

Al Gaskill

The Man in the Brown Derby

Did you know that one of Helena's most treasured historic relics is falling to pieces. Perhaps it is because you, like me, have not paid a visit to the place of late. But the Last Chance Gulch Restoration society has and it is through the efforts of that dedicated group that salvation may be achieved. And before it's too late. Although I was not unduly surprised to learn that the Old Fire Tower on Tower Hill was in bad condition, I was shocked to know just how desperately immediate repairs were needed. We are prone as individuals and collective nouns to "let George do it" but sometimes there is no George. In this case the knight in shining armor rode forth in the persons of Mrs. Hugh Galusha, president and Mrs. Gordon L. Doering, secretary, of the restoration group. One cannot adequately praise these devoted ladies for their interests, both as officers of the non-profit group and as individuals for the time and effort they have expended in the mission of restoring priceless reminders of the hard and laborious, but nevertheless glorious past of this Golden City of the Rockies.

What are they going to do about it? Come Friday they are going to conduct a voluntary public subscription campaign in an attempt to raise the \$1,200 needed to replace rotted and broken timbers in the old fire tower and take a huge step in assuring its permanence on the lofty perch atop Tower Hill where it looks down on nearly every quarter of the city, especially the glamorous gulch. For it was constructed by the sweat and brawn of a hardy race that realized the need for a guardian of the thriving little metropolis. Fire was the No. 1 enemy of Helena in the formative years, and that threat has carried over to the present day, largely because so many old buildings are still standing and the conglomeration of modern and outmoded structures tightly packed into an overall picture. The Old Fire Tower has seen many, many fires and many old faces disappear, to be replaced by others, or none at all.



Guardian of The Gulch. Perched high atop Tower Hill, this is the way it looked with the bell suspended under the penthouse which later housed the call box mechanism.

gold is where you find it

The history of the Old Fire Tower is a fabulous story. While it cannot be done adequate justice here, portions of that story make for interesting reading. Mrs. Galusha, like the many other women such as Mrs. A. T. Hibbard, Marguerite Greenfield and others, have spent countless hours in research about it and other priceless relics of the past. It seems Helena has sported a bell tower almost since the town was christened. It has seen various stages of glory and was rebuilt in 1876 to serve until 1931 as an alert to good news and bad. As a boy I remember that the pealing of the big gong meant either tragedy or joy. Today the bell is silent. It is no longer in the tower but it can be seen on the approach walk to the Civic Center. However the tower stands as a silent sentinel, brooding over the gay days and glamorous nights when money could be picked up in the streets and gold could be panned in the gutters. Which reminds me of a trick the steryper at the old Record Herald used; to pull off every time we had a cloudburst, or flash flood, as they are known today. He would get a handful of brass filings from his workbench and scatter them in the gutter in front of the printing plant on Broadway and as the water died away, astounded innocents would thrill to the prospects of a gold rush that would rival anything Robert W. Service ever told about. Gathering up the "gold" they would have their dream of sudden wealth shattered by Goodall Brothers Assayers who said it wasn't even "fools gold."

Marguerite Greenfield, in her booklet, "The Old Fire Bell" tells a delightful story of the tower and bell which was the first piece of municipal property in the camp. She relates that in the first days of the "camp" when a fire broke out some volunteer would run to the top of the hill and would yell and point in the direction of the fire to advise everyone that his services were needed. Fire was everybody's business then—and it should be today—although going in a car, running over fire hoses and generally gumming up the efforts of the firemen is not what is meant. The first cabins were clustered about the base of the hill and dotted the landscape on the hillsides and in the gulch. Later a triangle was installed at the corner of Bridge and Water streets. The fire-fighting facilities were public property and located on East State about a block from what is now the Main Drag—and we say "drag" on account of the drag races conducted there. It was not long before the triangle was moved to the hill. Fire was real tragedy—calamity—if you please, because supplies had to be freighted in from Fort Benton or Corinne, Utah. That took months. It was a common thing for Sunday School and other classes to visit the fire tower and get a great view of the city and the beautiful valley to the north. One of the best pictures ever taken of early day Helena was one by E. H. Train, one of the best known of the

early-day photographers. Few persons owned picture machines in those days.

roll out the barrel—and buckets

The number of fires which have devastated Helena is staggering. From the two big ones that wiped out the major portion of the town to the great fire of 1927 that eliminated the major portion of the main stem buildings, the history of fire fighting is replete with stories of heroism and suffering. But things are being done today to eliminate the cause and thereby effect a cure. The bell tower could no longer serve the needs of the community. The fast methods of getting a fire crew started have long since antiquated the old bell which tolled out the numbers of the fire districts and sent the horses flying over the cobblestones. New telephonic signals do the work in seconds and provide more accurate information. Instead of smashing the glass from a fire alarm box and turning the key, one simply calls the fire department and—swish—there they are. However tourists still find plenty to interest them and Helena residents should. I would heartily recommend a visit to the tower. It can be easily reached from a point near St. John's hospital. In fact old St. John's stood at the base of the tower.

There are some humorous, as well as chilling stories, that have come down from Tower Hill. For instance in 1869 during a fire that cost \$56,725 (and that was real dough, mister) Ed Conolly of the Merchants Exchange "displayed exemplary generosity in administering to the 'spiritual' wants of the noble fellows who labored at the fire. He emptied a full barrel of Bourbon, passing it up to them by the bucketful." Who said one gets his reward only in Heaven. Bucket brigades were the chief method of fire fighting and after a fire on May 17, 1869 only three of 100 buckets had been collected and The Herald begged their return. In the early days a watchman was employed at the tower to watch for fire but there were many complaints about many of the citizens not being awakened to join the fire fighters. The boys slept hard in those days.

shower for the tower

The first fire tower bell which was acquired from the Missouri River Steamer "Mountaineer" was sold to the city of Great Falls and used as a fire bell there for many years. After 52 years of being AWOL it was returned as a goodwill gesture during the Diamond Jubilee in 1939. Considerable fuss was made at the time. You may remember. Another duty of the bell was to ring "curfew"—and that meant curfew. Hit for home boys! At the time the bell was returned the Landmarkers Association staged a restoration movement which bore much fruit. But time and the weather have taken their toll and vandals haven't helped the situation one bit. However, everyone who can spare a buck could take pride in having done his bit in helping to preserve the one true relic of a bygone—but not forgotten era.