

# The Old Fire Bell on Tower Hill

By Marguerite Greenfield



Landmarks Association Is Raising Funds to Restore Bell  
to Tower Which Was Damaged by Earthquakes; Writer  
Tells of Fires Which Destroyed Early Montana Capital City

# The Old Fire Bell on Tower Hill

WRITTEN BY

Marguerite Greenfield

For Chapter in History of Helena, Donated to Landmarks'  
Society to Assist in Raising Funds for Restoration of Fire Tower

LANDMARKS ASSOCIATION IS RAISING FUNDS TO RESTORE BELL  
TO TOWER WHICH WAS DAMAGED BY EARTHQUAKES;  
WRITER TELLS OF FIRES WHICH DESTROYED  
EARLY MONTANA CAPITAL CITY



Committee on Landmarks.

Mrs. Adlai Rinda, Mrs. Clara Holter Kennett, Mrs. Blanche Rinda Atchison,  
Mrs. Edna Hedges Palmer, Mrs. Marie Kleinschmidt Southworth,  
Marguerite Greenfield, Lottie Rumsey Willetts,  
J. E. Norris, and Mrs. H. W. Child.

Copyright M. Greenfield

## THE OLD FIRE BELL

The restoration of the old Helena fire tower on Tower hill and the replacement of the bell is the first work of the Landmarks' association. It is considered fitting that this should be the first restoration as the fire tower was a focal point of early-day life and was vitally important to the welfare of the whole community for nearly seven decades.

In the first days of the camp when a fire broke out some volunteer ran to the top of Tower hill and would yell and shout and point and wave his arms toward the scene of the fire to advise everyone that their services were needed. The first cabins were clustered around the base of the hill, were dotted here and there up and down the gulch with a few scattered far down in the diggings.

Later, a triangle was braced and suspended from the side of a building on the corner of Bridge and Water streets and this was struck to announce the fact that a fire had started. Then the fire-fighting activities were located in a long log building where the Lager hatchery now stands on State street.

It was not long, however, before the triangle was moved to Tower hill and suspended from a frame with a watchman in attendance night and day.

A fire in those days was a calamity. No supplies were available nearer than Fort Benton or Corinne, Utah, and then only if they had been ordered months before. If Helena burned out in the late fall or in the winter, it would be months and months before replacements could be made.

Fire was the constant dread, the ever-present horror of all the early-day settlements and was especially dangerous in Helena, situated as it was, in a narrow gulch and built of flimsy pine buildings with a shifting, careless population of gold seekers and Chinamen who were notoriously careless with fire.

The general attitude of the inhabitants of the '60's is best expressed in the constant notices in the territorial papers that certain residents are going back to "America," not to the states, but to "America." How lonesome this sounds. Also how much suffering would befall those old-time Argonauts who could not take the long trip back to "America" if the fire tower and its watchman failed to arouse the settlement in time to fight any fire that appeared and before it gained much headway. In no time at all the whole place would be swept bare with not even the crudest necessities left. Not only money but life itself depended upon the old fire tower.

### Feared Fire

All the children and young people in the place grew up in deadly fear of fire and had instilled in them that the fire tower was to be carefully guarded and meant everything for the safety of all.

In the first 20 years of Helena's existence there were but few places to visit. The fire tower was one of the popular points of interest and one of the best of the early-day pictures of the town was taken from the top of the tower by E. H. Train, the early-day photographer.

Mrs. A. H. Rinda is the proud possessor of one of these Train photographs of her Sunday school class and its teacher, Captain Bailey, who, as an especial favor, took the young girls on a visit to the fire tower on their way to the Train gallery to sit for the picture.

Nearly every cabin had a fire bucket hanging on the outside wall where it could be hurriedly found. After the watchman tapped the alarm on the triangle to announce the fire he would, in the daytime run outside and stand in a conspicuous place waving a red flag on the end of a stick and pointing toward the direction of the fire, in the nighttime he waved a lantern.

The great problem was to get water to the fires in time and many were the expedients planned and executed to try and overcome the losses which were constant from the fire demon.

Dr. Franks conducted a bath house and had the first steam engine in the city. He offered the use of this engine and in one or two fires it proved to be of great value but the city was lacking in hose.

After one fire in the '60's it was thought that a hose that would extend from Bridge (State) to Broadway would have saved great loss. A careful soul advised that unless Dr. Frank lengthened the stove pipe on his engine that he would need to get up steam to save his own bath house.

### **Inspectors Out**

Inspectors were sent around to inspect all flues and stovepipes. Chinatown was especially negligent in respect to fire precautions. After one fire a move was on foot to run all Chinamen out of town. The Herald took a stand against such action, saying that all the Chinamen had worked as hard as the whites to save the town and had even neglected their own property to help others.

High winds added to the fire menace—which carried firebrands all over town, even down on the east side. Every fire notice in all early-day papers comments on the watchman and the fire tower and how good a purpose is served by the prompt action of the tower man.

In April, 1869, Helena was visited by a disastrous fire which swept away many business buildings and homes around Bridge and Main streets. In this fire Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle distinguished himself and gained the lasting respect of the whole community because of his active work in the bucket brigade.

After one of the fires it was proposed to build one long stone building on Main street extending from Bridge to Broadway, to be one story high and see if this could not withstand a conflagration.

### **Use Beer**

March 24, 1870, a fire started. Dr. Frank's engine had steam up and did noble work. However, the hose was short and water could not be

put on every building. The owners of the Helena brewery were desperate to save their plant, there was no water available, but they had beer to spare. Eight kegs of beer were hoisted to the roof of the brewery, the heads knocked out and the contents squirted on the brewery and adjacent buildings, among the latter, the Magnolia hotel. These new engines were an unqualified success, the streams of beer shot over the postoffice and over the Magnolia hotel, dampened the protecting blankets spread over vulnerable points and saved the buildings.

After the fire all the breweries in town treated the weary fire fighters, who numbered over 1,000, and who had fought the fire with great vigor. The watchman was complimented on the vigor and dispatch with which he had sounded the alarm.

Carl Miller was the watchman at the fire tower at this time and asked for a larger triangle or for the key to the tower of the Methodist church South, on the corner of Grand and Warren which had recently installed a new church bell. Mr. Miller wanted the key to the church bell tower so that, after tapping the triangle he could rush down the hill to the church and give another alarm from the church which would reach the outlying districts.

### **Water Arrives**

In the spring of 1870 the "Big Ditch" carried water across Grizzly gulch to the head of Dry gulch and then ran down Rodney street for the use of the mines on the lower part of Dry gulch (where the new high school stands). Notice was given that the new water supply was "giving down" a plentiful supply of pure water, which was greatly appreciated by the east sidlers.

In October of 1870 another fire kept the community busy. After this blaze it was declared that with Dr. Frank's steam engine, the use of the new steam engine just installed in the Rocky Mountain Gazette office on Jackson street and enough hose that there was water enough to "sluice" out any building in town, if the city only had the water supply in iron pipes.

The water company immediately set about laying iron pipes in place of the log ones used heretofore and this improvement was a matter of much satisfaction.

After several small but bad fires in 1871, in one of which the rival editors of the Gazette lost hair and eyebrows saving, or rather trying to save the mechanical equipment of the Herald, Col. C. A. Broadwater of the Diamond R freighting outfit offered to transport a fire engine free of charge to Helena from Corinne or Fort Benton.

### **Herald Destroyed**

The fire in which the Herald was destroyed also spoiled all the print paper. A messenger was despatched right away to Corinne to bring back by fast freight enough to print the newspaper, which meant on the passenger coach and which cost a tremendous sum.

Those residents who had lost their all in this fire asked that the commissioners remit all taxes. This request was refused.

## Fire Districts

Dec. 4, 1871, the fire districts were laid out as follows: One—Chinatown; two—Bridge and Wood streets; three—Main street; four—Broadway; five—hill east of town; six—west side. Corresponding number of taps on alarm bell every ten seconds before general alarm to enable citizens to ascertain locality of fire. The order was signed by John H. Curtis, secretary of the fire commission.

Aug. 23, 1872, one of the big fires in the history of the town occurred which swept from Grand street on the north, burned south of Broadway, on North Warren, Jackson street and Ewing streets. It started in the North Pacific hotel on Main street. The Gazette newspaper was in a stone building on Jackson street. Trying to save the building, sugar, flour and salt in sacks were piled in the windows, but to no avail, the fire swept everything before it.

Cannon Brothers' store had among a large stock of goods, twenty kegs of powder. A reward of \$100 was offered to whoever would carry these from the building. A colored man volunteered and at the risk of his life removed all the powder to a place of safety, received his money for a few minutes of dangerous work and also the thanks of the community.

After this fire a large meeting was held to take up the matter of a fire engine. A sum of \$5,907.50 was subscribed. S. T. Hauser, was chairman; C. J. Lyster, secretary; Henry Klein, M. Moore, A. M. Holter, J. H. Ming were members of the committee which recommended that cisterns be built all over town, the purchase of a hand engine and abundance of hook and ladders, ropes, buckets and axes. Each \$5 subscribed allowed one vote to be cast for the type of equipment to be chosen.

## Another Fire

Jan. 9, 1874, a hurricane was blowing. All Montana people know the high winds that sometimes prevail for a few days during some part of January, and fire started in a Chinese shanty. In a few moments all Chinatown was a seething mass of flames. The loss to the town was over \$900,000 and included the Gazette and the Herald, both of which were now burned out for the second time. Col. W. F. Sanders lost a collection of papers and documents of historic value and irreplaceable; the opera house, the public library, all books in the library, the Exchange gambling hall, the Kyus Saloon, the International hotel, one of the most completely equipped in the west, all went up in the flames.

The next day the Herald appeared on one-half a sheet of paper, giving full news of the catastrophe and stating that the employes from editor down were too exhausted to get out a bigger paper.

During this fire Herman Gans and Ike Greenwood, trying to save the Gans and Klein stock of men's furnishings were caught in their building. The iron shutters were locked on the windows and the doors swollen fast shut from the heat and water when they realized that they were trapped. Only by using heavy bars and breaking through the side next to the Kessler brewery did they escape with their lives. Conrad

Knipper, an employe of the International hotel, lost his life and his body was found in the debris.

Later in January it was stated that Helena could not ask for outside aid until \$2,000 had been subscribed locally. Also J. H. Rogers wrote to one W. W. Johnson that "Helena has never cried for help but has helped herself and will continue to do so."

### **Chickens Survive**

January 28, nearly three weeks after the fire, eight chickens were discovered under a pile of debris. One was still alive. It was decided to cherish this hardy fowl and start a new breed called "Hunger defier, fireproof, double-breasted, pullets," and make Helena famous for a new breed of poultry.

This fire of 1874 was hard on all the town. The placer mines were not as active as formerly, the shifting population was drifting toward the Black Hills and other new fields of excitement and money was more than scarce.

### **Fire Department**

Col. Charles D. Curtis, who was the first president of the fire department in 1865, was appointed fire chief in 1884. In January, 1886, he recommended the purchase of a larger bell to replace the one then in use which is now in Black Eagle park in Great Falls.

The request for a new bell was granted and the bell ordered from the Jones Bell company, in Troy, New York. It cost over \$535 and weighed nearly 2,200 pounds. It is now in front of the A-A garage and it is hoped with the assistance of the whole of Helena, to very soon replace it in the fire tower.

It is made of copper, East India mallora and block tin, which composition of metals is supposed to excel in depth, volume of tone and sound duration.

To accommodate the new bell, J. P. Ketchum rebraced and extended the base of the old tower and made other improvements. The watchman now had a tiny room on the top of the tower with windows on all sides with equipment to ring the bell mechanically. He sat for a twelve-hour shift in a swivel chair, swinging slowly around watching for the first sign of smoke in the wrong places. A stove kept him warm during the winter and only the most trustworthy men were given this position, which paid \$75 per month for every day, with hours from 5 p. m. to 8 a. m. Eugene Meyer was the towerman just before the installation of the new bell.

The bell arrived in March, 1886, and was christened by little Miss May Curtis, the daughter of the department chief. Miss Ella Cooper, then in the grade schools and the daughter of one of the pioneers of the state, was also present at the installation of the new bell in the tower. She witnessed its removal after the earthquakes.

### **First Alarm**

The first alarm given on the new bell was on March 30, 1886, and called the department to the home of J. R. Gilbert on Breckenridge street.

It was only a small fire, but again notice is given to the fact that the tower watchman was right on the job and that the engines were at the foot of Broadway almost before the bell ceased its clamor.

The fire department was now housed in a frame building on Clore street just north of what is now the Eddy bakery. At this time the Gamewell system of fire alarm had been installed in Helena and ran on batteries, 130 of them, the same as the old telegraph system. Seven Silsby hydrants, the first hydrants in town, were in use now, also twenty-one alarm boxes and thirteen cisterns located in various parts of town. When fire was in progress the hose cart pushed by hand, was rushed to the scene and the hose, if possible was placed in the nearest cistern and water pumped on the blaze.

One of the chief activities of the chief who at this time was C. F. McKinnon was to make the rounds of the cisterns during cold weather, have them shoveled free of snow, the trap doors in working order and the water full to the top. They were filled from the city mains but leaked a lot and had to be carefully watched. Mr. McKinnon was connected with the fire department for many years and still lives on Tower hill.

In the late '80's and early '90's three ward hose houses were built, one north of the Hawthorne school, one on Breckenridge street and one in the Sixth ward all of which have passed out of existence.

Ed Reece, first a volunteer fireman in the early '80's and then a member of the department during the '90's, in 1894 repaired the fire tower and no work has been done on it since, although it was in active service until January, 1931, when the bell-ringing mechanism froze and its use was discontinued.

During the '80's only the fire chief received pay for his services in addition to the engineer, the stoker and the driver—all the fire fighters were volunteers.

### **Rang Curfew**

For many, many years one of the regular duties of the fire department was the ringing of the curfew bell at a quarter of nine every evening and woe betide the young person caught on the streets after that hour. It was home and mother for all the young people after the old tower bell rang its warning.

The station in the seventh ward was the first one motorized which took place in 1913. In 1916 all the horse equipment was replaced with gasoline.

In the later days the bell rang out the fire boxes and residents of the various localities knew their own numbers and listened anxiously to hear if the bell told that they must rush home to save their own possessions or help ou a neighbor.

The old bell and tower may no longer announce the dread news of fire but if restored will bring as many visitors to its commanding location where the view is as good as it was in the first days of the camp.

History cannot be bought but must be lived and preserved. It cannot be imitated nor imported.



