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*'... from the singular appearance of the place, I called it the Gates of the Rocky Mountains.'*  
Meriwether Lewis



Photo courtesy of the Montana Historical Society

July 19, 1927. State Historian David Hilger, Gov. John Erickson and state D.A.R. regent Bessie Rasmusson are among dignitaries at dedication of the "tablet" at Meriwether Picnic Ground. The marker was moved to its present location when the Mann Gulch memorial plaque was dedicated in 1951.

## A place of singular appearance?

Twenty miles north of Helena lies an impressive canyon with physical characteristics familiar to most Helenans. Meriwether Lewis described it first in his journal entry for July 19, 1805:

"This evening we entered much the most remarkable cliffs we have yet seen. These cliffs rise from the waters edge on either side perpendicularly to the height of 12,000 feet. Every object here wears a dark and gloomy aspect. . . for the distance of 5 1/2 miles the river is deep from side to side. Nor is there for the first three miles of this distance, a spot on which a man could rest the sole of his foot. . . it was late in the evening before I entered this place. . . obliged to continue until sometime after dark before I found a place sufficiently large to encamp my small party; at length one occurred on the lard side. . . from the singular appearance of the place, I called it the Gates of the Rocky Mountains..."

WHAT IS NOT so familiar to us are the efforts of those who realized this spot and others like it along the Lewis and Clark Trail ought to be memorialized in a way sure to attract the attention of future generations. One such group, the Oro Fino, Helena, Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) sought to acquire and assume the protection of historic spots, to erect monuments and to encourage historical research.

In 1924, at the state D.A.R. convention in Billings a decision was made to set upon a definite program culminating in the placing of bronze marker or two each year until at least the most noteworthy landmarks and sites in the state had thus been designated. In this pursuit the organization relied upon the "magnificent generosity of Montana's greatest industrial corporation," according to state D.A.R. regent Bessie Elma Rasmusson, "the Anaconda Copper Mining Co. who magnanimously undertook to furnish these markers." The markers, later to be noted as a source of state pride, were made of native Montana copper and related ores and "are fashioned in a Montana foundry by the ingenuity and handiwork of Montana men." Between 1924-1940, the D.A.R. would place 13 historical markers across Montana.

ON JULY 19, 1927, the 122nd anniversary of the Lewis encampment in the Gates of the Mountains a festive ceremony dedicating the "handsome tablet" was held at Meriwether picnic ground. The area had been used as a landing since 1886 by Judge Nicholas Hilger for his steamboat the Rose of Helena. Before the D.A.R. monument ceremony renaming it Meriwether, Hilger called the spot "Picnic Canyon."

About 200 citizens witnessed the dedication, including Hilger's son David in his capacity as state historian, Gov. John E. Erickson, Chief Justice Llewellyn L. Callaway, state D.A.R. Regent Mrs. Rasmusson and many D.A.R. members. The marker was unveiled by two children, Filby Barker and Bobby Smith who "deposited floral pieces of red, white, and blue at the base of the monument in memory of the explorers." The plaque reads:

"In commemoration of the intrepid explorers comprising the Lewis and Clark Expedition who dis-

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#### MORE QUARRIES FROM LAST CHANCE GULCH

covered this canyon and encamped here July 19, 1805, on their westward voyage of transcontinental exploration en route up the Missouri River bound for the Pacific Northwest. Dedicated by the Oro Fino Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution, July 19, 1927."

IN HIS REMARKS, quoted in both Helena papers, historian David Hilger stated, "It gives me special pleasure to be invited to accept this gift for all the people of Montana and to express my appreciation of the splendid work of the D.A.R. Hilger went on to do something historians generally try to avoid. He stated that the site being honored that evening was the "exact spot" Meriwether Lewis and his men had camped on the gloomy July night of 1805. According to Hilger, "of the many camps made by the explorers in our state I know of none where the exact location can be more definitely assured than the spot on which these dedication exercises are being held." Hilger commented that the raising of the river by the Montana Power Co.'s Holter Dam in 1918, "had not changed the conditions from that time till now." Hilger arrived at his conclusion after tracing the route of the Lewis and Clark trail by steamboat, by motorboat, by horseback, and by foot. Having compared the maps and the journals Hilger was convinced that the location was exact as shown "definitely and positively by their records."

OTHER OBSERVERS and Lewis and Clark enthusiasts are not so sure. Using the same maps and journals along with modern tools such as depth finders, these researchers have come to startlingly different conclusions. One such researcher is Butte resident Bob Bergantino a recognized authority on Lewis and Clark in Montana. He thinks the site of Lewis's camp that night was actually nearly to the end of the canyon south of present day Fields Gulch. His maps, using detailed course comparisons, place Lewis at a site where, in a wet year, gulches would reveal what Lewis describes in his journal as "several fine springs bursting out at water's edge from the interstices of the rocks."

Others wonder why Lewis and his party of some 30 men would not have stopped at Fields Gulch which would seem to be, as Lewis describes, the first spot in three miles except one of a few yards on which a man could rest the sole of his foot? Bergantino feels the party kept going past Fields Gulch because Lewis believed he could get out of the canyon before nightfall but had to stop when it became too dark.

ROBERT LANGE, former editor of the journal of the Lewis and Clark Heritage Foundation, We Proceeded On, states "students of the expedition do not always agree with respect to some locations. However, careful study and perseverance rewards researchers with what may be claimed as authentic conclusions." Hilger certainly claimed his conclusion as authentic. Bergantino and other scholars can make similar claims of authenticity. The expedition left little physical evidence behind them so the truth will probably never be known.

What cannot be disputed are the words, if not taken too literally, of Gov. Erickson in his acceptance of the tablet on behalf of the state, "Here they rested their weary feet, here they built a fire, here they rested with the dark and solemn river rolling at their feet." Erickson looked forward to the coming years when thousands would journey to the Gates to visualize the meaning of the monument and go away better men and women "with a greater respect and love for their country."

This spring the Forest Service is giving Meriwether picnic grounds a face lift and working to ensure the lovely site can be enjoyed by everyone. Plans call for the D.A.R. and the Mann Gulch memorial plaques to be moved so that climbing steps to view them will no longer be necessary. The number of visitors Meriwether receives each year would surely surprise Gov. Erickson as they now total nearly 32,000, not including private boaters. No doubt some of these visitors leave inspired by the scenery and the plaque to do their own Lewis and Clark research just as the D.A.R. intended. An on-site computer kiosk is nearing completion thanks to the efforts of Jeff Dobb and the Gates of the Mountains Foundation. Students of the expedition can also find help reaching authentic conclusions by visiting Lewis and Clark at their world wide web site: <http://www.lewisand-clark.org>.

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Photo courtesy of Jeff Dobb

An unidentified group including David Hilger sometime in the early '20s before the placement of the D.A.R. plaque. The sign inaccurately claims Clark camped in the canyon. In reality, Lewis sent him to explore Prickley Pear Creek.

## 'Into the waiting arms of justice'

By CAROLYNN FARLEY  
IR Staff Writer

Where are the police when you need them? Early Thursday morning they were right where Montana Outdoor Sports owner Rex Seeley wanted them to be — down the street from his business.

According to Lt. Jim Andersen, Seeley was shaken from a sound sleep at about 5 a.m. by the burglar alarm from his business ringing in his bedroom. He has it hooked up so it sounds at his home.

Seeley jumped into his vehicle, drove to the store to investigate and found the door to the business open.

Before he could leave to search for a phone to call the police, Seeley noticed a police officer refueling his car at the station down the street, Andersen said.

Seeley told the officer what was going on, and the officer called for back up before entering the business. Four police officers and one sheriff's deputy converged on the business within minutes.

"YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE HOW QUICK they were," said Seeley. "I was shocked."

Then, officers entered the business through one door and startled the would-be burglar who ran out through the back door.

"He fled out the back door into the waiting arms of justice," said Andersen.

Mark Wearley, 38, was taken into custody and charged with felony burglary and theft. City Court Judge Myron Pitch set his bond at \$5,000.

Seeley said he recognized Wearley from an incident last month in which Wearley was caught shoplifting at Montana Outdoor Sports. Pitch fined Wearley \$125 on March 27 for theft.

According to Andersen, Wearley was attempting on Wednesday morning to steal such items as a hunting saw, a knife, a hatchet and an underwater camera house. The total value of the items was estimated at \$750.

## In Townsend: Hospital to keep its ambulance

By JEFF STOFFER  
The Townsend Star

Local ambulance services will continue to be managed by Broadwater Health Center, Townsend Health Systems, Inc., board chairperson Barbara Teller told the Broadwater County Commissioners recently.

Nine local emergency medical technicians in January signed a petition recommending the hospital return management of the service to the county, and discussions of a possible transfer have been held during the past four months.

"I THINK everything is now copacetic," Teller told the commissioners. "We can work things out."

She explained that the hospital would seek out a lease of the service from July 1, 1997, through July 1, 1998.

"THERE ARE SOME THINGS we have yet to work out," Teller said.

On April 21, Mike Koehnke tendered his resignation as coordinator of the ambulance service. In a letter to BHC administrator, Koehnke wrote that "I no longer have the time needed to do the best job possible. We, on the farm, are weeks behind in spring planting due to the weather, and as Broadwater County's Disaster and Emergency Services coordinator, have many emergency management duties to attend to."

KOEHNKE wrote that he would continue to serve as emergency medical service training coordinator, a separate position he has held since 1993.

"I sincerely hope you all will understand my need to focus on family and county obligations at this time," he concluded. Teller said the THS board and ambulance crew members are now working on replacing Koehnke.

## Youth camp to be at Flathead Lake

This summer teens can spend some time learning about grasses, fords and shrubs while they enjoy scenic Flathead Lake. The Montana Youth Range Camp is June 9-13 and open to all youths ages 14-18. This year will be held in Rollins, Mont., along the shores of beautiful Flathead Lake.

This well organized, balanced and educational program brings together range professionals and interested students to learn in an outdoor setting. Evening programs and activities give campers an opportunity to develop lasting friendships.

The camp costs \$75, which includes meals, lodging and supplies. Check with your local Conservation District for sponsorship. For more information or an application, contact Chris Malgren, Lake Conservation District, P.O. Box 766, Polson, Mont., 59860 or call (406) 883-5875.