

A national historic landmark and one of Montana's premier tourist attractions, Bannack State Park preserves the essence of a frontier gold mining town with all its glory, hardship, and heartbreak.



WHERE THE WEST COMES ALIVE

BY PEGGY O'NEILL. PHOTOS BY JOHN WARNER



I wanted to write you a ghost story. Bannack State Park, near the Pioneer Mountains in southwestern Montana, is a ghost town, after all. Park staff have heard stories of invisible crying babies, mysterious encounters with blasts of cold air, and visions of a forlorn teenage girl in a blue dress. An episode of the Travel Channel's "Ghost Adventures" was even filmed in Bannack. Yet the park is so full of tangible, living history that what *actually* is and was there is far more interesting than what's rumored to exist. ►►



GOODS ON THE GO During the annual Living History Weekend at Bannack State Park, a reenactor purchases canned fruits and preserves from a traveling salesman. The four-day event held each September brings together dozens of reenactors who live meticulously researched roles ranging from schoolteachers and preachers to doctors and blacksmiths.

Let's start with the park's popular Living History Weekend. For four days each September, reenactors portraying characters of 1860s Bannack relive the heyday of this once-booming gold mining town, which served as Montana's territorial capital in 1864 and is designated a national historic landmark. "The reenactors, exhibits, and artifacts help visitors experience what it was like to live right where the Montana gold rush began," says park manager Dale Carlson.

For most of the year, Bannack's streets and storefronts are empty, encouraging visitors to imagine life here 150 years ago. But today, as I walk down the town's main road during the 2018 living history event, the boardwalks and buildings buzz with reenactors from Montana History Live!, which partners with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks for the program. "It was a hardscrabble life, and many people perished just in the journey to get here," says Mark Brown of Whitehall. He and his wife, Sharon, founded the Old West reenactment group.

"That anyone survived after arriving is amazing. You've got to have a lot of respect for the people who stayed here and made it."

I meet Dr. Glick (portrayed by John Barrows of Helena), who's performing a toe "amputation" on an unlucky Bannack resident. "The most enjoyable part of this is the research—reading old medical books," Barrows says. "I do it as accurately as I can." A few buildings down, "Bummer Dan" (Paul Harper of Whitehall) is providing clues to kids for a scavenger hunt. "Bummer Dan" is a prospector famous for losing two bags of gold dust—which he'd taped to his legs anticipating such an encounter—to bandits during the area's first stagecoach robbery. Farther on, the town's schoolmaster (Leif Halvorson from Sidney) teaches visiting children to sing "My Old Kentucky Home." The kids, who can't tell if he's acting or the real deal, are mesmerized.

Up and down the dusty dirt road, roughly 40 Old West miners, bakers, bartenders, and others are brought to life, each role

researched and reenacted to the finest detail: Prospectors crouch in Grasshopper Creek, panning for gold; a blacksmith strikes his hammer on a red-hot iron at the forge; the proprietor of the general store wraps dry goods in brown paper and twine; freight drivers share stories over shots of whiskey in the old saloon.

The reenactors have as much fun as the visitors. "Bannack's Living History Weekend allows you to be someone you'd like to be—and also someone you wouldn't," says Glenn Davis, who lives near Butte and plays a miner and a barkeep.

CRIES FOR HELP?

If Living History Weekend restores the Wild West to its rough-and-tumble glory, Bannack's annual Ghost Walks, held in late October, resurrects the past by bringing the town's dead back from the grave.

Spooky? Consider the setting: nighttime in a western ghost town, in the middle of nowhere, lit only with lanterns and bonfires. Live reenactors play the ghosts of rogues and wretches from the town's early days, when gravediggers were kept busy burying those who died from gunshots, accidents, and infectious diseases.

To lighten the mood—because afterward things turn real eerie, real fast—the tour starts off with some jokes.

"Did you hear about the guy who didn't pay his exorcist? He was repossessed."

"Why did the game warden arrest a ghost? He didn't have his haunting license."

Cringeworthy, yes. Yet last fall when I took part in the Ghost Walks, I enjoyed the corny humor. It provided contrast to the somber stories of Bannack's violent and tragic past that I later heard during the event, held the Friday and Saturday before Halloween.

The most famous story that came to life that night was told by a reenactor portraying the town's most infamous resident, Henry Plummer. A convicted outlaw who had terrorized towns across the West, Plummer ran for sheriff in 1863 and actually won. Less than a year later, he was hanged, along with two deputies, for allegedly leading a group of outlaws, self-named the Innocents, who robbed

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"THE REENACTORS, EXHIBITS, AND ARTIFACTS HELP VISITORS EXPERIENCE WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO LIVE RIGHT WHERE THE MONTANA GOLD RUSH BEGAN."



HOW THE WEST WAS LIVED This page, clockwise from top: As a gunslinger provides commentary, the proprietress of a boardinghouse plucks a chicken for dinner; visitors and other reenactors watch Dr. Glick (John Barrows of Helena) prepare to "amputate" a gangrene toe while his patient takes another slug of whiskey to ease the pain; a park visitor poses with Dennis Borud, Lewistown, who portrays placer miner Lyman Brokaw. Facing page: Bannack State Park manager Dale Carlson takes a break in front of a backdrop used for old-time photographic portraits.



A GHOST OF A TOWN For most of the year, Bannack stands empty. The vacant buildings and remote setting allow visitors to imagine what the settlement was like in the late 19th century, when freight wagons rumbled down the town's single street, music and laughter drifted from saloons, and guests on the Hotel Meade balcony called down to passersby. Each summer during Living History Weekend and Bannack Days, the town once again comes alive, and visitors can experience the Old West as it was lived during Bannack's short but furious history.

stagecoaches and killed more than 100 people during an eight-month reign of terror.

Mary Edgerton, wife of Sidney Edgerton, Montana's first territorial governor, wrote in a January 17, 1864, letter: "There was a Vigilance Committee formed at Virginia City and a number of these highway men were hanged. Before they were hung, they

confessed and implicated many others. Their confession was that there was a regularly formed band of them and that the sheriff of this district was the captain."

Though some writers in recent years have suggested that the Vigilantes, as they were known, were more motivated by politics and post-Civil War disputes than justice,

most historians agree that Plummer and his gang were indeed murderers who received justifiable punishment. Some say the sheriff's angry ghost still haunts the town.

Another Bannack resident who became famous after death was Dorothy Dunn. Dorothy, 16, died in 1916 while wading with friends in a dredge pond near town. She

stepped off a ledge into deeper water and drowned. The teenager had lived and worked in the Hotel Meade, where a room is now named in her honor. Many visitors claim to have seen an apparition in a blue dress wandering the hotel corridors or through town at night. Others have said they felt mysterious rushes of cold air while in the

hotel, even on summer days.

Then there are the weeping infants. Down the road and across the street from the Hotel Meade is the Besette House, where residents with influenza, scarlet fever, diphtheria, whooping cough, and other highly contagious and deadly diseases were quarantined in the early 20th century. Several visitors have

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reported hearing the sounds of babies crying in the house and believe it's haunted by children who died there.

Park manager Carlson has lived on the park grounds since he began working there 16 years ago and has yet to see a ghost or hear the cries of an invisible baby. Park administrative assistant Lisa Hamar hasn't either, though she admits she still gets "creeped out" whenever she's in the hotel. "I'm not sure if it's the stories

from a few buildings.

Modern-day disasters have proved more hair-raising for Carlson. A sudden downpour in the surrounding hills in July 2013 caused a flash flood that sent a three-foot-high wall of water, mud, and rocks down Hangman's Gulch into the ghost town. "At one point the floodwater pinned a woman against a fence," Carlson says. The woman and other park visitors were safely evacuated, but the flood

swept away and the rest was filled with mud and debris. Carlson says cleanup for the town cost about \$2 million, most of which was covered by insurance.

That was the only year that the park's biggest event, Bannack Days, was canceled. The popular family weekend, which draws up to 5,000 visitors over two days, features horse-and-wagon rides, staged shoot-outs, and gold panning. While listening to cowboy songs and period music throughout the event, visitors can experience a blacksmith shop, surveyor's camp, and U.S. Cavalry camp, as well as demonstrations of basket making, candle making, mule packing, and tinsmithing. They can also listen as impassioned townsfolk debate the pros and cons of women's suffrage.

Bannack Days happens each summer on the third weekend of July. Unlike Living

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or just the way I feel," she says.

Park ranger John Phillips says the scariest things he's encountered at the park are the rattlesnakes he's been called on to remove

damaged 50 of Bannack's 60 historic buildings. For instance, much of the Assay Office, built as an office for testing the quality of gold and later converted to a general store, was



WHAT DOES 3-7-77 SIGNIFY?

One of the most enduring mysteries related to Bannack is the number sequence "3-7-77."

Vigilante committees painted the numbers on cabin doors or tents in several Montana towns and settlements as a warning for the occupants to leave town.

It was long assumed the numbers originated with the Bannack Vigilantes, who hanged the outlaw sheriff Henry Plummer in 1864. But historians have found no print record of the numbers appearing until a 1879 issue of the *Helena Herald*.

What did the numbers signify? In his 2013 book *A Decent, Orderly Lynching*, historian and journalist Frederick Allen writes that the numbers likely meant the recipient was being warned to get out of town (such as by purchasing a \$3 ticket on the next 7 a.m. stagecoach to take the 77-mile trip from Helena to Butte). Other theories posit that because the numbers add up to 24, they meant a person had 24 hours to vacate the premises (though why not just write "24"?); they represented the dimensions of a grave, 3 feet by 7 feet by 77 inches (though why not list all the dimensions in inches?); they stood for March 7 of 1877 (though historians can find no significant events anywhere in Montana Territory on that date); or they were numbers representing membership structure of the Freemasons, who established Bannack Historic Lodge No. 3-7-77.

Most historians agree that the Vigilantes and other western vigilante committees were necessary in a time before law enforcement and justice institutions were established. But they also point out that vigilantes wore out their welcome with the public once sheriff's departments and law-based trials were instituted after Montana was made a U.S. territory in 1864 and then granted statehood in 1889. Yet vigilante mobs were still hanging people and pinning "3-7-77" to their backs as late as 1917.

Nonetheless, in 1956 the Montana Highway Patrol added 3-7-77 to officers' shoulder patches and vehicle door insignia. "Regardless of its meaning...3-7-77 is emblematic of the first organized law enforcement in Montana," reads the Association of Montana Troopers website. "The Montana Highway Patrol, in adopting this early symbol, honors the first men in the Montana Territory who organized for the safety and welfare of the people. For that same reason, the Association of Montana Troopers has carried on that tradition by placing the legendary 3-7-77 on their patch as well."

The numbers live on. In 2013, the Montana Highway Patrol changed its toll-free phone number to 855-MHP-3777.

—Tom Dickson is editor of *Montana Outdoors*



GOLDEN MOMENTS Reenactor Mike Schweitzer of Sidney, who portrays a tenderfoot new to gold prospecting, teaches a school group the art of panning for the precious metal in Grasshopper Creek.

History Weekend, with its attention to historical detail, Bannack Days takes some liberties with verisimilitude. “It’s much more about being a fun, family festival than an accurate portrayal of that era,” says Carlson.

MONTANA’S GOLD RUSH

Bannack was named for the Bannock Tribe, whose people are native to today’s southwestern Montana and parts of Idaho, Utah, and Oregon. Lewis and Clark passed nearby in 1805 while traveling along the Beaverhead River toward Lemhi Pass.

But it was gold that put Bannack on the map in 1862, when John White and John McGavin discovered nuggets in Grasshopper Creek. The pair couldn’t keep their discovery a secret, and within months the town swelled from 400 to more than 3,000 people, including prospectors, shady businessmen, outright criminals, upstanding citizens, prostitutes, “respectable women,” and children.

Bannack was among the wildest of Wild West towns, a place where lucky prospectors cashed in their haul before heading to the nearest tavern, sometimes later ending up in the nearest graveyard. “I don’t know how many deaths have occurred this winter but that there have not been twice as many is entirely owing to the fact that drunken men do not shoot well,” resident Emily Meredith wrote in 1863, as recounted by author and historian Don Spritzer in *Roadside History of Montana*. “Bullets whiz

around so, and no one thinks of punishing a man for shooting another.”

Bannack’s boom and bust happened so quickly that the town lost its title of territorial capital within a year. When gold was found in nearby Virginia City, prospectors moved there, taking the territorial capital designation along with them. But Bannack lingered for another 80 years. The post office closed in 1938 and the school hung on until the early 1950s. In 1954, with help from Elfreda Woodside and C. W. Stallings, the newly formed Beaverhead County Museum bought most of

the town of Bannack. The museum then gave the property to the state of Montana. Stallings later donated remaining lots and buildings to the museum, and eventually the entire ghost town was handed to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to manage as a state park.

Unlike Virginia City, which has been partially restored and is still a living town, Bannack has retained its ghost town setting. Supporters decided to preserve what was left. “Our focus is to maintain the town rather than restore it,” Carlson says. “Visitors are meant to see it as an abandoned mining town.”



TIME TRAVEL This page, clockwise from top: Susan O’Neal, who, with her husband, runs the Mercantile and Assay Office, tells visitors about life in the 1860s; reenactor Mark Brown demonstrates early photography; provisions at the mercantile. Facing page: A Bannack street scene turns dreamy when viewed through an old glass window.



DEAD OF NIGHT During the annual Ghost Walks in late October, the Just-Us Old West Reenactors portray vigilante “justice” as part of their spooky-yet-educational skit.

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Keeping even a ghost town in shape is expensive. FWP maintains the constantly deteriorating roofs, windows, doors, and walls of a place frozen in time. In addition to its share of the state vehicle license fee that goes to FWP’s Parks Division, Bannack receives grants, donations, and occasional legislative appropriations. Many donations come through the Bannack Association, a grassroots organization that works with FWP to promote and preserve the park. Last year, a \$1.6 million fire detection system was installed in the most historically significant buildings.

Besides Living History Days, the Ghost Walks, and Bannack Days, the park offers other attractions to the 48,000 people who come each year. Visitors can do-si-do at a barn dance in August, ice skate in winter (with free skate rentals and a cozy warming

house), hike and bike on the park’s two trails, and catch trout in Grasshopper Creek. At two small campgrounds along Grasshopper Creek, towering cottonwoods provide shade from the hot midsummer sun.

Every other year on the second Saturday of January, Henry Plummer gets hanged all over again during a reenactment. No wonder his angry spirit still lingers.

Okay, so I’m telling a ghost story after all. Whether or not you believe in the supernatural world, there’s no disputing that Bannack provides opportunities to encounter real-life brushes with the town’s colorful past. Living history isn’t supposed to be scary, but even so, those glimpses into the lives that other people once led, people just like you and me, puts a little tingle in my spine.

Bannack’s 2019 Living History Weekend runs September 19-22. The 2019 Ghost Walk is October 25-26. For more information, to make reservations, or to volunteer for the Ghost Walks, call (406) 834-3413.