

The Fight for a Capital Reflected Numismatically Helena - Queen of The Rockies

By Harry C. Wigington

John Cowan and his little party of men had ridden for several days, panning the gulches and small streams. They had spent the spring and early months of summer with little success in finding gold. On the morning of July 15, 1864, they came upon a gulch. As they started panning in the shallow stream they declared that this would be the last one they could try before the season ended, forcing them to head back to Bannack City for the winter. One of the men in the party suddenly yelled, "Gold," and by so doing brought birth to Last Chance Gulch and the City of Helena.

Five days later, on July 20, 1864, the party drew up laws and regulations for the townsite which was christened Helena by John Somerville, who named it after his hometown in Minnesota. In a few short weeks, Constance & Jurgens had put up the first store. Helena grew rapidly with miners, businessmen, peddlers, saloon girls, and drifters from all the other camps who came flocking to the new find. It had been only two short years before that gold was found in Bannack City, then in Idaho Territory and now known as Montana, causing a rush to the region.

Earlier, on May 26, 1863, the Fairweather Party of seven prospectors had discovered gold in Alder Gulch. In a few short weeks, as the riches of the gulch were panned out, men began to arrive, not to mine, but to provide means to the miners for spending their dust. They settled along Daylight Creek, just a quarter mile below the "Discovery." Tent stores, and wickiup gambling halls sprang up, and the townsite was christened Varina City after Jefferson Davis' wife. However, the name was short lived, as Judge Bissell, in his first act as Representative to the District, changed the name to Virginia City. By the fall of 1863, the town was swelling with miners, new buildings were rising, and fancy merchandise peddlers were selling their wares.

At this time, Lewiston, located some 260 miles west of the new diggings, and separated from them by mountainous terrain, was the capital of Idaho Territory. During the winter months, the miners found themselves isolated from their capital city. Snow drifts made the roads impassable and crossing over the mountains was a rigorous task for man and beast. Those with business to be transacted in the city were compelled to make the long trek south via Salt Lake City or wait through the long winter months until the spring thaw. The hardships and inconvenience to the miners and businessmen created the need to establish new territorial boundaries. And on May 26, 1864, one year after gold was discovered in Virginia City, the Territory of Montana was formed.

Bannack City, site of the first gold strike, was selected to be the territorial capital, but the gold was panning out and the miners were leaving to go to richer strikes in the east. Merchants found little reason and fewer

profits for which to remain. Bannack City was quickly losing its population to Virginia City and again the need arose for a new, more convenient capital to serve the miners. On February 7, 1865, the territorial capital was moved to Virginia City.

Almost as quickly as it became the capital, Virginia City began to lose the ingredient which had necessitated the change. The harsh winter of 1864-65, coupled with a flour famine the same year, drove many residents from the town; however, the main reason for the departure was that the placer diggings were becoming harder to find, and miners were having to quartz mine for the precious metal. The town fathers and businessmen believed that quartz mining was the answer to their problems and fought to save the sagging economy, but heavy crushing equipment was needed for this type of mining, and that required large sums of capital. Eastern businessmen and bankers were skeptical and had no desire to place their money in the remote area known as Montana.

To add to Virginia City's problems, the citizens of Helena were asserting that *she* was the "Queen of the Gold Towns", offered more and should be territorial capital of Montana. Political tempers began to flare, and in August, 1869, the territorial legislature decided to put the question to the people. Large place cards could be seen in Helena with the following notice:

LOST, STRAYED OR STOLEN!

THE SEAT GOVERNMENT.

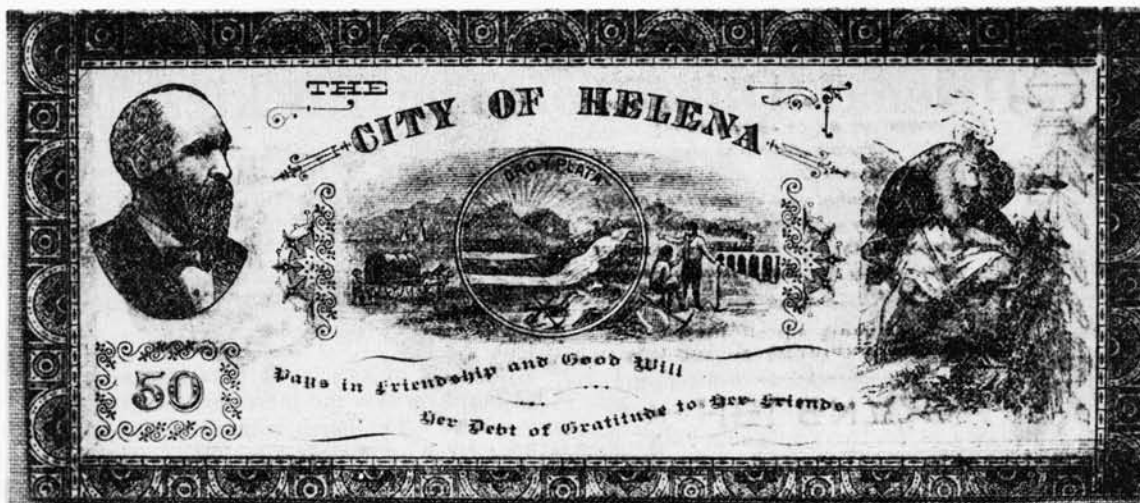
A LIBERAL REWARD WILL BE PAID
FOR ITS RETURN TO HELENA.

NO QUESTIONS ASKED.

LAST CHANCE.

Interesting "voting" arose out of this ballot to change the seat of the Territory. In the camp of Wigwam Creek, four miners turned in 250 votes, and in the mining camp of Summit, which was listed as having 150 legal votes, an even 600 were turned in. Not to be outdone, Junction, which had 50 votes, returned 200 votes. Such friendly backing by her neighboring camps saved the title for Virginia City and insured her place as territorial capital. A protesting voice that the count of votes had not been "fair and square" was overruled by the simple fact that all the records in the territorial secretary's office were destroyed by a fire of unexplained origin before the votes could be canvassed and recounted.

The question was laid to rest, but did not die, and five years later, the legislative act of February 11, 1874, placed the question again before the "good" voting citizens. An election was held in August, 1874, and its results at first appeared to be the same as in the 1869



election. However, the count of votes from Meagher County was questioned by the territorial secretary, and at first reports showed 29 votes for change and 561 against. The secretary went to the county seat, to have a recanvass of the votes and found the actual count to be 561 votes for the change, and 29 votes against. In the first tally of all the counties, the total vote showed 3,660 for the change of capitals and 3,802 against the change, a 142-vote majority against the measure. Upon recounting the votes in Meagher and Choteau Counties, the tally showed 4,282 in favor of the change and 3,370 against, giving Helena a clear majority of 912 votes. The territorial legislature decreed that the change of capitals should take place in January, 1875.

The desire for their town to become the "Queen" of Montana had not been an easy struggle for the people of Helena. She had been beset by a number of disastrous fires, the first occurring on April 28, 1869 (four months before the first vote went to the people). It originated in a Chinese gambling house at the corner of West Main and Bridge Streets. This fire destroyed the greater number of business houses in the town. The damage was in excess of \$20,000, and the businessmen and residents had no insurance to cover their losses. A second fire occurred within a month but caused less

damage. The third major fire occurred on October 1, 1871, when most of Main Street was destroyed. On August 23, 1872, the fourth major fire broke out, the largest one to date, causing some \$140,000 damage to business and residential districts. Within two days the townspeople had subscribed \$3,157.50 to purchase fire equipment. But a fire on January 9, 1874,—one month before the territorial legislature decreed a second vote on the change of capital—did the greatest amount of damage in Helena's history. It originated in the same Chinese gambling house where the first fire had started. Over a hundred business buildings were destroyed or heavily damaged, and more than seventy-five dwellings were destroyed. Total damage to Helena in this tragic fire was \$871,000, but the loss of life was miraculously low—only one person.

The "note" pictured here is a certificate issued by the City of Helena at the time it became the capital of the Territory in January, 1875. The original intent, as it is presently reported, was to repay the neighbors who had helped to rebuild the city. The following inscription appeared on the reverse:

HELENA IS ENVOIOUS OF NONE AND
FRIENDLY TO ALL.

HELENA IS INTERESTED IN EVERY CITY
IN MONTANA.
HELENA OWNS PROPERTY IN EVERY
COUNTY AND CITY.
HELENA PAYS TAXES IN EVERY COUNTY.
HELENA PAYS WAGES IN EVERY COUNTY.
HELENA'S INTERESTS ARE YOUR INTERESTS.
YOUR PROSPERITY ADDS TO HER
SUCCESS.
HELENA IS THE RIVAL OF NONE.
MONTANA IS BIG ENOUGH FOR ALL.

After researching for this article, the thought came to my mind: Were the good citizens also repaying their neighbors for "voting" them in as the new territorial capital, as well as rebuilding their town? The battle between Helena and Virginia City had been a bitter one for eight years; it involved political feelings as well as hometown pride on the part of the citizens. The rivalry had on occasions reached the point of a "busted" head, a shot in the back, and a smoldering building or dwelling. Perhaps Helena was setting it down straight how she felt; that the battle was over, and she wished to thank her friends and make up with her enemies. The verse on the reverse of the certificate may give a clue.

The certificate is in the collection of the author, having originally been discovered by the late Fred Marckhoff, who first listed the certificate in his "Gallery of Civil War Generals" in the December, 1962 issue of *The Numismatist*. At that time, he was identifying the portrait on the obverse as that of President James Abram Garfield. To date, no information has been found to contradict this identification; however, a picture of Benjamin F. Potts, who was territorial governor at the time Helena was made the capital, bears a strong resemblance to the portrait shown on the obverse—it would have been a logical choice for the note. The reverse portrait has not been identified; however, portraits of Samuel T. Hauser and Nathaniel P. Langford resemble the one shown on the certificate. Both men, being active in political and financial affairs, were prominent citizens of Helena.

REFERENCES

- History of Montana*, by Michael Leeson (1885)
Gold Camp, by Larry Barsness (1962)
 "Flour Famine in Alder Gulch, 1864," by Dorothy M. Johnson (Winter, 1957 issue, *Montana—The Magazine of Western History*)
 "Gallery of Civil War Generals," by Fred Marckhoff (December, 1962 issue of *The Numismatist*)
The Story of Montana, by Kate Hammond Fogarty (1916)
 Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana, Miss Mary K. Dempsey, Librarian
Golden Gulch, by Dick Pace

Montana Catalog Planned

Mr. Harry G. Wigington has agreed to prepare the SPMC listing of the obsolete bank notes, scrip, etc. of Montana. He requests all collectors, members or not,

to send him any information they may have on Montana material as soon as possible. His address is 4227 E. Williamsburg Dr., Harrisburg, Pa. 17109.

SPMC Enrolls Its 2500th Member



Dr. David H. McMahon

The Society reached a milestone of sorts recently with the enrollment of its 2500th member. He is Dr. David H. McMahon, a research chemist with Esso Research & Engineering Co., Linden, N. J.

Dr. McMahon began his numismatic career in the classic manner—as a 12-year-old collector of Lincoln cents. He had ample opportunity to pursue his youthful avocation since his father, a hardware merchant in upstate New York, let him go through the cash register every day. The father, incidentally, took up silver dollar collecting because a customer located in Wyoming always paid his bill with silver dollars.

In 1964, Dr. McMahon, fresh out of Holy Cross College and studying for his doctorate at the University of New Hampshire, became interested in obsolete bank notes. Impressed with the amount of early American history associated with them, he plunged into research in the area of broken bank notes of the Northeastern states. In addition, Dr. McMahon fancies a type set of all U. S. currency as well as fractionals.

Current membership of SPMC totals approximately 1,700, making it the third largest numismatic group in the world, surpassed only by the American Numismatic Association and the Canadian Numismatic Association.