

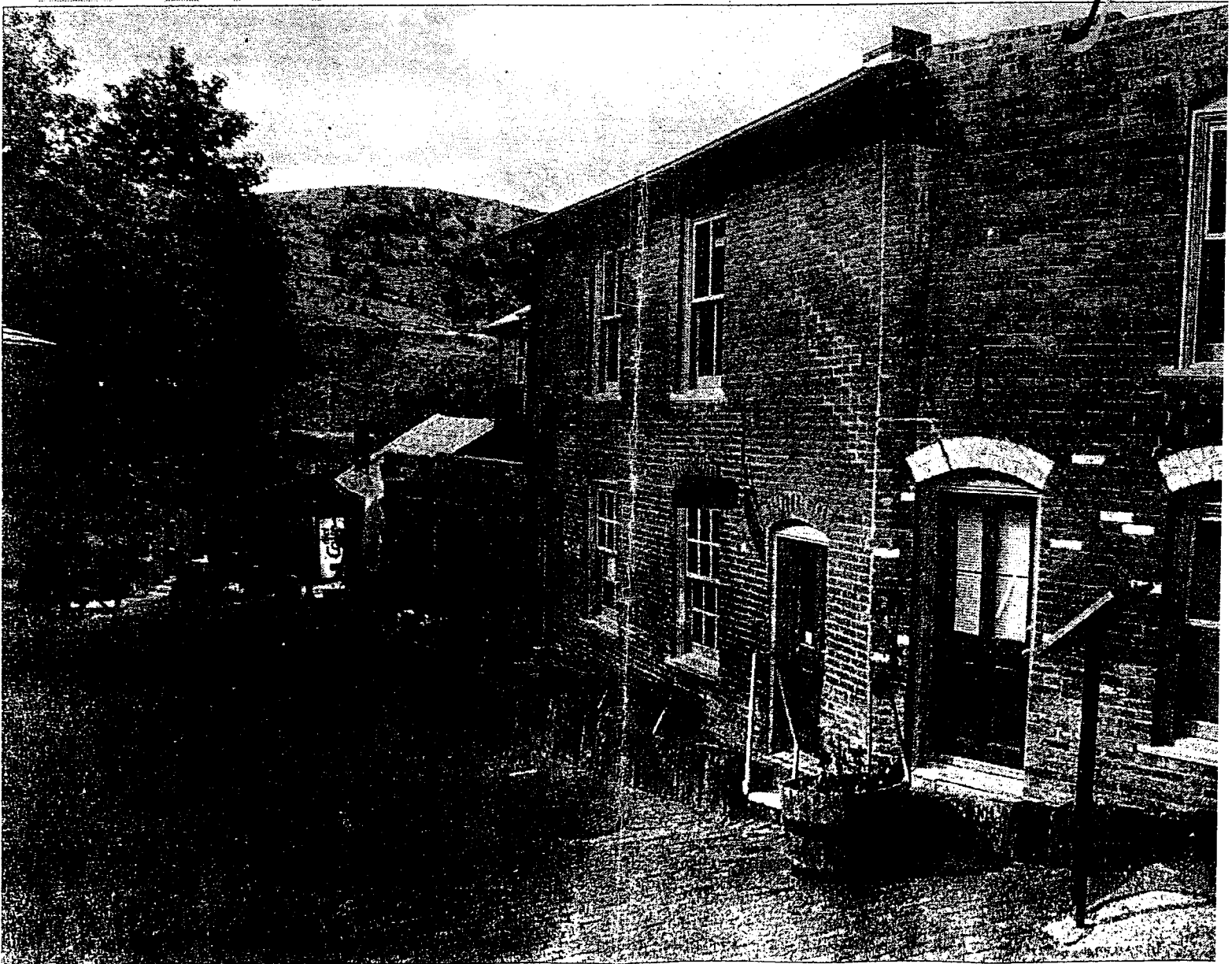
Local News

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The Independent Record

A fascinating slice of our earliest community

Reeder's Alley



Perhaps by virtue of its vantage point snug against the rough, uneven hillside, Reeder's Alley has been the subject of many a local tale. While only some of its stories bear the of truth, the small cluster of buildings and ghbors on the block have certainly ed over some interesting activities. This intact piece of early Helena is particularly tant in the context of the colorful mosaic nce spread out around it. The larger pic- ives Reeder's Alley and its immediate ors added dimension as the centerpiece iscinating slice of our earliest community. irst miners staked their claims along hance Gulch and the gold camp spread rd where it could. At the south end of Street (now Park Avenue) and along West the early residents literally prospected out ront doors. One of them, Wilson Butts, small serviceable cabin in 1864 to mark im. The next spring, his brother and sis- law, Jonas and Luanna, arrived with their laughters and built an adjoining cabin in f Wilson's. The two combined dwellings he "Pioneer Cabin." But the rowdy gold was not to the liking of Jonas, a strict t. He worried about the music of the near- dy gurdy houses that filtered into his ters' ears.

LONG THE OTHER NEWCOMERS ame to Helena for opportunities beyond cting was a young man from Bucks y, Penn. named Louis Reeder. A skilled nd stone mason, "Louie" arrived in town Butts family left in 1867. He immediately on to help build Helena's first brick cour- . The maturing camp offered plenty of uilding projects 1872, Reeder investing in prop- d development. n owned a num- lots on West Cut- et where he cond- a series of small ents and ouses that catered ally to single min- / 1884, the collec- brick and stone gs nestled along p slope of Reed- ley was in place.

der crafted his buildings in both stone and nd their design, especially the brick tene- reflect urban housing trends he brought ome. A log cabin, likely standing on the ty when Reeder acquired it, was incorpo- nto the complex. Although the buildings uch the same today, historically the land- was stripped of vegetation. Two locust lanted in front of the Butts cabin, brought s seedlings in lard cans, provided the only r many decades. Stonehouse Restaurant at the top of the s originally three separate buildings. The

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MORE FROM THE QUARRIES OF LAST CHANCE GULCH

largest of these was once partitioned into four small apartments; the individual entrances are still visible. Another building, now the private dining room at the southwest end, was once a two-story dwelling. The kitchen was two small detached apartments. Other buildings that no longer stand served as bunkhouses, stables and more dwellings.

BELOW THESE HILLTOP STRUCTURES along the slope are Reeder's distinctive red brick tenements. The bricks of these have been the subject of a persistent legend linking the alley to artist Charlie Russell. Russell's family owned the Parker-Russell Mining and Manufacturing Company in St. Louis, one of the nation's leading makers of fire brick. Some of the bricks of Reeder's Alley are rumored to have come by ox team from the Parker-Russell

Company. However, Reeder's Alley contains no fire brick, and by the mid-1870s when Reeder began his housing project, locally-produced brick was readily available. If any Parker-Russell bricks indeed made their way to Helena, they would more likely have been used for industrial purposes such as lining the massive lime kilns (constructed between the late 1860s

and the 1890s) at the end of West Main Street. The advent of the railroad in 1883 had Helena bursting at the seams with new buildings under construction all over town. Such industry unfortunately bred many accidents. The Helena Daily Herald reported on Aug. 26, 1884, that a scaffold upon which Louie Reeder was working to repair a chimney collapsed. Reeder was transported to the hospital on Catholic Hill where doctors in attendance announced that there was no hope for his recovery. Coincidentally, that same day another scaffold collapsed injuring three men and the Herald took the

opportunity to warn, "Such careless accidents are too common...; work and enterprise are apt to blind these industrious workmen to the first law of nature." Reeder succumbed to his injuries the following evening, naming his brother, Huston, heir to his Helena properties. These included Reeder's Alley, at least one rental house in the Sixth Ward near the new depot, and Reeder's own house on West Main Street. The estate totaled some \$25,000 to \$30,000 and some of it, including Reeder's Alley, remained in the Reeder family until after the turn of the century.

The miners who lived at Reeder's Alley in the early days had some very colorful neighbors. At the foot of the alley, Helena's large Chinese community spread out into the area where the federal building is today. Expansive vegetable gardens, diverse businesses and dwellings covered at least five city blocks. Today the only standing building associated with the Chinese community is the cabin to the south at the foot of Reeder's Alley. By 1879 it was owned by the Yee Wah brothers who long operated a grocery store at 304 S. Main.

ANYWHERE THERE WERE MINERS with spending potential, there were also female followers. These gold camp "groupies" moved from place to place eager to make fortunes, too. Words of a favorite miners' ballad recall that, "First came the miners to work in the mines, then came the ladies who lived on the line." The proximity of these working ladies was certainly part of the reason that the Butts family left Helena. Later on during the 1880s and 1890s, small cribs and houses of prostitution (euphemistically labeled "female boarding" on historic fire insurance maps) were tucked against the hillside all along South Park Avenue from Wall Street almost to the Butts cabin. At least 22 women worked and lived on the block in 1890. The shops of a Chinese doctor, pharmacist and tailor served as a buffer zone between later residents of the cabin and these women of "the line."

In 1897, the Helena Weekly Herald reported that as streetcar driver Bob Murray cut through Reeder's Alley on his way home after dinner, he caught a glint of something in the rain-swollen gutter. He picked up a gold nugget valued at \$3.10. Soon half the nearby Chinese community was panning for gold right in the alley, and resident caretaker James Gorman had all he could do to keep them at bay. No more gold was found, but the Herald speculated that the nugget washed down from Mount Helena to let residents know that "there is plenty of gold up there if they will only seek for it." Was this incident fact or fiction? The story's appearance on April Fool's Day is cause for speculation.

Reeder's Alley served as a carriage path for young girls from the west side attending St. Vincent's Academy on Catholic Hill. Because the alley housed unmarried men and was in close proximity to both the Chinese community

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Reeder's

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and the red light fringe, young girls were cautioned not to tarry on their way to and from school. Indeed, Reeder's Alley lore includes murders, suicides and shootings. One tale that bears threads of truth has to do with George Mitchell, the last resident of the Butts cabin whose death in 1938, according to the IR of June 7, 1953, was "shrouded in mystery." Mitchell raised chickens, sold eggs and poultry and ran a coal and wood business at the rear of the cabin from 1903 until he died in the mid-1930s. Mitchell, who had no family, left all his earnings in dollar bills and loose change lying on shelves, on the cabin floor, and stuffed in socks, tobacco cans and paper bags. Just before public auction of the cabin in 1939, a group of local women formed the Last Chance Gulch Restoration Association and arranged its purchase for \$450. The Pioneer Cabin became one of the first preservation projects in the West.

GEORGE DUCHESNEY OWNED REEDER'S ALLEY by 1920, and its small apartments and dwellings were home to 32 single male tenants including a stock herder, a sheep herder, a cemetery caretaker, two fruit store proprietors and a hotel cook. Duchesney and his wife, Laura, lived at 200 West Cutler St., which was the front apartment of the present-day Stonehouse Restaurant. Duchesney, a groundman for the electric company, advertised "cabins for rent" in the 1920s city directories. Laura Duchesney was well-known as a breeder of canaries and "bird doctor." She filled their small apartment with the little birds and their songs. An advertisement in the 1927 Polk city directory for Laura's canaries promised "excellent singers." When Laura died in 1933, the viewing was held at the Duchesneys' West Cutler apartment. George remained at Reeder's Alley until his death a decade later.

By the 1950s, Reeder's Alley was home to a number of pensioners. Owners Reed Matthews and Godfrey Sullivan supplied a need for low-rent housing for older folks on a small fixed income. But city planners had slated the "seedy" area, along with all nearby reminders of Chinese

occupation and red-light activities, for demolition as part of urban renewal. Reeder's Alley would be gone today but for the efforts of three Helena matrons who became its saviors in 1961.

Jane Tobin, Patricia Beodecker and Eileen Harper envisioned Reeder's Alley as an artists' colony and set about to clean it up. The three stone buildings at the top of the hill were their first purchase. They removed the four interior partitions in the largest structure, cleaned, painted, and connected the buildings. Sullivan offered to sell them the rest of Reeder's Alley, but it was home to 23 residents who could not afford to move. Sullivan spent months relocating every tenant. Only after everyone had found a new home did he finalize the sale to the women. The seeds of their vision are still viable as a variety of businesses have occupied the buildings.

AND THE TALES ABOUT REEDER'S ALLEY LIVE ON. A few years ago, author Dick Pace wrote an unpublished article about Reeder's Alley in which he recounted the story of a world-renowned musician out for an evening stroll after a performance. As the visiting master passed through Reeder's Alley, he heard a resident playing for a few neighbors. The visitor borrowed the instrument (perhaps a violin) and gave the pensioners a courtyard concert that other Helenans had paid to hear. For several hours, music caught the night breeze and drifted along the gulch.

Hurdy gurdies, songbirds and violins have long enriched the lure of Reeder's Alley. Music there can still entertain the visitor who stops to listen as the wind ruffles through the now-mature trees, playing its own tune. The picturesque neighborhood, tucked into its niche along the slope and softened by time, is a magical window to yesterday.

ELLEN BAUMLER coordinates Montana's National Register of Historic Places sign program at the State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society.

Community calendar

WEEKEND PICKS

June 19-20, Helena to 2000 "Celebrate Dad" at the

Women's Spirituality Group sponsored by St. Paul's United

