



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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Kalispell, Montana

February 12, 2025

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FEBRUARY MEETING

Monday, Feb. 17, 2025

“Stranger Than Fiction – The Bair Family of Martinsdale.”

Presenter: John Shontz, of Helena

Where: Second floor of the Northwest
Montana History Museum,
124 2nd Ave. East, Kalispell

Time: Gab 'n' Greet, raffle and book
signings start at 6:00 p.m.
Soft drinks, beer and wine
will be available.

Historic Presentation: Program begins
at 7:00 p.m.

No reservations are required, but
seating will be limited; so come early.
Call (406)-309-0938 with any
questions.

ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

A Montanan family you never heard of, from a town equally obscure, will be the subject of this month's presentation.

Charley Bair made his first fortune in the gold fields of the Klondike, his second in the sheep business in Montana, and his third in real estate in Los Angeles.

His daughters followed in his footsteps by

buying tens of millions of dollars of art. The art was brought to the family home in Martinsdale, Montana, where it remains on display.

Martinsdale, an unincorporated town located 36 miles east of White Sulphur Springs, has a 2020 Census population of 43 people.

John Shontz will talk about this wealthy and eccentric family. Mr. Bair was a pal of Will Rogers, and spent most winters in the movie community in Los Angeles.



Charley Bair



Bair Family Ranch Home in Martinsdale

Shontz knew both of Charley's daughters and their frugal nature. The youngest daughter married the ranch foreman to, as in Charley's words, avoid paying him a high salary.

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It is a tale where the truth is more amazing than fiction, Shontz notes. Being multi millionaires did not stop the daughters from picking up beer and pop bottles along area highways well into their 70s and turning them into the Mint Bar in Martinsdale for the deposit money.

The Bair fortune remains intact, and funds art, health and educational efforts in Montana.

About the Presenter

Helena native John Shontz has written extensively about railroads and transportation in Montana.



Shontz grew up in a newspaper family and his mother was a judge. He attended Carroll College, in Helena, and received an undergraduate degree in television management from St. Cloud State University in Minnesota and a law degree from Seattle University.

Shontz served on the staff of governors David Hall and David Boren in Oklahoma,

and ran a marketing and advertising agency in Sidney, Montana with national clients like Safeway and McDonalds.

He then practiced natural resource, copyright, transportation and open government law for 20 years in Helena and was a member of the Montana House of Representatives.

Shontz is also coordinator of the *Orphan Train Project*, about the 1854-1929 movement to relocate abandoned children from the East Coast.

He is author of *Taft – America's Wickedest City*, and his presentation to the Westerners on the former railroad town in April 2024 was well received. His books will be for sale before and after the presentation.



FROM THE SADDLEBAG

**By Jacob Thomas,
Acting President**

I moved to Northwest Montana full-time in 2017 when I had the opportunity to serve as Executive Director at the Northwest Historical Society. And try as I might, I could not escape the whispers that, at the tender age of 29, I was young for the post.

This was undoubtedly true, although I think the contrast between my youth and my predecessor retiring at 70 might have highlighted the discrepancy more than it would have been otherwise. Nevertheless, I was a professional historian for eight years, beginning even before my job here. The history bug can certainly bite you at any age.

I saw shadows of my personal past on Saturday, when I served as a judge at FVCC for the local National History Day. For those unfamiliar with the concept (as I was), a major component of National History Day is a student History Fair, where junior high and high school students put together projects in a variety of mediums, each exploring a different aspect or event from history. It is like a humanities-focused version of the science fair.

There were historic papers, exhibits, and short filmed documentaries. I was one of three volunteers assigned to judge the website submissions (probably the category I am least qualified to judge). But what I saw blew me away – three well-organized, in-depth projects that were clearly the products of countless hours of hard work, passion, and dedication from very intelligent and passionate students.

It would have been easy for students to phone-in this assignment, to just do the bare minimum and return to playing the socio-political games of the adolescent, but in these projects, I saw the opposite.

Don't get me wrong, there were flaws – stranded primary sources, some lack of broader connections, a few unconnected arguments – but beyond the actual content of the projects, I was mostly impressed with the passion that these students showed in the topics that they researched.

When I started at the Northwest Montana Historical Society, I was significantly younger than the vast majority of the volunteers and all of the board members. Membership was, and still is, slanted pretty steeply toward the older demographics. And yes, believe it or not, even our own Westerners skews older (shocker, I know).

On Saturday, I was encouraged to be reminded that the next generation of historians is alive and well.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

As the Northwest Montana Westerners start our 11th year, it is time to ask that you renew your membership. Our group operates on a shoestring budget, but it still takes money to rent the room and bring speakers to town.

We like to think our group offers a unique historical perspective. Unlike the Southwest, Montana history is not about gunfights and violent Indian raids.

Our stories reflect the quiet sagas of those who came to reinvent themselves, and stayed because of the state's underlying acceptance. Though others try to portray Montanans as “rugged individualists”, we know our philosophy is instead “self reliance.” We know how to fix a sink or drop a tree. But we see no stigma in accepting a helping hand, or providing one.

Montana made space for several Canadian tribes, saved the buffalo, grizzly bear and wolf, and took major steps to restore clean water and blue skies. We also struggled with political and social issues – again in the Montana way.

The Westerners plan to present those stories, one month at a time, and explore why our history is like no other.

TRIVA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Here are some obscure towns plucked from century-old Polk City Directories. Three are Great Northern Railway sidings where passenger trains once stopped. One has since changed its name. The other two are communities that could pop up in Google searchers.

The question is: Where are, or were, Udora, Garry, Skookum, Athens and Sedan?

Submit your answers to the editor at richardahull@charter.net and we will print the names of all those who get them right.

JOKE OF THE MONTH

By Tim Christenson

Uncle Torvald claims that when Swede Svenson wanted to join a local church, the pastor asked about his religious background.

"Vell, not much, I guess," said Swede.

"Do you know something about the Bible? For instance, do you know where Jesus was born?"

"Yah, I tink it vas in Philadelphia," said Swede.

"No, Jesus wasn't born in Philadelphia."

"Vell den, maybe it vas Pittsburgh," Swede suggested.

"No," said the pastor. "I'm afraid not. Jesus was born in Bethlehem."

"Oh, jah, Bethlehem," said Swede. "I knew it vas somevere in Pennsylvania."

MARK YOUR CALENDARS



● March 5

The History Book Club discusses *A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them*, by Timothy Egan. Wednesday 2 p.m. at the Northwest Montana History Museum.

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GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

NWMTW 's meetings are held on the third Monday of the month, except the months of December and January, at the Northwest Montana History Museum at 124 Second Avenue East, Kalispell, Montana.

Meetings begin with a Gab 'n' Greet session from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. for a chance to get acquainted. Local history authors will have their books for sale.

The presentation starts at 7 p.m. and is free for members and youths 16 and under. Non-members pay \$5.

Historic books are raffled off as a fund raiser. Soft drinks, beer and wine will be on sale by museum staff.

DUES REMINDER

It is time for the annual renewal for members. Please support our organization and its goals by paying at the February or March meetings.

FUTURE PROGRAMS

- **March 17:** "Thomas Meagher – The Irish General" by Tim Christenson.

LETTERS SURFACE FROM KALISPELL'S FORGOTTEN AUTHOR

By Rick Hull

For a number of months, Northwest Montana History Museum volunteer Jim Atkinson has been working his way through the letters and papers of Rev. George Fisher.



Margaret Scherf

Fisher was the one of the first Protestant ministers in northwest Montana. His circuit ministry began in Missoula in 1882 and involved a monthly trip of 130 miles. On a trip to the Flathead, "I found seven or eight hundred people who had no religious services of any nature," and petitioned to take his ministry north. On Thanksgiving 1887 he moved his wife and infant daughter to Kalispell, settling in "the dirtiest, greasiest cabin you could find in a days ride." A round trip of 24 miles on horseback was a typical Sunday.

Fortunately in 1927, at the age of 78, Fisher sat down and chronicled his life in an 89-page document he hoped to sell to the Saturday Evening Post. Fisher supported his ministry with a farm that turned out to be where Charles Conrad and Jim Hill decided to build Kalispell.

"Until all unlooked for and unexpected we were offered more than the farm was worth, then, for farming purposes," wrote Fisher. "Our ranch is now located under the business portion of Kalispell."

Fisher originally planned to be a missionary in Chile, but was somewhat of a rebel. He got in a theological dispute with his superior when he advocated open communion. The boxes of Fisher's papers include letters where he defends his position.

The letters also include letters from his mother back home in Washington, a suburb of Pittsburgh. Though full of interesting observations, the letters had no local significance. Once they were scanned, the museum sent the originals to the local museum in Pennsylvania.

But Atkinson was fascinated by letters from Fisher's granddaughter, Margaret "Peggy" Scherf.

Peggy traveled around the world, and reported back on her adventures. She would often strike up a friendship with local youngsters, who would guide her around town. In one letter from Spain, she kept the children out late, and she was confronted by a worried father. She was taken to the local police,

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where she explained she had not kidnapped the youths.

I had recalled a reference in Kathy McKay's historical/architectural inventory of Kalispell homes, that one of Fisher's relatives was an author.

A Google search brought up a surprise. Not only was Peggy an author, but her books are still in print. Overall she published 27 light mysteries with a comical tone, three juvenile mysteries, and ghost-wrote a volume in the Nancy Drew series.

She was born in West Virginia in 1908, the daughter of Charles Scherf and Miriam Fisher. Mr. Scherf was a teacher, and taught at the Flathead County High School for several years. Peggy attended school in New Jersey, Wyoming and Cascade, Montana. She cut her college education at Antioch College short in 1928, and moved to New York, where she worked for several publishing companies. Within two years she took her first trip to Europe.

Her first novel, *The Corpse Grows a Beard*, was published in 1940. During World War II she worked as secretary to the Naval Inspector at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard in Brooklyn, but otherwise turned out books for 30 years.

“My idea was to write amusing books, without too much gore, but with sufficient suspense to carry the reader on,” she was quoted.

In 1965 she served as a member of Montana House of Representatives. That

same year she married Perry Beebe, a Yellow Bay cherry grower. Based on her writing success, she taught creative writing at the University of Montana.

Scherf died tragically in a violent vehicle crash on Highway 93, south of Kalispell, on May 12, 1979. An intoxicated driver lost control of his Dodge pickup, and collided “headlight to headlight” with Peggy's Buick sedan. She was 70 years old.

Most of her books are still available on Amazon.

The Google search revealed that her manuscript and some correspondence are on file at the University of Oregon. The museum contacted the university about sending her letters, but was told there would just be a reference to the Kalispell collection.



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