Children in Montana's Mining Camps

By
Ellen Baumler

Montana's mining camps provided children with unique childhood experiences and memories. Although they went to school like children elsewhere, they also witnessed the vices and violence of everyday life in Montana's rough-and-tumble mining communities. Many were seasoned travelers who had crossed the plains in covered wagons or spent days in cramped quarters aboard steamboats en route to the gold fields. In a preface to the reminiscence of Frances Gilbert Albright—whose father, Henry Gilbert, established one of the first breweries in Alder Gulch in 1864—University of Montana professor H. G. Merriam wrote: "It is interesting to learn what a child's mind seizes upon and later recalls, especially if the childhood has been spent in a raw and rough community."[1] Children are the same no matter where they live, but because of their hardships and material deprivations, mining camp children experienced life more intensely. They also learned to make the most of their extraordinary circumstances.

The author's interest in this subject began with the preparation and publication of Mary "Mollie" Sheehan Ronan's pioneer reminiscence, *Girl from the Gulches: The Story of Mary Ronan*, in 2003.[2] Portions of Mary's story so engaged and delighted students of all ages that it precipitated the author's wider search for more recollections from pioneer children. Archival records, published accounts, and oral histories at the Montana Historical Society Research Center yielded numerous colorful and lively stories of Montana's mining camps from a child's perspective. Those reminiscences add an important and overlooked element to our understanding of mining culture. This article will discuss children's impressions of their surroundings, the amusements they enjoyed, and

the hardships and dangers they faced in some of Montana's mining communities.

On the Move

Many families traveled by wagon to Montana's gold fields in the mid-1860s. The Jonas Butts family left Independence, Missouri, wintered in Denver, and arrived at Virginia City, Montana, in the summer of 1864. Derinda Jane Butts was eight years old. The three Butts daughters were not used to luxuries anyway and were unaware of the deprivations others complained about. The family had no mishaps crossing the plains. Without the heavy responsibilities and worries that burdened their parents, Derinda Jane and her two sisters regarded the trip as a lark. Derinda Jane's most vivid recollection was that of a lesson learned.

The children had been repeatedly told to stay close by the wagons. One evening, heedless of the warnings, some of them ran up a hill away from camp. Suddenly they saw the dark form of an Indian moving stealthily from bush to bush. The children ran all the way back to camp and breathlessly described what they had seen. The "Indian" turned out to be one of the train's own men, stripped to the waist, his skin rubbed with mud to darken his complexion. It was his way of teaching the children the danger of wandering too far.[3]

Montana's early population moved with the gold rushes. Many Virginia City residents relocated to the camp at Last Chance Gulch, newly named Helena, drawn by fresh opportunities. Mollie Sheehan's family moved to Helena in July 1865. One of her first memories there was of a camel train unloading goods. She got a ride on one of the strange creatures, an event she never forgot. The family's log cabin at the foot of Broadway had a dirt floor, but was cozy and comfortable. In her recollection of those times, Mollie astutely noted that people were constantly coming and going, and that friendship, "like everything else in a mining camp, was in a constant state of flux and change."[4]

First Impressions

Like their parents, children recognized Montana's primitive conditions, and their impressions mirrored those of adults. Five-year-old James Sanders, son of Wilbur and Harriet Sanders, crossed the plains with the Henry Edgerton family from Ohio to Montana in 1863. James heard the excited talk about the great gold camp at Ban-

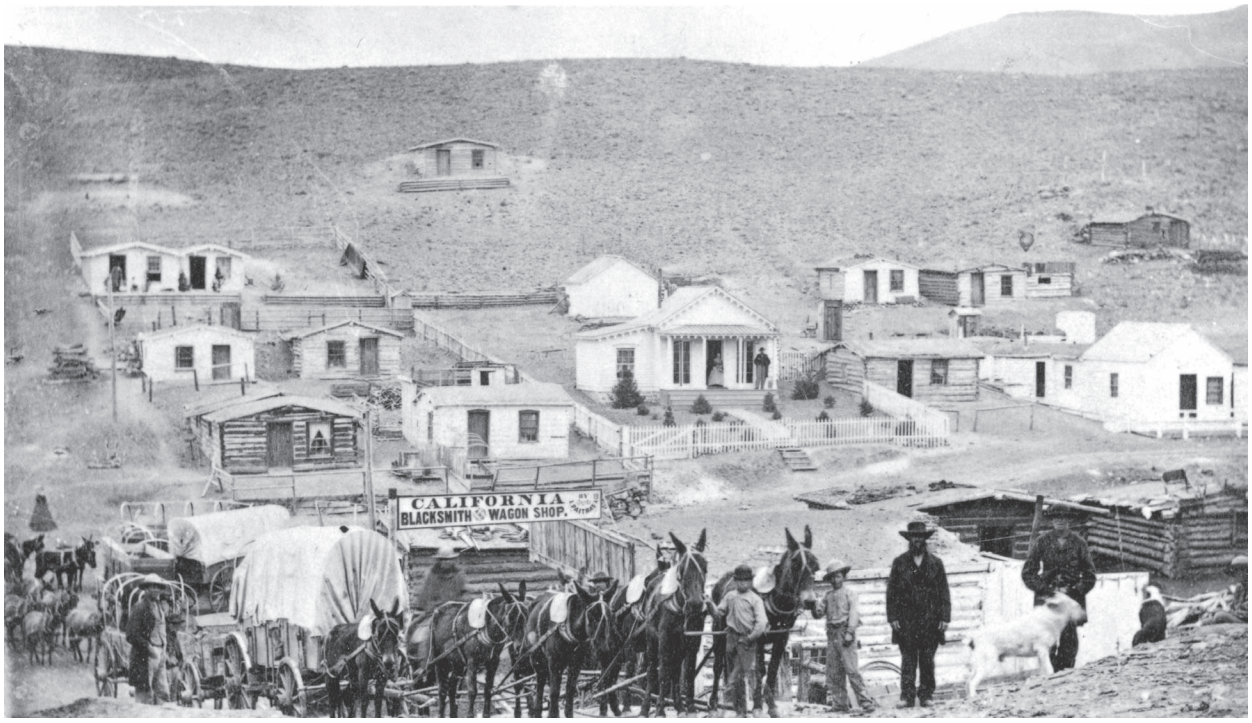
Mary Ronan left a lively reminiscence of her life in Montana's gold camps. (83-138, University of Montana, Missoula)

nack and of Montana's golden gulches. Upon arriving at last at far-famed Bannack, however, James took one look at the ugly settlement, where the dirt was everywhere churned into mud and primitive cabins and tents straggled along Grasshopper Creek. He then expressed well what the adults probably thought but did not want to admit when he blurted out his disappointment, declaring, "I fink Bangup [*sic*] is a humbug."[5]

Another child who reported early Montana's rough circumstances was seven-year-old Homer Thomas. He wrote to his grandmother back in Illinois that the miners at Alder Gulch "dressed in old dirty & ragged clothes; they do not look nice, like at home." Homer's letter is well written and thought out, and in it he expressed his dislike for Montana's remoteness. He especially missed apples and cider, and his grandmother's cake. " Well Grandmother," he continued, "it is pretty near to Christmas time and I do not expect to get many things this year, for it is not like home, because Santa Claus do[es] not come out here to give children things, because he thinks the children too smart to come to this old place."[6]

Frances Gilbert Albright was just a toddler when her large family came to Alder Gulch, where she would spend the rest of her life. Her earliest memories were more gentle. They included rides on a Newfoundland dog whose owner, her father's partner, always had a sack of candy. She recalled lines of freight wagons in the muddy street that brought their groceries and glorious moonlight sleigh rides under piles of buffalo robes.[7]

Children caught the gold fever too. Ten-year-old Mollie Sheehan's family arrived at Bannack as the first rumors of a new strike at Alder Gulch began to circulate. Her father freighted the first load of goods to Virginia City and returned to Bannack to retrieve his family. The Sheehans followed the trampled ground in the wake of stampeding min-



These boys found work holding mule teams in Virginia City, Montana Territory, circa 1864. (Photograph by the Montana Picture Gallery, 965-113, Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena.)

ers. As the mule team panted up the last hill, the Sheehans stopped to let the animals rest. Mollie hopped down from the wagon, grabbed a stick, and wrote her name in the dirt, announcing, to her father's amusement, "I stake my claim."[8]

Life on the Urban Frontier

Once settled at Virginia City, Mollie and her friend Carrie Crane roamed the countryside gathering wildflowers and edible goosefoot to sell to the boarding houses. They learned the names of plants and observed the wildlife. Mollie ignored the fancy ladies who lounged around smoking cigarettes. She knew they were different, but never questioned why they were not "good women."[9]

Harriett Sanders, however, worried about the settlement's influence on her two boys, James and Wilbur, and insisted that their house be built well out of town, out of earshot of the miners' coarse vocabulary. Thomas Dimsdale, *Montana Post* editor and author of Montana's first book, *Vigilantes of Montana*, complained about young hooligans in the streets and opened a school to help corral Virginia City's youth.[10]

Mollie Sheehan attended Dimsdale's school. She found its mild-mannered professor so preoccupied with his writing that she and her friend Carrie took advantage of him. They delighted in asking permission to be excused. The professor would wave them away and the girls would make their escape. They would run down the hillside to a corral below, take a few daring minutes to slide down the haystacks, then scurry back up the hill to slip into their seats unnoticed.[11]

Mollie saw the aftermath of two vigilante hangings at Alder Gulch, but it was the hangman's tree at Helena that left her shivering. She arrived at school one day to find the boys clustered together, pointing down the hill. There she saw a man hanging on a branch, his head bruised and clothing in disarray. The man's wrinkled, stiff boots made an impression she could never forget. Mollie heard that a Sunday school teacher took her students there to look at the dead man, to impress upon them that crime does not pay.[12]

As Helena matured into Montana's capital city, its citizens consciously tried to shed its rough mining camp image. This applied to children as well, whose parents dressed them up for portraits. They played somber games of chess, put on pageants, and took ballroom dancing at Mrs. Sulgrove's Academy. Many children who lived in Helena from the 1890s to the 1920s took these lessons. The Fligelman sisters recalled that Mrs. Sulgrove required every boy to wear one white glove, so that when he put his hand on the small of a girl's back, it would not soil her dress.[13]

Elizabeth Farmer Smith left wonderful descriptions of her childhood in the mining camp at Garnet in the 1920s. Her father was an engineer and partner in the Pra-Fa-Po Mine Company. She and her mother and sister spent three summers at Garnet beginning when Elizabeth was ten. She and the other children had great fun sliding down the mine dumps on pieces of tin, riding in the empty ore cars as the men pushed them back into the mine to reload, and watching her father scrape the mercury tables at the end of the day. The balls of mercury would catch the gold, and when enough had accumulated, the blacksmith would retort it in a vat, leaving a blob of gold at the bottom.

The summer's highlight was a big dance on the Fourth of July. Adults spread cornmeal on the oak floor in the dance hall, and Elizabeth and the other children skated and slid on it to prepare the floor for dancing. Her family had a 1922 Buick that Elizabeth's mother learned to drive, an unusual feat at that time of which the family was very proud. The horse-drawn stage to Bearmouth still operated, however, and three times a week it would bring the Farmers a gallon jug of sweet milk. By the time the stage reached Garnet, up the steep, log-lined grade that reminded Elizabeth of corduroy, the jug had been jostled so much that there was always butter at the top.[14]

Freedom and Adventure

Children usually had more freedom in Montana's mining camps than they might have enjoyed under different circumstances. While myriad duties kept their parents always busy, children made up their own games and devised ways to keep themselves entertained. Mollie Sheehan and her friend, Carrie Crane, enjoyed the unique privilege of cleaning miners' sluice boxes at the end of the day, until Mollie's father discovered this activity and forbid it.

While miners would have shot any man caught around their sluice boxes, the little girls amused the men and so they allowed them to keep for themselves small amounts of gold that they laboriously dug out of crevices in the sluices. Mollie and Carrie brought their hairbrushes and straws, or "blowers," brushed out the gold caught in crevices in the wooden troughs, blew it into piles, and scooped it into their buckskin pokes. One day, one of those generous miners, Peter Ronan, poured a bucketful of muddy water down his sluice box, unaware that the girls were down at the bottom. Mollie's new bonnet was ruined, but that is how she met the miner who later became her husband.[15]

Young boys in the mining camps could always find work, if their parents would allow it, cleaning up the saloons and hurdy-gurdy houses. They pocketed the loose dust inevitably spilled on the dance floor. Sometimes they found jobs in the liveries and stables, where there was always work to be done, or by holding mules while freighters un-

Almeda Farmer, James A. Farmer, Alfred E. Farmer and Elizabeth Farmer perch above Mussigbrod's Mill near Garnet, Montana, in the 1920s. (PAc 79-60.2, Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena.)

loaded. In the mid-1870s, Virginia City was still a rough camp. When Sister Irene McGrath—one of three Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas, who opened a miners' hospital at Virginia City—gathered youngsters to teach catechism classes, parents expressed gratitude to her for getting their children off the streets, even if only for an hour or two. Sister Irene herself, a novice, was barely eighteen.[16]

Boys in Garnet, where Elizabeth Farmer spent her summers in the 1920s, played mean tricks on Frank Davey, whose many properties and businesses included the general store. Mr. Davey guarded his merchandise to a fault, and the boys would order candy which Mr. Davey kept behind a glass case. When he plunked the sack on the counter, the boys would snatch it away, put down rocks instead of money, and run away. Mr. Davey threatened to tell their parents. Once the boys found a three-piece suit like Mr. Davey always wore, stuffed it with straw, and hung the effigy on the hotel's flagpole. The ultimate insult was that Mr. Davey also owned the hotel.[17]

Smoking has universal appeal to children, and most experiment with it at one time or another. Mining camp children, boys and girls, were no different. Six-year-old Eileen Yeager and her sister Mary made up a creative game called "Bill and Bob." They collected chewed up cigar stubs from behind the livery. Each child had a cigar box which she filled with the old stogies.

They had made a sidewalk of scrap wood in

A sea of miners surrounds one little girl at the Bluebird Mine in Jefferson County, Montana, circa 1900. (Lot 26 Box 2 F4, Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena.)

the backyard and, beginning at opposite ends, they sauntered toward each other dressed in their dad's old hats. They met in the middle, and took turns. Eileen would say, "Hello Bill." Mary answered, "Hello, Bob." They had a set dialogue, and after a bit, Eileen would say: "Would you like a cigar?" With that, she opened her cigar box and each took a stogie, lit it up, and sauntered down the sidewalk puffing away. Then they would switch roles and do it again.

One day, however, Mary forgot and inhaled. She keeled over, and Eileen ran into the house and announced dramatically: "Mama, Mary is dead!" Their mother rushed out to find Mary violently ill. She called the doctor who immediately asked Eileen: "What have you been smoking?" Eileen produced the box of damp, chewed cigar butts. This time her mother keeled over. Eileen didn't understand why her mother had fainted, but the spankings had a lasting influence. Neither girl ever took up smoking again.[18]

Butte, the mining camp that became a corporate-controlled, urban industrial center and cultural melting pot in the middle of remote Montana, was as unique for its children as it was an anomaly in other respects. Copper king William A. Clark's gift to the community was Columbia Gardens, an amusement park which boasted one of the nation's first Ferris wheels and a spectacular roller coaster. Children especially loved it. Young mining camp ruffians and the children of prominent mine officials rubbed elbows on the streetcars that took them all to the gardens each week for Children's Day. Children by the hundreds enjoyed free rides and entertainment, and at the end of the day picked huge bouquets of pansies to take home to their mothers.

The Dangers

Butte had a much darker side, however. Children grew up breathing polluted air and playing in filthy alleyways. Boys who had reached puberty and could chew a plug of Peerless Tobacco without throwing up were considered man enough to work in the mines. In the 1930s, a sign on the fence around the red light district read "Men under 21 Keep Out"—an acknowledgment that boys in Butte often became men long before they reached legal age.[19]

The intrinsic dangers of mining camps put children especially at risk. While Homer Thomas, Mollie Sheehan, James Sanders, and Frances Gilbert had parents who kept close watch on their children, this was not the case for all. Some children, as Thomas Dimsdale noted, ran wild in the early mining camps. Youngsters were sometimes left in desperate need of community charity and social services.

On a frigid December day in 1864, three sisters dressed in little more than calico slips begged at the door of James Fergus in Virginia City. Inquiries about their parents revealed that their father was gambling in nearby Nevada City and that their mother could not to be found. Women in town gave the girls food and clothing before reluctantly returning them to their father, as there was no legal alternative. The *Montana Post* publicly chastised him for neglecting and abusing his children. The eldest girl was twelve-year-old Martha Canary, who grew up to become well known as Calamity Jane.[20]

During the early decades, various Catholic institutions and boarding schools sometimes took in orphans, but Montana's first orphanage, St. Ambrose's, was at Helena. It was established in 1881, when the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth took in three young brothers from Butte. Their mother had died and their father, a miner, could not care for them. The sisters initially named the home after the namesake of Ambrose Sullivan, one of the children, but it soon became St. Joseph's Orphanage and was quickly filled to well over its capacity.[21]

Epidemics were commonplace throughout the nineteenth century and knew no social boundaries. Rich or poor, no person was immune and all children were at risk. Typhoid and cholera

plagued mining camps because residents quickly polluted their water sources. Children's diseases, such as measles, whooping cough, and diphtheria, sometimes ravaged the population.

Eight-year-old Sallie Davenport traveled by steamboat to Helena with her mother, brother, and sister in the spring of 1865. They came to join their father, William Davenport, who had gone ahead to establish a claim. One younger sibling died before the family boarded the steamboat *St. Johns* at Liberty Landing, Missouri. There were many families with children on board. Sallie, along with her two siblings and most of the other children, fell victim to the measles, which swept through the passengers housed in close quarters. Sally recovered, but her younger brother died as the boat docked at Fort Benton. Her older sister Anna made the final leg of the long trip to Helena in a makeshift bed in the back of a freight wagon.[22]

The summer of 1865 in the mining camp at Helena was rainy. Mollie Sheehan remembered her family's cozy cabin during that summer, but the Davenports had the opposite experience. They lived in a cabin with a sod roof. Every time it rained, the sod soaked up water like a sponge and the roof constantly leaked. Sallie recalled that her mother was suffering from a bone felon in her hand. She paced the muddy floor at night, unable to sleep, worried about Anna's health. Anna died

Mining camp children went to school in Garnet, Montana. (947-520, Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena.)

in September, leaving Sallie—one of four children just six months before—an only child.[23]

Two decades later, the great silver camp of Elkhorn, Montana, flourished. Elkhorn's pathetic legacy, however, reminds us that sometimes the sacrifices parents made in leaving home and family for new opportunities were minor compared to the hazards these decisions imposed on their children. Dr. William Dudley served as camp doctor, but could do nothing when a diphtheria epidemic claimed most of Elkhorn's children in 1889. The Dudleys left Elkhorn abruptly, leaving their firstborn son, a casualty of the epidemic, buried in the hillside cemetery. Later that year, on September 27, Albin Nelson, ten, and Harry Walton, nine—rare survivors of the recent epidemic—found a quicksilver container full of black powder. Adults filled these containers to detonate for community celebrations like the Fourth of July, and had overlooked this one. The boys managed to explode it, and blew themselves to bits. They share a common grave in the small cemetery.[24]

Epidemics and explosives were not the only perils; dredging created its own dangers. At Bannack in 1916, three girls were enjoying the warmth of a summer afternoon, splashing and wading in Grasshopper Creek. Laughing and talking, they waded out into a pond created by the dredge boat, not realizing they had gone too far. Suddenly the girls stepped off a ledge into nine feet of water. None could swim. Twelve-year-old Smith Paddock heard the commotion and managed to pull two of the girls out, but the third girl, sixteen-year-old Dorothy Dunn, drowned.[25]

Of all the mining camps, Butte was probably the most dangerous place for youngsters. This made Butte's children tough and unusually daring. They seemed to thrive in the polluted air and unsanitary conditions frequently noted in reports to the board of health. While Maury Mulcahy was growing up in Butte in the 1930s and 1940s, mine officials came to his elementary school, showed the kids what a blasting cap was, warned them not to pick up the devices, and showed them the explosive inside. After the lecture, every boy went out in search of caps. They would pour the powder into a bottle with a wick, put it on the train tracks, and try to explode it as a train passed by. Mulcahy knew children who lost limbs to this form of play. Danger made the game that much more fun.[26]

These strong and resilient children of the mining camps grew up to become the backbone of Montana. Mollie Sheehan Ronan vividly recalled from a very early age that Montana's "dry, light sparkling air" invigorated her "and gave zest to living."[27] While unusual hardships and dangerous conditions sometimes put them at high risk, the freedom these young pioneers enjoyed made them singularly independent individuals. In this way, mining camp children and their descendants helped define the character of today's Treasure State.

Diphtheria took the lives of many children at Elkhorn, Montana, in 1889. (Photograph courtesy of Larry Goldsmith.)

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Notes:

1. H. G. Merriam (ed.), *Way Out West: Recollections and Tales* (Norman, OK, 1969), 187.
2. Margaret Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches: The Story of Mary Ronan As told to Margaret Ronan* [Ellen Baumler, ed.] (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2003). When I began teaching Montana History in 1996, I was trying to find ways to engage my college students in the subject. The students found portions of Mary's story fascinating and their enthusiasm led me to edit the manuscript. This firsthand reminiscence includes a well-loved chapter on childhood in Virginia City, Montana, and was a finalist for the WILLA Literary Award for Memoir or Essay in 2004.
3. Butts family reminiscence, "The Forgotten Pioneers" (unpublished manuscript in possession of the author), 3.
4. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 60.
5. W. F. Sanders II, and Robert T. Taylor (eds.), *Biscuits and Badmen: The Sanders' Story in Their Own Words* (Butte, MT: Editorial Review Press, 1983), 25.
6. Homer Thomas to Isabella Thomas, 17 Dec. 1864, Small Collection 837, Montana Historical Society Research Center Archives, Helena, MT.
7. Merriam, *Way Out West*, 188.
8. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 32-3.
9. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 32-3.
10. Sanders and Taylor, *Biscuits and Badmen*, 27.
11. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 38-9.
12. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 55-6. Vigilante justice seems to make a curious, indelible imprint on a community and continues to make an impression on today's children. The last vigilante use of Helena's Hangman's Tree was the double execution of Arthur Compton and Joseph Wilson, for attempted murder, in 1870. That grisly photo hung in the hall of nearby Jefferson Elementary School until a few years ago.
13. Susan Leaphart (ed.), "Frieda and Belle Fligelman: A Frontier-City Girlhood in the 1890s," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 32 (Aut. 1982): 87.
14. Elizabeth Farmer Smith, reminiscence, vertical file on Garnet, MT, Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena.
15. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 36-7.
16. Sister Julia Gilmore, S.C.L., *We Came North: Centennial Story of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth* (St. Meinrad, IN: ?, 1961), 46-8, 295.
17. Don Miller, "Garnet's Day in the Sun is Done but Restoration Bringing Back Some Life," *Great Falls (MT) Tribune*, n.d., vertical File on Garnet, Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena.
18. Madison County History Association, *Pioneer Trails and Trials: Madison County, 1863-1920* (Virginia City?: The Association, 1976), 780.
19. WPA Writers' Project, *Copper Camp: The Lusty Story of Butte, Montana, The Richest Hill on Earth* (1943; reprint, Helena, MT: Riverbend Publishing Co., 2002), 8; Ellen Baumler, "Devil's Perch: Prostitution from Suite to Cellar in Butte, Montana," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 48 (Aut. 1998): 17.
20. (Virginia City) *Montana Post* , 31 Dec. 1864; Roberta Deed Sollid, *Calamity Jane: A Study in Historical Criticism* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1958), 9-10.
21. Gilmore, *We Came North*, 60; Ellen Baumler, "Catholic Hill" (at http://www.metnet.mt.gov/Special/Quarries%20From%20The%20Gulch/HTM/Catholic%20Hill.pdf, accessed May 5, 2011).
22. Sallie Davenport Davidson, reminiscence, 1928, Small Collection 606, Montana Historical Society Research Center Archives, Helena.
23. Davidson reminiscence, Small Collection 606; Butts, "The Forgotten Pioneers," 3.
24. *Great Falls Tribune*, "Parade," 9 Oct. 1949; Ellen Baumler, "Historical Reflections," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 50 (Aut. 1982): 75.
25. *Dillon (MT) Examiner*, 9 Aug. 1916.
26. Maury Mulcahy, personal communication with author, Apr. 2006.
27. Ronan, *Girl from the Gulches*, 51.