

**2019 Montana Historic Preservation Governor's Award
for Outstanding Historic Preservation Rehabilitation Project to
the McGraw Building, Fort Benton**

**Presented by Lt. Governor Mike Cooney
Myrna Loy Center, Helena**

January 18, 2010

The 2019 Governor's Award for Outstanding Historic Preservation Rehabilitation Project goes to the McGraw Building of Fort Benton, owned by Bob Milford.

John McGraw built his namesake building in Fort Benton as a saloon in 1912. He chose a visible location opposite the Missouri River Bridge on the main thoroughfare, Front Street, to entice prospective customers. The Irish-born McGraw, made his living as a saloon operator for much of his time in Fort Benton. He weathered prohibition by selling soft drinks and meals to customers and allegedly selling Canadian beer to undercover police.

Through the years, as the McGraw Building changed hands, its businesses came and went. It operated from the early 1930s to the mid-1960s as the Capitol Theater. An addition on the rear of the building allowed seating for 274 moviegoers. Subsequent businesses housed by the McGraw Building included an optometrist, insurance company, and a roofing company.

In time, owners significantly altered the brick and terra cotta façade of the structure, removing the original storefront and infilling the arched opening that distinguished the building.

Enter Bob Milford. Raised in New Mexico, Bob moved to Montana in 2006 pursuing his interest in historic preservation almost immediately. Bob served six years on the Great Falls-Cascade County Historic Preservation Commission, donated time as a site steward at First Peoples Buffalo Jump, and currently serves on the board of directors of the Sun River Valley Historical Society.

In 2015, Bob purchased the McGraw Building in Fort Benton. Realizing the historic gem that lay beneath, he went to work removing the non-historic brick overlay, and movie theater awning. With a new historically compatible storefront, the McGraw Building's historic and aesthetic charm is once again on full-display. What had become a fairly-nondescript building is now a hallmark on the block. During the rehabilitation, Bob relied on the expertise of a number of people including Sophia Spark of Spark Architecture, Randall Reeve of Reeve Construction, and Ben Ruddy of Dutton State Bank.

Fort Benton's layered history goes back to Montana's earliest days as a Territory through to the Homestead boom. Restored buildings like the McGraw show those layers and establish a setting for this important historic narrative. We know that preservation doesn't happen as a matter of fact; it takes something extra from the people who make it happen. So we thank Bob Milford for his hard work and ability to see beyond a languishing storefront. His vision and work show us all what's possible.