



HELENA'S FIRST BUILDINGS

We don't know what Helena's very first building looked like -- only that it was made of "brush". It was a rudimentary shelter built by the Four Georgians (really one Georgian, one Alabaman, one Iowan and an Englishman) near the pit where they'd first struck paydirt on the evening of July 14th, 1864. We don't know how soon they built it, but it seems to have been the only building here that summer. It's the only one seen by a visitor in September. Most of the camp's residents (and there weren't many at first) still slept under canvas or under the stars, which was fine as long as the gentle Montana summer held sway, and until the placer field had proven itself.

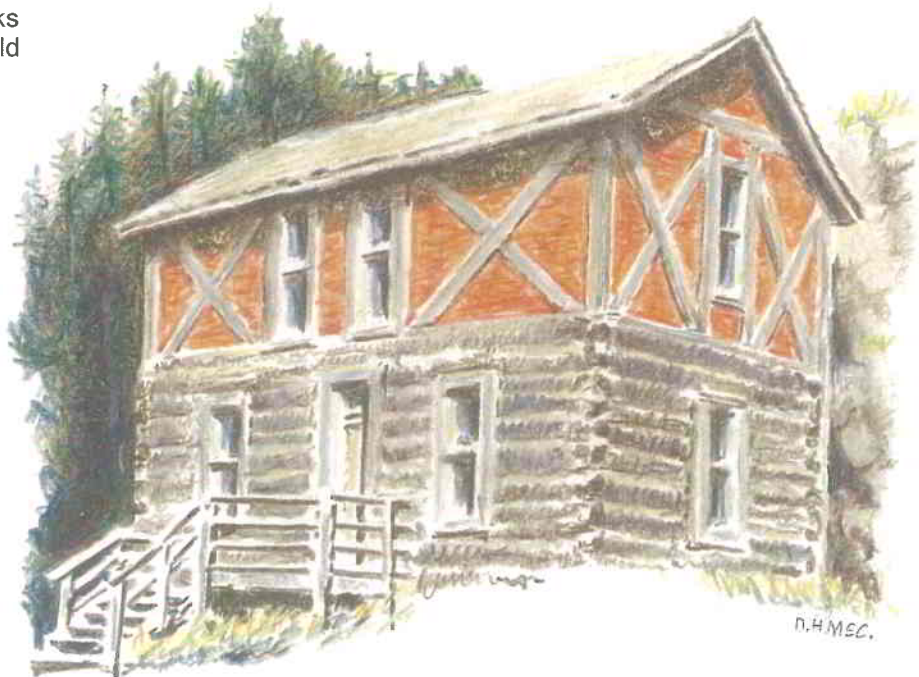
Proof and chilly weather arrived at about the same time, in mid-autumn. The first serious log cabins were under construction on October 30th when the population gathered in one of them, owned by George J. Wood, to make a town of the place. Wood might have been the only man here who was as interested in town-making as in gold-mining. He not only hosted the meeting but acted as chairman, took the minutes, and dutifully accepted the chore of laying out streets and lots and keeping the town's records (see page 20 in this series). When the group got around to naming the place it was suggested that it be called "Wood" in his honor ("Helena" won of course, narrowly beating out "Tomah"). Two others were appointed along with Wood, though it's said that Wood did most of the work.

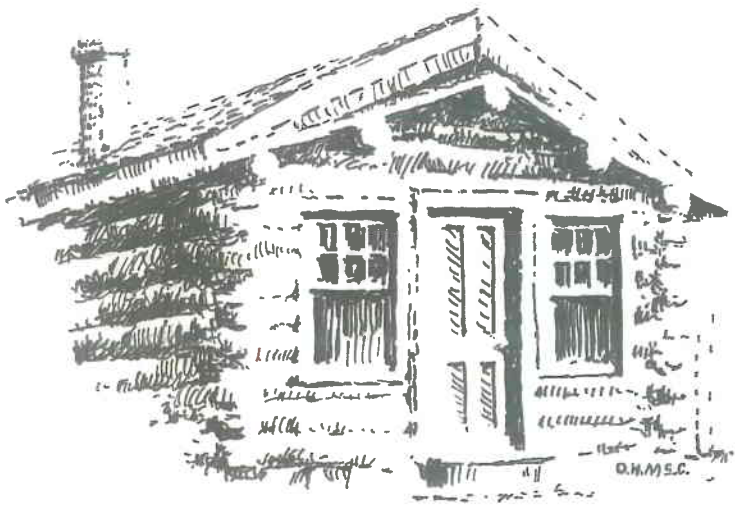
Wood's cabin and almost all of the other few hundred built during the first months following that meeting (it was a log building boom) are long gone, but a few survive in one way or another. Above we've drawn the "Pioneer Cabin", at the foot of Reeder's Alley. It's really two cabins stuck together. The one in back is almost certainly the oldest intact building in town. Dating to that autumn of 1864, it might be one of the first few dozen, old enough to have been built of trees found on or very near the site. The cabin in front was added in 1865 and an open porch along its south side, where you now see the front door, was enclosed a bit later.

Other log cabins that might well have been part of that first boom survive by having been incorporated into slightly newer structures. Below we've drawn the Emil Kluge house, which stands lengthwise in the narrowest part of the Last Chance "canyon" (see page 18). Kluge made the place unique by adding that wonderful brick-filled half-timber second story around 1893 -- but he deserves our thanks also for re-using the particularly solid-looking old cabin downstairs. He was a resourceful man. Even the timbers for his second story are said to have been salvaged from demolition of an old flume that crossed the canyon nearby.

Another resourceful builder who saved an old cabin for us is Louis Reeder. The cabin is up on the south bank of Reeder's Alley (the siltstone side, see page 14). We think it's the oldest part of the Alley and that it was already there when Reeder took over the site and starting building the rest of the place in 1872. Reeder worked in masonry, and log cabins were rapidly giving way to frame and masonry buildings by 1872, but this one was still good, too good to throw away. Reeder could build around it. The cabin became the nucleus of his Alley.

(over)





So, for the initial preservation of the Kluge and Reeder cabins we can thank the wide-awake imagination of their owners -- but there's another reason why they and a few others (not only the Pioneer Cabin, for one, but the "Caretaker's Cabin" next door and the slightly-newer Yee Wau Cabin across the Alley) are still with us. They were built just far enough away from the rollicking commerce on Bridge and Main Streets to escape being replaced by bigger or more adaptable buildings when sawn lumber became plentiful.

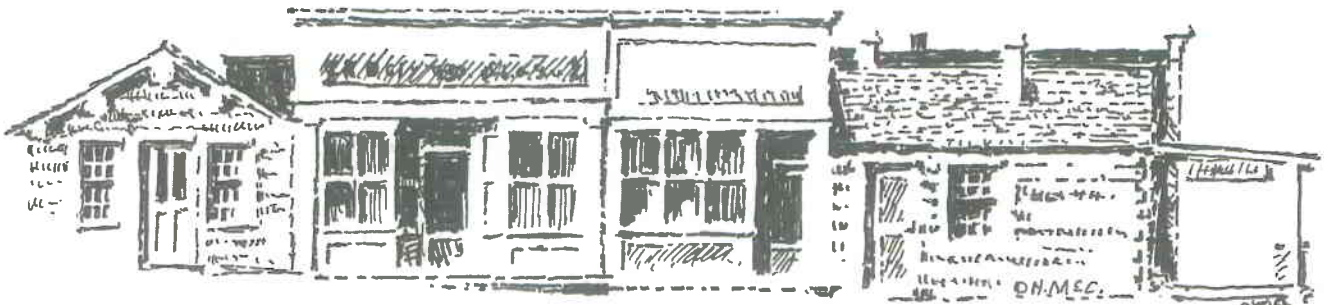
As early as 1865, within a year of the meeting at Wood's cabin, sawn lumber had already given those two commercial streets a surprisingly urban character. In the rest of town those first boards -- after making such basic items as flumes and sluice boxes -- hadn't so much begun to replace log construction as to complement it, as we show in our drawing to the left. There'd be a roof, then often a superimposed better roof, a floor, a few sticks

of furniture, framing for windows and doors (which in turn were probably brought in, ready made, from someplace else), maybe an outbuilding or two, and so on. Down on Bridge and Main though, builders were thinking about architectural good looks -- as shown in Helena's oldest photographs.

An 1866 panorama, shot from atop Acropolis Hill, shows a town built mostly of low-slung log cabins, but stretches of Bridge and Main are lined with wooden commercial "false fronts" of the sort familiar to fans of western movies (or as seen for real at Virginia City). The rear and side walls may still be built opaquely of logs, but fronting the street there's a lighter frame-built facade with generous doorways and big windows, letting in the sunshine and the gaze of potential customers. Other photographs -- dating to 1865 and (probably) to 1866 and 1867 -- show that the facade was often a handsome and nicely-proportioned affair, proof of a working familiarity with "folk" versions of the Greek Revival and other architectural styles popular back east, and a regard for the public domain not usually associated with life in the wild west.

The pace of change shows when we compare Helena's oldest known photograph, an 1865 shot looking east up Bridge from just west of Main, with an 1866 shot from about the same spot. There are already lots of nifty little false fronts in the first picture, while the second not only shows more of them, but also that the cabins on the northeast corner of Bridge and Main, near the site of Wood's cabin and now the very center of town, had been replaced with a two-story hotel built entirely of sawn lumber. Downtown was off and running.

That wooden downtown didn't last though, not only because of the constant rebuilding but because it was flammable. In April of 1869 came the first in a series of fires that gobbled up big chunks of the place. The worst roared through on a blustery January morning in 1874. It started southeast of the present Public Library site and burned north on Main and Jackson Streets as far as the present Securities Building, then east past Courthouse Square all the way to the intersection of Rodney and Fifth. That fire led the town fathers to prohibit construction of wooden buildings on Main north of Wood Street (an intersection now supplanted by Anchor Park). Our wooden downtown quickly became a masonry one -- a topic for page 22 of this series.



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-mulled Helena lore.