
***MORE QUARRIES FROM
LAST CHANCE GULCH***

That grand silver bell at the Civic Center has story to tell

We often ignore the most obvious remnants of our rich Helena past. That grand silver bell is a case in point. The massive, four-foot tocsin and its hefty metal frame sit in the middle of the south approach to the Civic Center. We stare passively at it while waiting for the traffic lights to change, or we catch it out of the corner of the eye as we merge right. But surely it has a story to tell.

Indeed it does!

The placer-gold camp of Last Chance Gulch grew rapidly into the town of Helena during the 1870s. Yet the community retained its mining-camp disarray - log and frame structures randomly perched on either side of the gulch, above a conglomeration of woodyards, liveries, warehouses, a sizeable Chinese neighborhood, and an expanding commercial district. The combination of steep terrain, east-slope winds, and a reliance on fire for heating, lighting, and cooking, created a volatile mix.

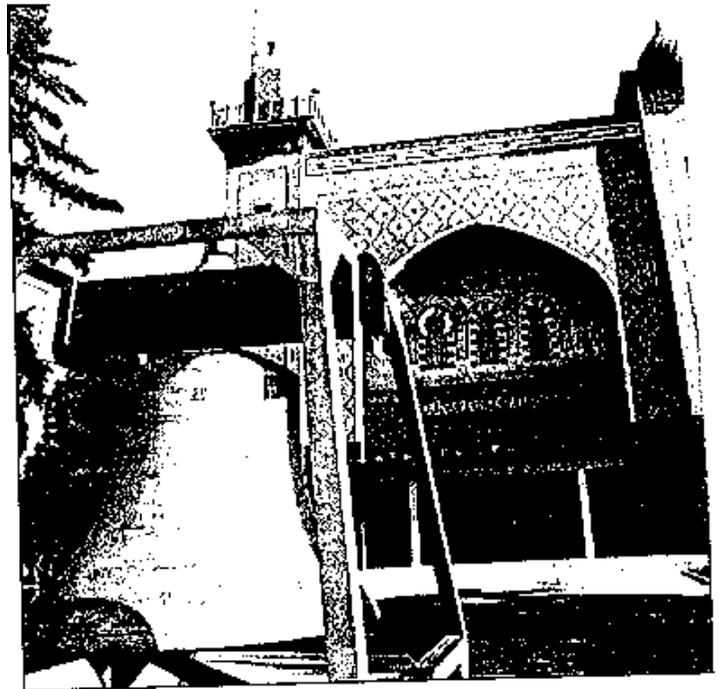
With only rudimentary equipment to combat fire, Helena suffered two devastating blazes in 1869, one in 1871, another major conflagration in 1872, and the worst in 1874. Although the flames repeatedly razed whole blocks of commercial buildings and scores of residences, the spunky community always rebuilt - and that alone set it apart from most Montana mining camps.

After the 1871 cataclysm, Helenans subscribed to build a watch tower on Tower Hill and to erect

an alarm bell there. Watchmen staffed the lookout full-time and raised the alarm repeatedly - although the wind-shipped firestorms of 1872 and 1884 defied control.

In January, 1886, Chief Fire Marshal Charles D. Curtis petitioned the Helena City Council to replace the cracked, two-foot bell in the fire tower with a large model. Upon authorization, he negotiated a contract with the Jones Bell Company of Troy, New York, to supply a 2,121-pound bell for \$535 - including fixtures.

“This same company supplied the bell that for many years has been used at the Catholic Cathedral and has stood the test of long and active use...The bells manufactured at the Troy Bell Foundry are made of the best brands of copper and East India Malacca block tin, and are said to excel in depth and richness of tone, prolongation of sound, and durability (*HELENA HERALD*, March 18, 1886.)”



In 1951, the city created the big bell frame and positioned it at the south entrance to the Civic Center.

In addition to the foundry name on the bell, an inscription reads: “Helena - Queen of the Mountains - February 13, 1886.” The bell arrived at the Northern Pacific depot on March 15, and firemen hauled it into town three days later. The City Coun-

cil appropriated \$25 to reinforce the tower, so it could support the much-heavier bell. Erected on March 27, Helena's new fire bell tolled its first alarm on the night of March 30.

When questioned about why he sought to replace the fire tower's original bell with one so much larger, Chief Curtis said: "The department has been guided by future requirements no less than present wants. For though a smaller bell would now answer all purposes, the rapid growth of our city would soon render the purchase of a more powerful one a matter of necessity. (*HELENA HERALD*, January 27, 1886)."

What Chief Curtis did not foresee was the advent of an electric alarm-box network, followed by a telephone-exchange system to alert firefighters. By 1915, firemen used that grand big silver bell only to ring the 8:45 curfew each evening. After the bell's ringing mechanism froze in 1931, it remained silent until the 1935 earthquakes. This series of shocks weakened the fire tower, and a city crew removed the bell to prevent further damage.

When the Helena Fire Department moved to the Civic Center in March, 1939, it took the "Queen of the Mountains" bell along and placed it in storage. In 1951, the city created the big bell's steel frame - including the oak block from which it was suspended in the tower - and positioned it at the south entrance to the Civic Center.

And that's where it sits today: a utilitarian reminder of the resolve of generations of Helenans to survive her greatest disasters - fire and earthquake. Knowing its story surely will make the Park and Neill traffic lights seem less long.

So if that's the tale of that grand silver bell what's the story of the bell that hangs in the fire tower today? In an upcoming column "The Bell in the Guardian of the Gulch."

Dave Walter has been employed by the Montana Historical Society for 15 years and currently is the Society's research historian.
