-level apartments built by Louis Reeder in the 1870s known as Reeder's Alley. The lower portion of the photograph shows part of the Chinese neighborhood with gardens and laundry. Urban Renewal claimed this area in the 1970s.





In the 1870s, Chinese residents made up 20 percent of Lewis and Clark County's population. The date of construction of this cabin is unknown, but by 1879 the Yee Wau brothers, who operated a South Main Street grocery, lived there. Reeder's apartment buildings rise behind the cabin.



Although the Chinese made significant contributions to the early community, this ethnic group suffered discrimination and segregation in Helena, as in other western mining towns. With few families and even fewer women, the population dwindled. By 1930, Lewis and Clark County had only 87 Chinese residents. Chinese homes and businesses later fell victim to Urban Renewal programs, and traces of Chinese culture disappeared. Today, the Yee Wau Cabin remains the only Chinese-associated building still standing in Helena. It is located across the alley south of the Caretaker's House.

Street in 1890. Chinese doctors and pharmacists were highly skilled and well trained in ancient medical arts, many of them under renowned practitioners. They prescribed for the women what western doctors often either could not or would not: remedies for venereal diseases and birth control. Further, opium was readily obtainable. Under the care of a professional, opium ingested to the point of near overdose brought on spontaneous abortion. By 1892, a two-story brick building labeled “Japanese Female Boarding” and other brick female boarding establishments replaced the log shops and other frame buildings.<sup>27</sup>

Nearby Reeder's Alley tenements were home to many men during this period, but one woman in particular is part of its mystique. Laura Duchesnay lived with her husband, George, in the stone house at the top of the alley. George managed Reeder's Alley in the 1920s. The Duchesnays were French immigrants,

and local children were in awe of Laura with her heavy French accent and her reputation as a “bird doctor” who had a magic touch. She was a breeder of canaries and filled her tiny apartment with the little songbirds. Legend has it that the Duchesnays sold bootleg whiskey during Prohibition. According to lore, buyers lined up to her door all the way from Park Avenue. They feared the revenue officer would come around with questions, so Laura set her cages along the alley. If anyone asked, customers said they were in line to buy canaries. When the Montana Heritage Commission converted the stone house into office space in 2008, workers discovered two hidden underground rooms accessed by a homemade ladder, likely for storing moonshine.<sup>28</sup>

Over the decades, several factors helped preserve the Reeder's Alley buildings. The neighborhood was far enough away from the fires that ravaged early



By the end of the 1950s, city planners were targeting the Reeder's Alley buildings for demolition along with all the remnants of the red-light district and the Chinese settlement. Jane Tobin, Eileen Harper, and Pat Boedecker, pictured left to right, disagreed. When they discovered that the stone house and nearby property at the top of the alley were for sale, they joined forces to raise the asking price of \$1,500 and began renovating the buildings. As Pat Boedecker described it, Tobin, the granddaughter of T. C. Power, was attracted to the idea of preserving a unique historic site; Harper wanted to establish a commercial area and a place for people to gather; and Boedecker herself envisioned galleries and spaces for artists to work.



Pat Boedecker, Reeder's Alley: History, Housewives, and Art (Helena, 2005), 6

Helena many times. The buildings were well constructed of sturdy materials, and, unlike other structures that fell vacant over time, continuous occupation kept them relatively safe from vandalism and wrecking crews. Earthquakes claimed several of the Reeder's Alley brick buildings in 1935, but enough remained to maintain the ambiance of the little complex. The neighborhood held on, but barely.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of the 1950s, Reeder's Alley was home to twenty-three male pensioners who lived in the tenements, which were served by a series of outhouses and a bathhouse. The small dwellings filled a significant need for low-rent housing for senior citizens on fixed incomes, and property owners Reed Matthews and George Sullivan looked after the men, but city planners were eyeing the area, targeting it for eventual demolition along with all the remnants of the red-light district and the Chinese settlement. Most considered the area a blight on the community. Pat Boedecker, who grew up in the neighborhood above Reeder's Alley, viewed it otherwise.<sup>30</sup>

Over lunch in 1959, Boedecker and her friend Eileen Harper decided they had to do something about Reeder's Alley. They envisioned an artists' colony where women could create. When they dis-

covered the stone house and several other smaller buildings at the top of the alley were for sale, they added Jane Tobin to their little group. Each of the three women brought her own special skills: Pat was the artist, Eileen the organizer and builder, and Jane the financial wizard. The three of them succeeded in clandestinely buying the buildings. Without their husbands' knowledge, each day from ten till three while their children were in school, the women hauled trash, cleaned, knocked down partitions, and installed drywall.<sup>31</sup>

While some scoffed at the three women, others caught their enthusiasm and pitched in to help, donating expertise, labor, and equipment. The group incorporated, and after George Sullivan relocated the tenants, the women bought the rest of Reeder's Alley and improved that, too, by offering women artists one year's free rent in exchange for cleaning up their units. The threesome completed their work in 1962, filled



After purchasing the property, Tobin, Harper, and Boedecker's first task was to fix up the stone building, where they planned to sell antiques to support a gallery and to host private luncheons. As Boedecker wrote, "By 1963 we had opened our luncheons to the public. We made our favorite household dishes. In those days there were not that many good cookbooks, just the *Joy of Cooking* used as a Bible!"

the new shop spaces and opened a lunchroom in the stone house at the top of the alley. For a decade, the colony thrived. Artist Nan Parsons and jazz musician M. J. Williams, then in high school, rented studios at Reeder's Alley. Williams later wrote that the "vision

those women had and their belief that they could manifest it, was instrumental in our—much later—moving to Basin as artists, restoring the old buildings there, and eventually founding the Montana Artist Refuge."<sup>32</sup>



In 1961, the women bought the rest of Reeder's Alley for nine thousand dollars and incorporated as the Reeder's Alley Corporation. Above, Jane Tobin (at left) visits with longtime resident and caretaker Stark Evans, standing in the doorway of one of Reeder's apartments. The stone house is behind the women.



Eileen Harper moved out of state, and Pat Boedecker became an inactive partner in 1964, but Grayce Loble stepped in, and she and Jane Tobin kept the business going. When the women sold the alley and dissolved the Reeder's Alley Corporation in 1974, they were pleased with their work: "We were able to pay off all of our debts and knew that we had really accomplished more than we had ever hoped to realize: we had saved the alley from deterioration, established an art colony, provided a tourist attraction, and made our dream for the alley."<sup>33</sup>

After several ownership transfers in the 1970s and 1980s, the Reeder's Alley properties were donated to the State of Montana by Kathy and Darrell Gustin in 2001. The Last Chance Restoration Association owned and maintained the Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House until it gave the property title to the State of Montana in 2005. The Montana Heritage Preservation and Development Commission currently manages all three properties. The only private dwelling among the territorial-period buildings is the Yee Wau Cabin. Its survival is thanks to Vicky Homer,

State Historic Preservation Office, MHS, Helena



Tobin, Harper, and Boedecker set about improving Reeder's Alley by offering women artists free rent for a year in exchange for cleaning up individual units. By 1962, work was complete, and the alley was filled with shops and artists. "It's really simple, after all," Eileen was quoted as saying in the July 9, 1961, *Helena Independent Record*. "What we are trying to do is establish the area as a place where tourists and Helena visitors may see various phases of the arts actually in the process of creation." This view from the upper end of Reeder's Alley (originally Cutler Street) shows Reeder's apartments on the right and the backsides of the Pioneer Cabin and the Caretaker's House on the left below the fence.



Pat Boedecker, Reeder's Alley: History, Housewives, and Art (Helena, 2005), 49



By 1963, Reeder's Alley housed antiques, pottery, glass, and book shops as well as a cookie store, an art classroom, and the Bear Mouth Country Store (left), which raised funds for the local Florence Crittenton Home.

Pat Boedecker operated a restaurant in the stone house at the top of the alley. "There was something so addictive about feeding people, nourishing them, and the hum of satisfaction from the dining room," Boedecker wrote. She and Helena High School student Wendy Porter (below, right) pose beside the sign Porter designed and painted. Even after Tobin, Harper, and Boedecker sold the alley and dissolved the corporation in 1974, the restaurant continued to be a popular dining spot.

Pat Boedecker, Reeder's Alley: History, Housewives, and Art (Helena, 2005), 14



Above, Eileen Harper holds up a portrait found in one of the abandoned buildings in 1963. Pat Boedecker credited Harper with conceptualizing Reeder's Alley as a space for women artists: "She was, frankly, the only woman I knew in Helena at that time who could be called a 'feminist.' . . . She was constantly complaining that there was not a space in town where women could play cards, hold lectures, and engage in matters of intellectual growth. She wanted a kind of salon where women could talk about books they'd read, have lunch, enjoy the arts."



Pat Boedecker, Reeder's Alley: History, Housewives, and Art (Helena, 2005), 54





Today, the neighborhood continues to be a model of community preservation and a credit to the women who documented its pioneer past and preserved its physical remains. Reeder's Alley, the Pioneer Cabin, and the Caretaker's House are owned and managed by the State of Montana. In this 1970s-era photograph, one of Luella Gilpatrick's original locust trees flanks the cabin on the left, and an offspring, which still survives today, grows in front of the window.

its longtime owner, who raised her children there, still lives there, and carefully maintains the property.

The women who documented Helena's pioneer history provided a written framework for the next generations. The accomplishments of Grace Erickson and the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association and the women of the Reeder's Alley Corporation left an important sustainable legacy that continues to be a model of community preservation. The oldest documented cabin of the gold rush, the cabin-turned-brothel-turned-Caretaker's House, the last Chinese

dwelling in Helena, and the miners' quarters at Reeder's Alley are a tribute to women who, in Bessie Rasmussen's words, learned "to do these things better."

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**Ellen Baumler** is the interpretive historian and National Register sign program coordinator at the Montana Historical Society. She is the author and editor of numerous articles and books about Montana history. Her blog, *Montana Moments*, can be found at [ellenbaumler.blogspot.com](http://ellenbaumler.blogspot.com).



## 'We Are Learning to Do These Things Better'

1. Bessie Elma Rasmussen, "On the Trail of the Markers," in *State History, Daughters of the American Revolution in Montana*, by Mrs. Lewis D. Smith (n.p., 1940).
2. Sandra Riccio and Sue Pringle, "Women and Historic Preservation," *Forum Journal* 16 (Spring 2002).
3. Smith, *State History*, details the DAR's marking of many historic sites and credits Antoinette Van Hooke Browne of Fort Benton with securing eight hundred dollars from the Tenth Montana Legislature for restoration of the blockhouse. Governor J. K. Toole placed her in charge of the funds. Once the goal was accomplished, the property was turned over to the city to maintain as a park. Restoration of the Fort Logan blockhouse in 1924 was the group's second restoration project. See the *Fort Wiki* at [http://www.fortwiki.com/Fort\\_Logan\\_\(1\)](http://www.fortwiki.com/Fort_Logan_(1)), accessed June 2014; DAR National Website, <http://www.dar.org>.
4. *Helena Independent*, Mar. 26, 1939.
5. *Ibid.*, Dec. 4, 14, 16, 18, 1938.
6. *Ibid.*, Mar. 24, 29, 1939. Among the numerous prominent women on the advisory committee were Mrs. Harry Child, Marguerite Greenfield, Mrs. A. N. Rinda, Mrs. Robert H. Fletcher, Lucinda Scott, Marie Southworth, and Clara Kennett.
7. Dick Pace, "Will Never Be Forgotten," *Virginia City Madonian*, June 15, 1978; "Montana Towns Saved," *Preservation* 49 (May-June 1997): 102; *Montana Moments* blog, <http://ellenbaumler.blogspot.com/2013/05/sullivan-saddlery.html>; Phil Gruen, "Staging the Past in Montana's Alder Gulch: Ruminations on History, Tourism, and Preservation," *Montana* 61 (Winter 2011): 16-33.
8. Grace Erickson, "Report from the Oro Fino Chapter to the DAR State Conference," 1940, 1/17, Charles A. Bovey Papers, 1907-1978, MC 298, MHS; *HIR*, June 7, 1953.
9. *HIR*, Dec. 23, 1962.
10. The details of the earliest neighborhood emerge through the recollections encouraged and recorded by the women who interviewed them. Without their foresight, there would be no information. The stories of Jonas and Louanna Butts' daughter Arminda Ellen Butts Carney were documented by her granddaughter, Leona Arminda Carney-Fisher, and those of daughter Derinda Jane Butts Tuttle by her daughter, Lulu Tuttle Wallin. Both Martha Plassman and Dorothy D. MacIntosh interviewed Jeannette Parkinson. Sallie Davidson wrote her own memoir.
11. "Memoirs of Sallie Davenport Davidson," Nov. 1, 1928, 1/17, SC 606,

MHS; Jeannette Parkinson, interview by Martha Edgerton Plassman, MNAI Aug. 11, 1928; Leona Arminda Carney-Fisher, "Builders of the Pioneer Cabin in Last Chance Gulch," 1951, Pioneer Cabin VF, MHS; Lulu Tuttle Wallin, "The Forgotten Pioneers," n.d., copy furnished to the author by Lynda Kieres, granddaughter of Lulu Wallin, July 14, 1999. The Carney-Fisher account and the earlier Wallin reminiscence were compiled from the firsthand interviews and reminiscences and share nearly identical passages.

12. Wallin, "The Forgotten Pioneers," 3-4.
13. *Ibid.*, 5; Carney-Fisher, "Builders of the Pioneer Cabin in Last Chance Gulch," sec. 5; author conversations with SHPO architect Herb Dawson during cabin renovation in the late 1990s.
14. "Memoirs of Sallie Davenport Davidson."
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*; Wallin, "The Forgotten Pioneers," 6, 7.
17. Plassman MNAI interview, Aug. 11, 1928.
18. William Parkinson biographical sketch, written by W. F. Wheeler as part of the Parkinsons' application for membership in the Pioneers Association of Montana, William Fletcher Wheeler Papers, 1895-1894, MC 65, MHS.
19. Plassman MNAI interview; MacIntosh interview, MNAI, Apr. 18, 1940.
20. "MAHI, 313 Pine Street, South Central Historic District," SHPO; Wallin, "The Forgotten Pioneers," 2. The Butts family relocated on mining claims at Dry Gulch, where Jonas developed consumption, and the family then ranched at Fish Creek. Jonas died at age forty-five in 1873. The family divided the property, and Louanna remained at Fish Creek while Wilson, still a bachelor, took up a ranch of his own. "MAHI, 313 Pine Street."
21. *Helena Independent*, Feb. 27, 1931.
22. Wallin, "The Forgotten Pioneers," 4.
23. *Helena Weekly Herald*, Mar. 8, 1894; *HIR*, Feb. 10, 1950; "MAHI, Pioneer Cabin at 208 South Park Street"; "Sources of Items in the Pioneer Cabin," Pioneer Cabin VF, MHS.
24. Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Map of Helena, 1884; *Helena Herald*, Aug. 27, 1884; *Helena Independent*, July 1, 1908.
25. Alexander Botkin, *The Charter and Ordinances of the City of Helena with the Rules of Order for the Government of the City Council* (Helena, MT, 1887), 126-27; Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1865-1900* (Helena, MT, 1987), 42-43; Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps of Helena, 1884, 1888, 1890, 1892; Polk City

Directory, 1890, arranged by address. These women, although anonymous, played a major role in this phase of the neighborhood's history as they occupied the area from the 1880s until 1917. Red-light districts closed by federal law with the onset of World War I in 1917.

26. Christopher Merritt, "The Coming Man from Canton: The Chinese Experience in Montana (1862-1943)" (PhD diss., University of Montana, 2010), 58, 54, 237; "MAHI, Yee Wau Cabin at 300 South Park Street," SHPO.

27. Despite the activities of its nearest neighbors, Reeder's tiny apartments behind and up the hill never seem to have sheltered working prostitutes. At the rear of the Caretaker's House, however, there is an extension of several cribs with windows opening directly onto the alley; these windows were bricked off at some point, forcing the women to reorient their business away to the north side of the building. Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps of Helena, 1890, 1892. This same situation occurred in Butte. See Ellen Baumler, "Devil's Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana" *Montana* 48 (Autumn 1998): 4-21.

28. Polk city directories for Helena, 1925-1933; Dick Pace, "Reeder's Alley," n.d., Reeder's Alley VF, MHS. See also Ellen Baumler, "Songbirds in the Alley," *Distinctly Montana*, Fall 2013; *Helena Independent*, Feb. 25, 1933; author interview with Don Byrd, fall 2000.

29. *Helena Independent*, Nov. 1, 1935.

30. *Great Falls Tribune*, July 1, 1962.

31. Author conversations with Pat Boedecker, Nov. 2001; Pat Boedecker, *Reeder's Alley: History, Housewives, and Art* (Helena, MT), 2005.

32. Boedecker, *Reeder's Alley*, 52.

33. *HIR*, Nov. 20, 2001; Boedecker, *Reeder's Alley*, 7, 56.