

September

HELENA'S WEATHER in SEPTEMBER

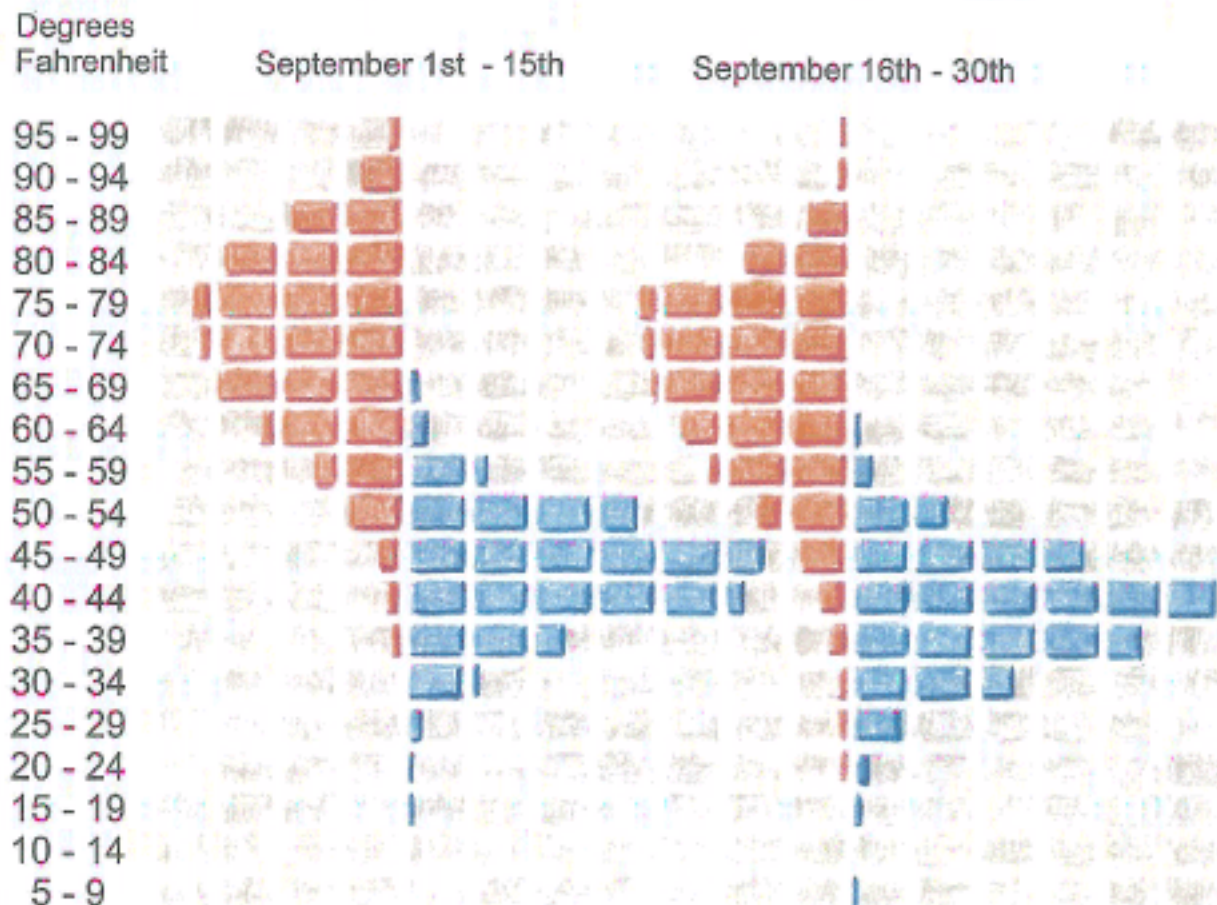
In 131 years of record-keeping, Helena had 26 measurable summer snowfalls -- one of them in August and the other 25 in those first three weeks of September before the equinox. September brings our first frost of the season in four years out of five. One morning in twenty will be frosty by mid-month and by the end of September it'll be one in ten. In 131 Septembers we warmed to 90 degrees or higher only 96 times, and never hit 100 degrees. Despite all of that, September is still very much a summer month in Helena.

In three years out of four it'll be our fourth-warmest month (after July, August and June) and in the other year it'll bump June for third place. On about three days out of five during those pre-equinox weeks we'll warm to 70 degrees or higher, and even those infrequent frosty mornings usually mellow quickly into perfect weather for being outdoors. It's the best hiking of the year -- good enough to suggest we forget that our warm season has begun to yield, inexorably if lackadaisically, to our cold one.

We can't really forget, of course. September's occasional wintry turns are unnecessarily rude reminders of what's already plain enough in the morning chill and the early dusk and in the quality of the light. Nature lets us know in countless different ways. The change is best enjoyed outdoors as a sensual thing, but for indoor perusal we reduce it to numbers on our temperature graphs, below and on the back of this page.

The graph below shows how warm and how chilly (sometimes downright cold) we get during September. We've graphed all of Helena's official daily highs and lows from September of 1880 through September of 2010 (131 Septembers in all). The red side shows the highs and the blue side shows the lows. Each full rectangle, red or blue, represents five percent of the recorded figures. One full red rectangle, for example, shows that our daily high has fallen into that particular five-degree increment five percent of the time. We've divided the month in half because it's more

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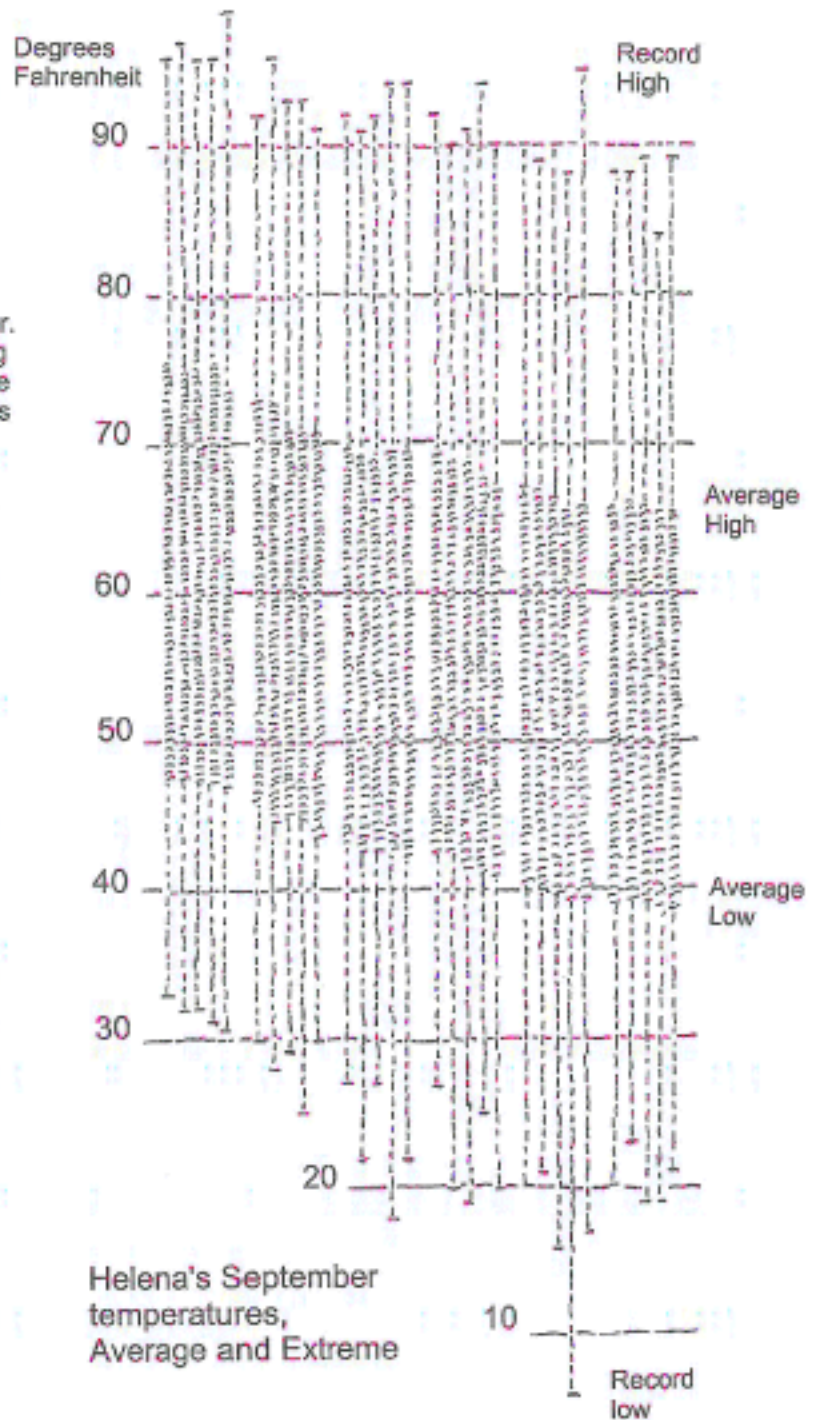
useful to take things in half-month chunks than to generalize over a whole month. The second half of September, after all, is cooler than the first half, especially up in 80-degree territory and down in 30-degree territory (our chance for 70-degree weather stays about the same, all month). That skinny blue line way down in the 5 to 9-degree range records a single 1926 cold snap, which we'll get to later.

The graph on the right shows that our average daily range drops about ten degrees through September, steeply for awhile before leveling off a bit toward October. All of our record lows after September 1st are at freezing or below, and tend to hang out around the 20-degree line after mid-month – about the time our average low begins to flirt with the 40-degree line. Our average high quickly drops to approach and pass the 70-degree line, but our record highs are all well above 80 degrees into October. We've even been as hot as 95 degrees as late as September 25th – but then there's that scary record low, 89 degrees lower, on the 24th. This brings us to that 1926 cold snap.

Somewhere on the 131-year weather record for each of Helena's months there's a single event that's unseasonal enough to be called freakish. September's entry is more freakish than most. On the afternoon of September 22nd, 1926, just as Summer had turned, officially, to Fall, it began to snow and our temperature took a sudden 20-degree drop, then kept dropping at a slower pace for the next 40 hours, to finally bottom out at six degrees above zero around dawn on the 24th. Then it warmed a bit, but altogether we stayed well below freezing for 64 consecutive hours. Our high reading on the 23rd (25 degrees) matched our previous record low for the date. That six degree low on the 24th remains, by a full ten degrees, the lowest ever recorded here in September, and the lows on the 23rd and 25th (16 and 17 degrees respectively) remain the second and third lowest.

It was a thoroughly nasty start to the Fall season, but then October turned out to be unusually mild, and we didn't get anywhere near six degrees again until mid-November, when it's more-or-less expected.

As an antidote to that 1926 story, you might want to consider the much more recent September of 2001, our warmest, when our average daily high was 80.2 degrees and we didn't dip below 42 degrees all month. That's when we hit 95 degrees on the 25th.



Quaking Aspen,
Orofino Gulch

The Sesquicentennial Project

2014 will be Helena's sesquicentennial year, its 150th year. How'll we mark it?

The best way, we think, is to celebrate what's authentically peculiar to our town -- to sharpen our sense of place.

We won't define "sense of place", beyond saying that it acts much like a sense of humor. Either you "get" a place or you don't. If you get it, it's engaging and invigorating and good for the imagination. You'll want to savor it.

We get Helena, so, from now to the sesquicentennial, we'll publish these free bits of information, one page at a time, about Helena's architecture, landscape, weather, history, whatever tickles our sense of place.

Look for these pages. Pick them up. We can't say how many there'll be, but we'll number them. Keep them and you'll build a trove of well-muffled Helena lore.