



Revised 12/1/2024

Title: Children in the Mining Camps

Grade Level: 6th-12th grades

Subject(s): Social Studies/Montana State History

Duration: One Fifty-Minute Class Period

Description: This PowerPoint lesson complements, but does not duplicate, information presented in Chapter 6: "Montana's Gold and Silver Boom" from the textbook *Montana: Stories of the Land* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2008).

Goals: Student will be able to describe what life was like for children on the mining frontier.

Content Standards Addressed:

SS.H.6-8.5. Explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present.

SS.H.9-12.1. Analyze how unique circumstances of time, place, and historical contexts shape individuals' lives.

Materials:

PowerPoint (which you can download from the following link:

<https://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/chapter6/Childrenintheminingcamps.pptx> and script, below, starting on page 2.

Laser pointer (optional)

Laptop projector

Procedure:

Print the script, pages 2 through 15 of this document.

Review the script and PowerPoint before presenting, adapting the content to your grade level. Note that parts of the script, which mentions prostitution, smoking, and death, may not be appropriate for all grades. Slide 19 shows a picture of young children sitting on toilets. Slide 42 shows a child in a coffin.

Children in Montana's Mining Camps PowerPoint Script

- 1. Title slide.** The richest of the Montana gold strikes at Grasshopper Creek (1862), Alder Gulch (1863), and Last Chance Gulch (1864) attracted an eclectic population. Among them were officials, merchants, and service providers, some of whom brought their families to the booming camps. Children at first were few, but children and adults who spent time in Montana's great boomtown camps and later mining communities left fascinating accounts of childhood.
- 2. Butte Kindergarten.** Mining camp children went to school, made up their own games, and were exposed to the vices and violence of everyday life in the rough and tumble mining communities.
- 3. Covered wagon.** Many were seasoned travelers who crossed the plains in covered wagons...
- 4. Steamboat.** ...or spent days in cramped quarters aboard steamboats en route to Montana.
- 5. Children on hydraulic lift.** They faced dangers peculiar to mining communities. University of Montana Professor H. G. Merriam noted, "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." Children are the same no matter where they live. However, because of their hardships and material deprivations, mining camp children experienced life more intensely. They learned to make the most of their extraordinary circumstances.
- 6. Bannack.** Like their parents, children recognized Montana's primitive conditions. Five-year-old James Sanders, son of Wilbur and Harriett Sanders, crossed the plains with the Henry Edgerton family from Ohio to Montana. James heard the excited talk about the great gold camp at Bannack and Montana's golden gulches. Upon at last arriving at far-famed Bannack,

however, James took one look at the ugly settlement where the dirt was everywhere churned and primitive cabins and tents straggled along Grasshopper Creek. He well expressed the adults' opinion observing with disappointment, "I fink Bangup is a humbug."

7. Nevada City, Alder Gulch. Seven-year-old Homer Thomas 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 he expresses his dislike for Montana's remoteness. " 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."

8. Mary "Mollie" Sheehan (later Mary Ronan) and her father, James. Children caught the gold fever too. Ten-year-old Mary "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 take his family there. The Sheehans followed the trampled ground in the wake of stampeding miners. As the mule team panted up the last hill, the Sheehans stopped to let them rest. Mollie hopped down from the wagon, grabbed a stick and wrote her name in the dirt declaring to her father's amusement, "I stake my claim." 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 she never questioned why they were not "good women."

9. Miners at their sluice boxes. The girls 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 them and they allowed it. Mollie and Carrie brought their hairbrushes and straws, or "blowers," brushed the gold caught in the crevices of the wooden troughs, blew it into piles, and scooped it into their buckskin pokes.

10. Peter Ronan. One of those generous miners, Peter Ronan, poured a bucketful of muddy water down his sluicebox, unaware that the girls were down at the bottom. Mollie's new bonnet was ruined. And that is how Mollie met the miner who later became her husband.

11. Boys holding mules. Boys always found work in the mining camps. Frances Gilbert Albright, whose father Henry Gilbert operated one of the first breweries in Alder Gulch, recalled lines of freight wagons in the muddy street that brought their groceries and glorious moonlight sleigh rides under piles of buffalo robes. While Homer Thomas, Mollie Sheehan, and Frances

Gilbert had parents who kept a close eye on their children, others ran wild in the mining camps.

12. Dimsdale's school advertisement. Harriett Sanders worried about the influence of the miners on her two boys and insisted that their house be built well out of town. Thomas Dimsdale, *Montana Post* editor and author of *Vigilantes of Montana*, complained about young hooligans in the streets and opened a school to help corral Virginia City's youth.

13. Dimsdale's School, moved from Virginia City to Nevada City. Mollie Sheehan attended Dimsdale's school, which you can see in today Nevada City. She found the mild-mannered professor so preoccupied with his writing that she and her friend Carrie Crane

delighted in asking to be excused. The girls would run down the hillside to a corral below. There they took a few daring minutes to slide down the haystacks, and scurry back up the hill to slip back into their seats unnoticed.

14. Mathilda Dalton. Besides the five road agents' graves atop Virginia City's Boot Hill, there is a poignant memorial to Clara and William Dalton who came to Bannack with the first Fisk train in 1862. The Daltons (unrelated to the infamous Dalton gang) and their four children soon moved to Virginia City where 19-year-old Matilda became very ill with typhoid. She recovered, but her mother and father also became ill, and both died within two weeks of each other.

15. Dalton graves, Boot Hill. Matilda really had no choice but to marry and leave Montana with her younger siblings. Years later her children returned to Virginia City to place the monument to the Daltons that stands today on Boot Hill.

16. Montana Post clipping. While Mathilda's siblings had their older sister to look out for them, some children were in desperate need of social services. In December, 1864, three sisters, dressed in little more than calico slips, begged at the door of James Fergus in Virginia City while their father gambled in Nevada City. Women in town gave them food and clothing before reluctantly returning them to their father as there was no alternative. The *Montana Post* publicly chastised him. The eldest girl was twelve-year-old Martha Canary, later known as Calamity Jane.

17. St. Joseph's Home. Although various Catholic boarding schools and institutions sometimes took in orphans, the first orphanage, St. Ambrose's, was at Helena, founded in 1881, where the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth took in three young brothers from Butte. The sisters named the home for one of the children, Ambrose Sullivan. Their mother had died and their father, a miner,

could not care for them. The institution later became St. Joseph's Orphanage and was instantly filled to well over capacity.

18. House of the Good Shepherd. Others needed social services that were sorely lacking. The House of the Good Shepherd opened in 1890 in Helena to provide a safe haven for wayward women (prostitutes and drug addicts) who wanted to reform. In April 1892, Linnie Connor's father marched her, kicking and screaming, down 8th Avenue in Helena, to the House of the Good Shepherd and handed her over to the sisters. Neighbors, thus far tolerant of the sisters' mission, were appalled that Linnie's father would forcibly place an innocent child there. They were also aghast that the sisters would accept an innocent 14-year-old girl. But Linnie's parents were at their wits' end with the incorrigible teenager. As the hours passed and Linnie remained with the sisters, neighbors hung a makeshift likeness of Linnie's father in the Connors' front yard and pinned a note on it that read: "C. Connor--Made His Child Homeless." Someone chalked the vigilante warning 3-7-77 on the Connors' sidewalk. The next morning, Linnie's parents removed her from the Good Shepherd and placed her with friends. Her father made plans to send her elsewhere. Linnie's friends engaged attorney Ella Knowles, Montana's first female licensed attorney, who represented her in court. Many neighbors and others testified on her behalf. The judge ruled that Connor was not to lay a hand on his daughter, send her away, or force her to go anywhere against her will without the consent of the court. Some months later, Linnie suddenly died. An autopsy revealed a brain tumor, likely explaining her incorrigibility.

19. Florence Crittenton Home 1930s. From 1898 through the mid-twentieth century, the Florence Crittenton Home took in needy girls and teenage mothers who had nowhere to go. Today the Crittenton Home still performs similar services.

20. Montana Deaconess School. The Montana Deaconess School was not an orphanage, but a protestant boarding school. From 1909 to the 1950s, it provided needy children whose parents could not care for them necessary social services and education.

21. Saloon at Rocker near Butte. Young boys in the mining camps could always find work cleaning up the saloons and hurdy gurdy houses after hours if their parents would allow it. They pocketed the loose dust that inevitably spilled on the dance floor. Sometimes they found jobs in the liverys and stables where there was always work to be done.

22. Miner's hospital at Virginia City, now the Bonanza Inn. By the mid-1870s, Virginia City was still a rough camp. When Sister Irene McGrath, one of three Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth who ran a miners' hospital, 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 18. The sisters' hospital is now the Bonanza Inn.

23. Family in wagon. Many families traveled by wagon or by steamboat 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.

24. Derinda Jane Butts Tuttle. Derinda Jane Butts was eight years old. She and her two sisters were not used to luxuries anyway, and the family had no mishaps along the way, so the girls thought the trip was a lark without the heavy responsibilities their parents had. Derinda Jane's most vivid recollection was that of a lesson learned. Some of the children ran up a hill away from camp one evening. Suddenly they saw the dark form of an Indian moving stealthily from bush to bush. The children ran all the way back to camp, breathlessly describing what

they had seen. It turned out to be one of the train's own men. It was his way of teaching the children the danger of wandering away from camp.

25. Charley's Boot. Sometimes parents put their children at risk. Among the many diaries kept by emigrants along the Bozeman Trail, one stands out as the most poignant, a tragic reminder of the real risks early travelers faced. William Thomas left his Illinois farm in 1866 after his wife and twin daughters died of pneumonia. William took his seven-year-old son Charley and a driver, Joseph Schultz, to join William's brother George Thomas in Montana Territory. [Homer Thomas, whose letter to grandma was quoted earlier, was Charley's cousin.] They traveled in a prairie schooner, drawn by a pair of \$500 mules. William's diary is strangely full of forebodings and once, remarking on his emotions gazing at distant mountains, wrote, "cold chills run through my blood." He was right to feel apprehensive. William's party broke off from the main group to travel Sawyer's Cutoff, right in the midst of Red Cloud's War. On August 23, 1866, they camped near the Yellowstone at present day Greycliff. The next day, other travelers came upon their campsite, the fire still warm. William had thirteen arrows in his body; Charley had three. Schultz, whose body was found in the river, had apparently been fishing when the attack occurred. William's diary was found in his pocket. Indians took or destroyed nearly everything except a few books, a family Bible, Charley's hunting knife, and only one of his small worn boots, now part of the museum collections of the Montana Historical Society. The other boot was never found.

26. Steamboat on the Missouri. With the third great discovery at Last Chance, soon dubbed Helena, much of Virginia City's population followed the miners to the new camp. Eight-year-old Sallie Davenport traveled to Helena with her mother, brother, and sister in the spring 1865 to join

their father, William Davenport, who had come ahead to establish a claim. The youngest sibling died before the family boarded the steamboat St. Johns at Liberty Landing, Missouri. There were many families with children en route to Montana. Sallie and her two siblings, along with most of the other children on board, fell victim to measles. 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.

27. First photo of Helena. That summer in the mining camp at Helena was rainy.

28. Pioneer Cabin, first home of the Butts. The Davenports and the Buttses lived in neighboring cabins with sod roofs. Every time it rained, the sod soaked up water like a sponge and the roof constantly leaked. Sallie's mother paced the floor at night, unable to sleep, suffering from a bone felon (swelling) in her hand and worried about Anna's health. A few months later, Anna died, leaving Sallie—just six months before one of four children—an only child.

29. Mary “Mollie” Sheehan Ronan. Mollie Sheehan's family also moved to Helena in July 1865. One of her first memories was that 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.

30. First sketch map of Helena, 1865. This is what Helena looked like when the Butts, Davenport, and Sheehan families arrived. In Mollie's recollection of these times, she astutely noted 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.”

31. Hangman's Tree. Mollie glimpsed 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.

32. Hanging of Compton and Wilson. Vigilante justice seems to make a curious, indelible imprint on a community. The last vigilante use of Helena's Hangman's Tree was the double execution of Compton and Wilson, for attempted murder, in 1870. That grisly photo hung in the hall of nearby Jefferson Elementary School until a few years ago.

33. Portrait of young smokers. Smoking had a wide appeal to children, and most boys, and girls, experimented 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 had a cigar box which they filled with the old stogies. They had made a sidewalk of scrap wood in 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?” and 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, Mary forgot and inhaled.

She keeled over, and Eileen ran into the house announcing 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 fainted, but the spanking made a lasting impression. Neither girl ever took up smoking again.

34. Dorothea Gans. As Helena matured and aspired to be a cosmopolitan city and not a dirty mining camp, citizens consciously tried to shed the mining camp image. This applied to children as well, whose parents dressed them up for portraits. Dorothea Gans looks uncomfortable in her finery.

35. Playing chess. They played somber games of chess, put on pageants, and took ballroom dancing at Mrs. Sulgrove’s Academy.

36. Mrs. Sulgrove’s students. Most 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 the girl’s back, it would not soil her dress.

37. Garnet. Elizabeth Farmer Smith left wonderful pictures of 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 melt it in a vat, leaving a blob of gold at the bottom.

- 38. The Farmer family at Garnet.** The 4th of July was the summer's highlight. Adults spread cornmeal on the oak floor in the dance hall. Elizabeth and the other children skated and slid to prepare it for the dancing.
- 39. Farmers' 1922 Buick.** The Farmers had a 1922 Buick that Elizabeth's mother learned to drive, an unusual feat at that time of which the family was very proud. But the horse-drawn stage to Bearmouth still operated, 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, it had jostled so much that there was always butter on top.
- 40. Mr. Davey's store ad.** Boys in Garnet 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 threepiece 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.
- 41. Store window.** Elizabeth Farmer's reminiscence includes stories of Mr. Davey's meanness.
- 42. Child in coffin.** Epidemics were fairly commonplace throughout the nineteenth century and knew no social boundaries. Rich or poor, no person was immune. Typhoid and cholera plagued mining camps because miners quickly polluted the water source. But measles, whooping cough and diphtheria also invaded the communities.
- 43. Elkhorn.** The great silver camp of Elkhorn that flourished in the 1880s has a particularly pathetic legacy, reminding us that sometimes the sacrifices of parents—leaving home and

family for new opportunities—were minor compared to the sacrifices they imposed on their children. Dr. William Dudley served as camp doctor but could do nothing when a diphtheria epidemic in 1889 claimed most of Elkhorn’s children.

44. Children’s tombstone. His wife was pregnant with their second child, and the Dudleys left Elkhorn abruptly, leaving their first born son, a casualty of the epidemic, buried in the hillside cemetery along with these sisters and many other children.

45. Tombstone. During that same year, Harry Walton, 9, and Albin Nelson, 10, somehow escaped the epidemic. But then on September 27, they 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 grave in the small cemetery.

46. Dredge boat. Mining-related accidents were a hazard to children and explosives and mine shafts were not the only perils. Dredging created its own danger. 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.

47. Newspaper clipping. 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.

48. Columbia Gardens. Butte, the mining camp that became an industrial hub, was as unique for its children as it was an anomaly. Copper king W.A. Clark’s Columbia Gardens, which

boasted one of the nation's first Ferris wheels and a spectacular roller coaster, was his gift to the community, and children especially loved it. Mining camp ruffians and children of prominent mine officials rubbed elbows on the streetcar that took them all to the gardens each week for Children's Day. Children by the hundreds enjoyed the entertainment, and at the end of the day picked huge bouquets of pansies to take home to their mothers. Butte boys who 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," acknowledgment that young boys in Butte became men long before they reached legal age.

49. Butte. Of all the mining camps Butte was probably the most dangerous place for youngsters. This made Butte's children tough and unusually daring.

50. Children playing. They seemed to thrive in the polluted air and unsanitary conditions frequently noted in reports to the Board of Health. This photograph, taken by the Board of Health, shows children playing in an alley full of debris.

51. Modern poster. When Maury Mulcahy was growing up in Butte in the 1930s and 1940s, mine officials came around to his elementary school and showed the kids what a blasting cap was, warned them not to pick them up, 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.

52. Immigrant children. These strong and resilient children and their mining camp contemporaries became the backbone of Montana.

53. Child on rocking horse. Mary “Mollie” Sheehan Ronan vividly recalled from a very early age that Montana’s “dry, light sparkling air” invigorated her “and gave zest to living.”

54. Garnet School. While unusual hardships and dangerous conditions sometimes put them at high risk, the freedom they enjoyed made them singularly independent individuals.

55. Child with dog. In this way, mining camp children and their descendants helped define the character of today’s Treasure State.

55. End Slide.