

M Historical Reflections

PHOTOS FROM MONTANA'S PAST



When Forrest L. Campbell stopped along State Highway 287 just north of Laurin in south-central Montana to snap the above picture, he was undoubtedly aware of the building's storied past. A World War I veteran from Anaconda, Campbell was discharged from active duty in June 1919 and soon after took a road trip to Yellowstone National Park with his brother, John Collier Campbell. Driving a Model T Ford, the two brothers took a number of pictures, including this one of Montana's famed Robbers' Roost. Forrest Campbell was proud of the picture, for it hung in the family home for many years. His daughter, Lucille Campbell Balfour of Florence, Oregon, shared a print of it for publication here.

Legend holds that this two-story, square-hewn log structure with its second-story balcony across the front was the supposed get-away for Montana's notorious road agent Henry Plummer and his fabled gang called "The Innocents." Here it was that Sheriff Plummer and his band plotted holdups of those traveling from Montana's premier gold camps, Bannack and Virginia City. Here it was that the gang committed at least one murder, the blood stains supposedly discoloring the floor. Here it was also that Plummer and his hooligans drank whisky in the downstairs barroom and perhaps cavorted in the upper floor dance hall. And here it was—somewhere on the grounds—that Plummer and his cohorts buried much of their gold dust and loot.

Or so the legend has it. Whether any of it is true is a different story. Susan Curtis, who gave the building and its history thorough study in 1975 while preparing

a report on its eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, concluded it was historically significant for several reasons, including the legends associated with it. It was well preserved and relatively unaltered, she noted, it represented a rare style of frontier architecture, and it was one of the few stage station structures to survive from Montana's early gold rush period. Unfortunately for the sheen of legend, Curtis also concluded that this building probably did not exist in 1863. More likely, Pete Daly built it in 1866–1867, some three years after Montana's famed Vigilantes hanged Plummer and his gang.

By the time Forrest and John Campbell happened by, the building was no longer a stage station, and by the 1930s it had fallen into total disuse. Concerned about its historical significance, local citizens urged its preservation, and in 1932, with the aid of private contributions, Madison County acquired the property for \$1,200 in back taxes. Six years later, Charlie Wheeler became the building's unofficial caretaker. Wheeler maintained the place as a "labor of love," according to what his grandson, Bob Wheeler, told *Montana Standard* reporter Perry Backus earlier this year. But the Wheelers have given up running the place, and the darkened structure now sits quietly awaiting a new fate.

That fate could be linked logically to Virginia City, which, with Nevada City, the State of Montana purchased two years ago to operate on behalf of heritage tourism. Both the Montana Heritage Commission and the Virginia City Preservation Alliance would like to see the building preserved, but for now representatives say neither agency can take it on. *M*