

# Half Century in Grocery Business in Helena Is Record of R. C. Wallace Completed Today

## Scotch Army Officer From Army of Potomac Walked Into Camp Fifty Years Ago and Always Made Good

Rubbing his eyes with a pair of hands and stretching a pair of legs which were hard from long marches but not much larger than a pair of saplings, a young major of the United States army pulled himself out from under a blanket spread by the side of a freighter's wagon in Payne's Corral, where the Helena postoffice building stands, now, and took a good look at the camp which he had needed to make his new home in the west. It was a summer morning in 1870.

This soldier, who had won his commission for distinguished service in a Michigan cavalry regiment and fought in most of the battles along the Potomac and turned down a regular commission in the army, though by his order by officers of his own regiment and approved by General Philip Sheridan, had one dollar and fifty cents in his pocket, a blanket and a few pieces of bacon.

"There was no soldiers' welfare committee in vogue in the spring of 1870, where a young officer discharged from the union army could find friends: there was no club house, no reading rooms for returned soldiers. He did not belong to a "union" where he could get financial aid or secure a few "tips" to help him through the first week. There was no state nor territorial fund for putting soldiers on their feet. They had to scramble on their own feet and stand on them.

So this major from the Union army of the Potomac—this soldier of fortune with the bacon and the blanket, tented a one-room cabin over in Dry Gulch, opposite Hagan's tree, and moved in.

His name was in the directory published in Helena in those days, down toward the end of the list of residents. His name would have appeared:

"WALLACE, Major Robert C. No. 1 Hagan's Park, Dry Gulch."

For this young man was Robert C. Wallace, native of Ayer, Scotland, adopted son of Michigan, who, today (May 1, 1921) completes forty years with the bacon and the blanket and head of the firm of R. C. Wallace & Company of Helena, whose store front stretches fifty feet of city block on First street.

See An Old Friend.

From his cabin he could see the "bright lights" of the Gulch, and the first evening in Helena Major Wallace walked forth and curiously led him to go into a gambling house operating on the town, with a dozen games in progress. Seated behind a table dealing faro was a man whose face was familiar in the young army officer. Turning back to his memory to the battlefields of the early states, he recognized in the dealer a man named "Forky," a young lieutenant in Sheridan's army. Major Wallace was strongly tempted to make himself known to the man but decided he did not want to begin his acquaintance in

the territory with gamblers, so he shuffled out of the place.

A short time after Forky was trying to get a horse and a mule in Chance Gulch by another gambler and his body buried back in the hills by the rough crowd with whom he laced.

Thirty years later Mr. Wallace had the body of Sheridan's old son removed to the Grand Army park, where a granite monument and a head-stone erected, giving the name and regiment of Forky, a good soldier and a brave man.

But the losses were getting low in the little cabin of Wallace and he picked up a farmer who needed help in his potato patch down on the Prickly Pear valley. Wallace went to work for him at \$1.50 per day and board, which was fairly good for a potato digger, though farmers were making 50 per day and hoarding themselves.

Hard Work Begins to Count.

With the potatoes out of the way, the young man found the officers' ranks of a famous Michigan cavalry regiment found a job removing ballings from a little cabin which it was proposed to convert into a street. It is Sixth avenue now. "The work was hard for a green hand on the job and his legs got so sore and cricked that the shovel handle was often marked with blood when he dropped it at sunset. The winter was long and he kept for a rather, taking care of stock, hauling wood from the hills, being generally handy man about the place.

When spring opened in '70 Mr. Wallace made a bargain with the man who kept a little fruit and the land, while he was to do the work and put in a crop of potatoes and small vegetables to sell to the mining camp. He brought the vegetables to the camp every morning by daylight and before noon was out working in the field again. When the potato was dug, he owned half of it and with his savings had \$450.

Winnings at the Ranch.

But the profits were not all young Mr. Wallace made at that ranch in the Prickly Pear valley. A cousin of the owner, Miss Ellen M. Shaw, taught school in Helena and lived at the ranch. She became acquainted with the industrious young man and she, too, was from Michigan. She completed her studies at school there, she and Wallace agreed to wed when he had acquired enough to rent a cabin of his own in the gulch.

Four years later Miss Shaw was a passenger on the old steamer, Nellie Peck, and landed at Fort Benton in 1875. Mr. Wallace met her there. There was no one in Fort Benton to perform a marriage ceremony except a justice of the peace who ran a butcher shop. The wedding took place and the certificate was written up by the butcher on a piece of paper, Mrs. Wallace

## Fifty Years Ago Today, Wallace Opened Grocery Store in Helena—And the Store Is Still Open



MAJOR R. C. WALLACE

often laughingly referred to it as "Our Butcher Bill." She died in 1890.

How did Major Wallace get into the grocery business? Just like countless thousands of other young men have started in one line of business or another, by becoming the last one on the pay roll of some firm or business man. In the fall of 1870 with his \$450 carefully put away, he got a job with the "Big Deal," driving their grocery wagon.

Business For Himself.

But he was looking around for a place to invest his money, now grown to \$825. There was an old man who kept a little fruit and grocery store in the old "Dumphy & Bentley" block, which was across the street from the old Cruse bank. He occupied just one door of the building where the old Cruse bank was later located. Mr. Wallace bought the fixtures and rented the place, paying \$30 rent in advance. May 1, 1871, he had invested his last dollar in aiding a stock of groceries to this little fruit store and Mr. Wallace was in business for himself. He slept and cooked in the place and laid down his experience.

How did he succeed?

Let Mr. R. C. Wallace, himself, tell what he considers the foundation of a successful business career:

Wallace Success Program.

"Don't live beyond your means. It will surely lead to trouble and besides you cannot do it and be honest, and if not honest, what will you amount to in this world or any other? Cultivate a true and friendship with reasonable economy—it is the truest friend you ever will meet, and will never go away on you. It will lead you to success and without it you can never succeed in the long run. I know these are homely words and don't count for much, but the estimation of many, but they ought to be written in letters of gold, for were they universally practiced, many miserable thieves would be made happy."

"The young groceryman had his ups and downs in the camp, one day he went to the bank and got a signing a note with another man for \$375, which Wallace had laid out on the profits of his little store. He had secured for his credit good with everyone in the community.

In the spring of 1875, H. Wilson, a grocery merchant, died and J. L. Davis, a clerk in the store, was made one of the administrators of the estate. Mr. Wallace suggested that they take over the Wilson stock to sell on commission and form a partnership. He suggested that they move his little stock but the Wilson settlement and the firm of Davis & Wallace was formed. They had a large stock of goods of groceries valued at more than \$200,000. They settled every month with the estate for what had been sold and in that way got a good start. The firm prospered from the beginning, both men working hard and paying attention to business. Davis was one of the best men in the grocery business who ever entered a store in Montana but he wanted to fly high when the firm was making money and his ideas of economy did not harmonize with those of the Scotch soldier. So Mr. Wallace bought the interest of Davis and went to the bank and asked for a loan of \$11,000 on his individual note and rather to his surprise, he got it. He also assumed the debt of the firm and the building, which the firm had re-

Colonel Broadwater and Self-Block probably interested him the most. Seth Wallace used to come into his grocery store now and then with a proposition. "Wallace, if you'll furnish the eggs I'll furnish the sherry and we'll have a drink." Seth was some promoter of such propositions for a number of years in Montana before he went into the Dakotas and made the acquaintance of Theodore Roosevelt, who at his first opportunity made Seth United States marshal for South Dakota.

Mr. Wallace was but seven years of age when he came to the United States with his parents. His father, John Wallace, was a physician, and practiced in Detroit for a number of years. When the "Civil war" broke out, Mr. Wallace had reached young manhood, having been born in 1827 and he enlisted for a term of three months in the First Michigan volunteer infantry. At the end of his term of enlistment he returned to Detroit, but when the call came in 1862, he again enlisted, this time in the Fifth Michigan cavalry, in which he served until the close of the war. He participated in many of the battles of the Army of the Potomac and in the spring of 1863 in the battle of Gettysburg. He was promoted to the rank of private and was repeatedly promoted, coming out of the army with a major's commission.

When Helena was incorporated, Mr. Wallace was made the first city treasurer and in 1883 he was elected to the territorial legislature. He was also an alderman for several years but finally resigned. The firm of R. C. Wallace & Company is today conducted by the son of the founder, David R. Wallace, who, with Miss Margaret Wallace, constitute the family of this pioneer merchant and soldier who celebrates today the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of his store in Helena.

erently bought, making his total indebtedness over \$20,000. The five years Mr. Wallace kept his "nose to the grindstone" and when the panic of 1893 dawned, he was one of the only business men in Montana who weathered the storm without borrowing a cent of money or asking for an extension of credit.

"Well, I was just able to do this by simply exercising reasonable economy during all those years and by ordinary diligence," says Mr. Wallace. "It was not because I had any superior business ability."

Davis, who sold out to Mr. Wallace, started another store in Helena, but failed. He then started up in Butte and failed. He then went to Texas—a trial to start up, but returned to Helena in a few years, "dead broke." He worked for Mr. Wallace for a time at \$125 per month, but could not live on it. He over-drew his wages and account over three hundred dollars, which Mr. Wallace paid for a time and they again parted company.

"Little Game Free the Hoys."

Mr. Wallace says the people of Helena have been very good to him from the first day he opened the little fruit store, when a prominent business man called in and said: "Well, my friend, I see you are opening a little game for the boys, and we wish you the best of success." Another told him the first week: "We've watched you, Wallace, and from your habits of industry and thrift, you'll have \$30,000 out of this camp in a few years."

In those early days Mr. Wallace and the friendship of the big men of the camp, as well as the interesting characters. He says of these

## Some of R. C. Wallace's Old Customers Prices They Paid for Everyday Things

Senator T. C. Power was one of the good customers of R. C. Wallace back in the '70's and we find in Mr. Wallace's old ledger some interesting entries:

- 50 lb. potatoes . . . . .50c
- 1 can mushrooms . . . . .50c
- 1 broom . . . . .65c
- 100 lbs. flour . . . . .\$5.50
- 3 lbs. brown sugar . . . . .45c
- 1 dozen eggs . . . . .85c
- 25 lbs. potatoes . . . . .25c
- 2 1/2 lbs. whitefish . . . . .50c

Massena Bullard was another customer of R. C. Wallace in the early days. Compare the prices Mr. Bullard paid for things with those paid today and remember all these groceries came in by wagon. It is enough to make people want to go back to the stage-coach and ox-team freighters:

- 2 1/2 pounds butter . . . . .30c
- 3 pounds bacon . . . . .42c
- 3 pounds lard . . . . .60c
- 1 broom . . . . .50c
- 3 pounds cheese . . . . .\$1.00
- 2 cans oysters . . . . .50c
- 1 pound Japan tea . . . . .50c
- 10 pounds corn meal . . . . .30c

Scattered through the ledger are numerous accounts which show some of the former citizens used their full share of port, sherry and muscatel, which the Wallace concern sold over the counter with vinegar and molasses. An entry of 20 1/2 pounds of ham at \$4.18, sold to Mr. Bullard in May, 1879 makes the fellow who pays 60 cents a pound for ham today wish he had lived back in the "good old days."

## WHEN R. C. WALLACE TOOK OVER THE WILSON GROCERIES ON A 5% COMMISSION.

Here are some interesting prices paid by R. C. Wallace and J. L. Davis in 1873 for groceries turned over to them by the administrators of the estate of E. H. Wilson. Wallace and Davis sold these on a 5% commission so the prices quoted are about what they received at retail for the items listed in an old "blotter" dated June 1, 1873, still in the possession of Mr. Wallace, who made out the list in his own handwriting 48 years ago. These goods were brought in by wagon from Fort Benton. Compare the prices with those of today:

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| 43 pounds crackers at 12 1/2c            | .....\$5.37 |
| 25 1/2 pounds coffee, at 10c             | .....2.50   |
| 100 pounds wheat                         | .....1.25   |
| 60 pounds oats                           | ......60    |
| 2 1/2 bushels corn, at 85c               | .....2.12   |
| 40 pounds sweet starch, at 20c           | .....8.00   |
| 2 dozen bottles Scotch ale, at \$4 dozen | .....8.00   |
| 25 pounds dates, at 18c                  | .....4.50   |
| 2 side Navy tobacco, at 85c              | .....16.25  |
| 143 pounds powdered sugar, at 21c        | .....30.03  |
| 48 pounds coffee, at 37 1/2c             | .....18.00  |
| 10 gals. port wine                       | .....25.00  |
| 2 gals. muscatel wine                    | .....22.50  |
| 30 pounds ginger snaps, at 18c           | .....5.40   |
| 54 pounds butter, at 28c                 | .....15.12  |
| 3 boxes (25 each) cigars                 | .....2.25   |
| 2 side Maryland, at 85c                  | .....16.25  |
| 2 1/2 pounds Japan tea, at 60c           | .....1.50   |
| 12 pounds chocolate, at 40c              | .....4.80   |
| 1 box crackers, 18c pound                | .....4.00   |
| 30 pounds sweet starch                   | .....12.00  |
| 10 gallons of Angelica wine              | .....15.00  |
| 18 gals. buckwheat flour, at 75c         | .....13.50  |
| 223 pounds, at 15c                       | .....33.45  |

Of all the merchandise sold for the Wilson Estate, cornmeal seems to have been the highest in price, numerous entries being made showing this much desired food to bring \$7.50 per 50-pound sack. Note, however, that the best port wine was selling for \$2.50 per gallon while a very good quality was sold for \$1.90 per gallon "in the good old days."