



PONY TRACKS

Newsletter of the Northwest Montana Westerners

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ABOUT THE PRESENTATION

This month's presentation examines "Montana Frank" McCray as a fascinating case study of the line between myth and performance that defined the Wild West show era.



Triggered by the discovery of weathered show posters discovered in the Bozeman Public Library, Joseph Shelton traced the story of this self-proclaimed "last of the Buffalo Bill scouts" through period accounts. And McCray may have had genuine connections to Cody's Wild West Show before launching his own touring career.

JUNE MEETING

Monday, June 16, 2025

*"Montana Frank" McCray
Wild West Performer*

Presenter: Joseph Shelton of Bozeman

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

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

Historic Presentation: 7:00 p.m.
No reservations are required, but seating will be limited; so come early. Call 406-309-0938 with questions.

Shelton's research raises compelling questions about truth, myth-making, and the American hunger for Western legends.

Frank McCray had both a genuine link to the golden age of Wild West shows and was a dreamer who understood that sometimes the appearance of authenticity matters as much as authenticity itself.

Figures like Buffalo Bill Cody and Montana Frank McCray are showmen who helped shape popular conceptions of "Westernness" through their theatrical presentations of frontier life.

Some Wild West shows had as many as 1,200 performers, including cowboys, Indians, and

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soldiers, as well as buffalo and longhorn cattle.

McCray's career extended from the 1890s to the 1950s. While some of his more outlandish claims – like riding for the Pony Express before he was born – strain credulity, his possible early association with Buffalo Bill adds intriguing legitimacy to his later career.

Newspaper research revealed Montana Frank's evolution from his alleged early days with Buffalo Bill to a traveling film exhibitor showing Miles City Round-Up footage, and finally to a vaudeville performer working with the Circle M Rangers, accompanied by colorful characters like "Fresno Rose" and "Cattle Annie, the World's Smallest Cowgirl."

About the Presenter

Shelton has been editor of the Bozeman-based *Distinctly Montana* magazine since 2020, and was contributing writer starting in 2014. He holds both undergraduate and graduate degrees in English, bringing a literary perspective to his exploration of Western history and culture.



Shelton's research interests focus on Western subjects and Montana history, with particular fascination for the performative aspects of frontier identity.

His work examines the complex relationship between authentic Western experience and its staged representation, exploring how performers and entertainers contributed to the mythology of the American West.

It is no surprise that he is also a devoted fan of Western movies.



FROM THE SADDLEBAG

By Edward "Eddy" Byrne

Today I am getting back in the saddle after a six-month hiatus while serving in the Montana Legislature and representing Flathead County. Now its back to enjoying the nice late Spring weather, catching up on chores and getting the first alfalfa hay cutting done. In addition, the Westerners is back on my radar.

First I want to thank Jacob Thomas for filling in as President and also recognize the team that continues to excel at planning and executing our monthly events and publications at a professional level. This always begins with our publisher and go to for any and everything Rick Hull.

In addition, our board members that operate key functions primarily behind the scenes coordinating speakers, managing the desk and money, correspondence, mail, et cetera... include Kathy, Tim, and Malinda.

Also, in my absence we have a couple of members who have stepped up and volunteered at the front desk – Glenda Brown and Sally Steuben (who I just met at the May event). Thank you both for becoming involved with the Westerners.

I would be remiss not to recognize May's presentation by Darris Flanagan on "Bootlegging". This was, I believe, the seventh presentation to the Posse over the years and places him as our most frequent speaker. Congratulations and thank you Darris for sharing your wealth of knowledge on a wide range of topics for all these years.

As we close out spring with this month's presentation by Joesph Shelton and his lecture on "Wild West Shows, we transition into our summer line-up starting in July with a historical perspective of the "Jammers" in Glacier Park by return lecturer Ray Djuff from Calgary, Alberta. This will be a fun presentation, and Ray should have his new book on the red bus Jammers

available to purchase.

The Board meets from 6:00 - 6:30 p.m. before the 7 p.m. presentation at the museum.

All members are welcome to attend to observe the meeting. Also, anyone interested in becoming more involved with the group is encouraged to show up early and volunteer your time and services.

Once again to volunteer or if you have any questions, recommendations, or concerns, please get in touch with me at 406-871-6001 or edwardjbyrne860@gmail.com.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

By Rick Hull

This weekend (June 14-15) is the 24th annual rendezvous open house at Fort Connah.

Located in the Mission Valley between Ronan and St. Ignatius, the former Hudson's Bay Company outpost is tied for the oldest existing building in Montana.

The trading post was built in 1847 and remained open until Canada's claims south of the border were bought out for \$700,000 in 1870.

Among rendezvous events are native drummers and bagpipers, horse drawn wagon rides, an ice cream social and a visit to the site's historic cemetery.



Not a fort in the usual sense, Ft. Connah's only concession to avoiding attacks from Blackfoot raiding parties was locating away from the trees and brush of neighboring Post Creek.

Displays include 1820 historical re-enactors, living history demonstrations, wet-plate photography, children's wildlife stories, and sales of unique frontier items. Food vendors with huckleberry fry bread and more will be on site.

Contests include muzzle loader target shooting, tomahawk and knife throwing, bow and arrow shoots, and trapper's run. Over \$500 in cash prizes will be awarded.

Fort Connah is located six miles north of St. Ignatius on U.S. 93. It is on the downgrade south of Ninepipes Reservoir, on the mountain side.

Saturday's hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday's 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The muzzle loader contest will be 2 p.m. Saturday.

For information, call Four Winds Trading Post at 406-745-4336 or 406-210-9824.

TRIVA QUESTION OF THE MONTH

Pat Walsh and Sally Stueben knew what Kalispell establishment was the target of the fiery temperance advocate Carrie Nation in 1910. She was famous for wielding a hatchet.

If you have been on the Museum's downtown Kalispell historical walking tour, you would know the showdown came at the Pastime Bar on Main Street.

Nation accused owner August Heller of promoting evil, including prostitution. In response, he called her a "grafter."

This Month's Trivia Question

Many Montana towns, such as Whitefish, had a saddle-club arena where locals competed in events such as carrying an egg on a spoon while racing on horseback.

These contests are known by the Blackfeet name for "games on horses." What is this name?

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

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FUTURE PROGRAMS

After month-to-month uncertainty, it appears that the schedule for the remainder of 2025 has come together. There are also strong possibilities for 2026 from interested parties.

Below is the tentative schedule for the remainder of the year.

- **July 21:** "Red Buses of Glacier Park" by Ray Djuff of Calgary, Alberta.
- **August 18:** "The Bair Family of Martinsdale" by John Shontz of Helena.
- **September 15:** "The Swan Valley Massacre" by Rick Hull of Kalispell.
- **October 20:** "Fifty years of the Alert Helicopter" by Bob Sandman of Kalispell.
- **November 17:** "Why the Railroad Left Kalispell" by Jacob Thomas

GENERAL MEETING INFORMATION

Northwest Montana Westerners 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. The speakers often 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.

NEW MEMBERS

Joseph and Laurie O'Rourke
of Columbia Falls

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The next issue of Pony Tracks will be emailed on July 9 (or thereabouts)

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