



Ghost Town

Andreas Fischer

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Hyde Park Arts Center, Chicago
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As any good horror story demonstrates, there are consequences to reanimating the dead. Or at least, there should be. Ghosts, zombies, vampires and other creatures from the realm of the beyond have earned their uncanny badges in part because they take the form of someone who was once recognizably human, coursing with blood and feeling. Yet not for a moment can such creatures be mistaken for the people they once were. The apparition hovering in the mist may look a little like grandpa, the psychic may give voice to a dead aunt's cherished childhood memories, the vampire inevitably wears stylish street clothes, but there is something fundamentally wrong with all of them: They are not who they appear to be. Despite all this our culture remains fascinated with ghost stories and other tales of the undead, because we want to know what these strange new/old creatures know. We want to believe.

In many ways, Andreas Fischer's recent paintings can be understood as ghost stories told with paint. Each of his works attempts to represent imaginative experiences that cannot be conveyed linguistically, often by taking the form of something they are not, be it a faded archival photograph or a snapshot of a picturesque Montana landscape. Using paint to weave together the factual and the ineffable, Fischer provides us with information that cannot be confirmed by a source outside of the painting: Meaning must be intuited via the paint itself. Fischer's concurrent exhibitions



Sheriff Henry Plummer

at the Hyde Park Art Center and the Gahlberg Gallery at College of DuPage consist of two separate but conceptually related groups of paintings. The first, titled *Original Location*, is a series of landscapes depicting various Montana settings. The second, titled *Sunday Best*, consists of portraits based on found tintype (also known as ferrotype) images of anonymous individuals dressed in 19th century-style attire.

Fischer draws on metaphors of historiography and the archive to explain how these two bodies of work relate to one another:

"History often gets represented through a collection of fragments or an archive and it has been argued that what is important in archives is what is left out – what can't be represented factually, actual experience in other words. Both parts of *Ghost Town* attempt to use painting to

address this absence. Through material facts of paint these bodies of images attempt to extend beyond basic linguistic representation into broader experience.

"Both bodies of work are meant to mimic kinds of historical fragments. They pretend to document. More importantly, though, they attempt to use paint activity to tap into imaginative characteristics that make up subjective experience."

No matter what form history takes, there will always be aspects of experience that are omitted from the official narratives because they don't fit the trajectory or are considered irrelevant. Fischer wants to figuratively gather up these stray parts, these shadow stories, and use them as the inspiration for paintings that are in no way historical and yet rely on the suggestive power of historical fragments to make meaning. No doubt there is something vaguely Frankensteinian in Fischer's attempts to assemble images of human beings from bits and parts. (The same could be said of the historian's efforts to construct historical narratives out of disparate archival materials.)

The personal and historical identities of the individuals in Fischer's portraits have eroded over time. Backgrounds composed of bright blue, garish orange or lime green appear to hold these subjects in place while also gnawing away at their outlines, so that both the figure and ground appear to be disintegrating before our eyes. These people are an unsettling combination of living character and dead things. The ruddiness

of skin is conveyed through mottled strokes of pink, gray and green, giving some of the figures a distinctly zombielike appearance. So too do their eyes, which Fischer often conveys with a few strokes of brown or black so that the sockets appear as gaping hollows. A single curved brushstroke may evoke a pair of pursed lips, a slackened jaw or other facial grimace that hints at a quality that is somehow essential to the character, and yet other areas of the composition will be more crudely evoked or purposefully underdeveloped, thereby breaking the illusion of coherency and referring us back to the raw materiality of paint as a representational device.

We have the distinct sense that these individuals are posing for a photographer rather than a portrait painter. The unintentional facial grimaces, the momentary twitch or droop of an eyelid – these are all imperfections that most portrait painters would take care to erase but that the photographer has no choice but to record. Fischer's paint applications also mimic the visual cloudiness and surface discolorations of unretouched tintypes. He is especially skillful when using paint to capture the apparitional qualities of the wet plate process, in which certain elements appear hazy or obscure while others seem preternaturally sharp. As Fischer explains, "there is a partial purging of original context and then a re-creation" of it. "The older referent [the subject of the tintype] is pushed away by paint and through its suggestive possibilities paint helps to invent a newer character."



Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 16" x 22"

This exhibition catalog contains a historical account of Bannack, MT, written by Kathy Weiser. Bannack was a territory that thrived for a few brief years during the Gold Rush era and is now a ghost town. Populated by outlaw gangs, a crooked sheriff, a prison escapee-turned saloon proprietor and a schoolteacher named Lucia Darling (have you any doubts she was young and pretty?), Bannack's brief but tumultuous history is animated by the reader's imagination. How can we not be tempted to construct dramatic plotlines for these people beyond

the sketchy details that history has provided? So too may we wish to invest Fischer's characters with qualities that exceed the boundaries of the canvas. The *Sunday Best* characters are all of a type that could have lived in Bannack, although Fischer's paintings are not, in fact, portraits of Bannack residents. But couldn't they be? Like the now-defunct HBO series *Deadwood*, which presented a heavily fictionalized version of real historical events that took place during the Gold Rush era in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the characters in Fischer's paintings serve as



***Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 10" x 12"**

vessels for imaginative projection. In this context, Weiser's account of Bannack, MT, reads as fiction, a rollicking ghost story that provides an interpretive framework from which Fischer's spectral figures can emerge as more fully human.

Functioning in a somewhat analogous fashion to the portraits are the landscapes from Fischer's *Original Location* series. Ranging from picturesque mountains and lakes to nondescript wooded areas seen as if through the window of a passing car, these sites are as anonymous as the subjects of Fischer's portraits. Yet they also seem strangely familiar. Try Googling the words "Montana landscape" and you'll find any number of images that could have provided

the 'original locations' for these paintings. All the elements are there: the big sky, the snow-covered mountains, the lake and its fragmented reflections of surrounding trees and grass. Yet Fischer's landscapes disrupt classical notions of the vista by using paint in a loosely signifying manner. White paint applied in a few jagged strokes evokes snow on a mountainside, the paint applied so thickly it at times appears as an attempted erasure. In one painting, the craggy face of a tree-studded mountainside appears to be sliding downward, as if the earth, trees and rocks were slipping off the mountain's surface like so much dripping paint.

In this way Fischer's paintings can be seen as working against themselves. But in using paint as a disruptive device to undercut the work's representational functions, Fischer risks making paintings that are merely incoherent or inert. Either the painting succeeds at capturing something distinctive about its subject or the whole thing falls apart. Perversely, Fischer strives to make paintings that manifest both of these outcomes. And this is where things get tricky. Because, of course, when you attempt to reanimate the dead, you may inadvertently wind up with something that's less like a friendly ghost and more like a mindless zombie. So how can the artist enable these ghosts, these mottled amalgams of paint, to communicate on their own terms without putting words into their mouths? For Fischer the answer is to let paint do the work of intuition. "I want the paint to have a range of ways it can behave outside of linguistic representation," he explains. "There's

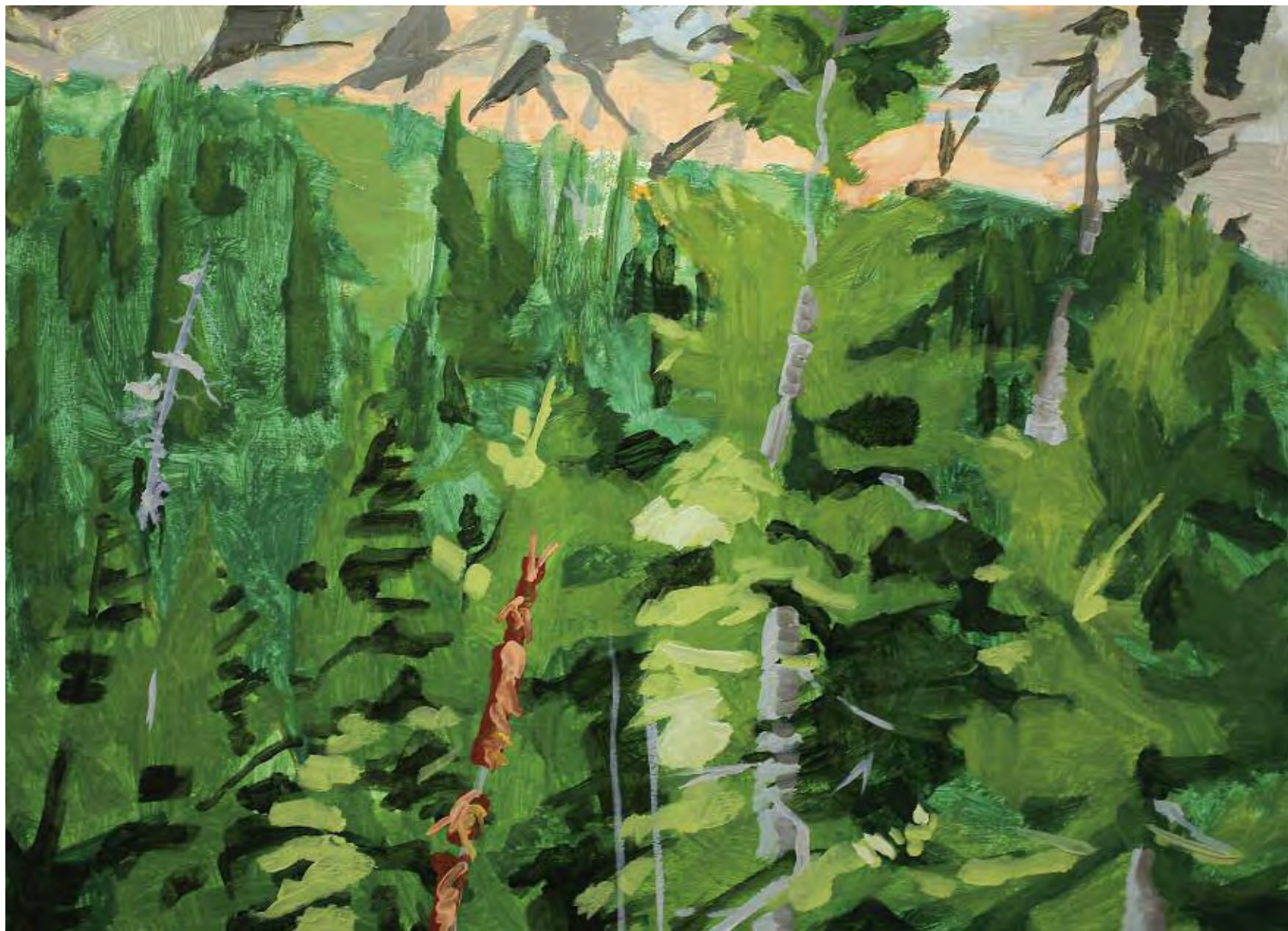
something about the way a mark is made that is an opening up, a complication that produces something else." Fischer insists that he doesn't need to know ahead of time exactly what that mark will produce. He has faith that, if handled properly, paint will communicate something of value. He believes.

– *Claudine Ise*

Claudine Ise is a freelance arts writer who for the past decade has worked in the field of contemporary art as a writer and curator. She's lived in Chicago, IL, since 2008. Before moving to Chicago, she was associate curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, where she organized a number of solo and thematic group exhibitions.

Image on page 5:
***Original Location*, 2009, oil on canvas, 22" x 26"**





Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 16" x 22"



Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 23" x 29"



Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 29" x 23"

Image on page 9:

Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 23" x 27"

Image on page 10:

Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 19" x 23"

Image on page 11:

Original Location, 2009, oil on canvas, 19" x 26"



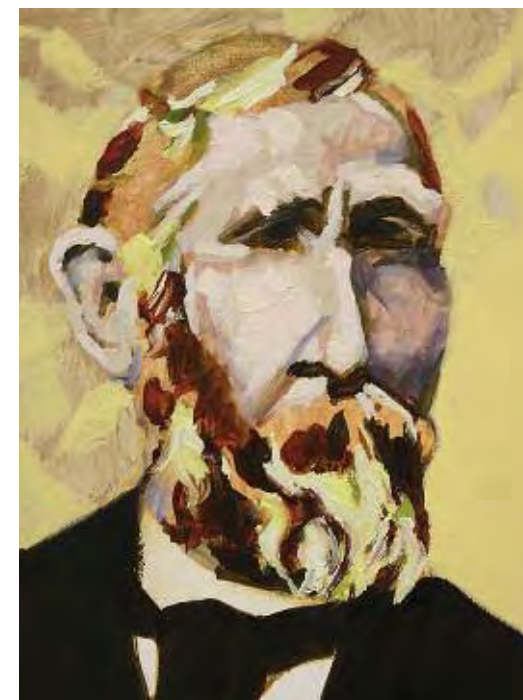




Top: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 10" x 8"
 Top right: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 11" x 9"

Images on page 13:
 Top left: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 11" x 9"
 Top right: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"
 Bottom left: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 13" x 10"
 Bottom right: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"





Top left: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 10" x 8"
 Top center: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"
 Top right: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"
 Image on page 14: *Sunday Best*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12" x 9"

The Story of a Ghost Town

Bannack, Montana



Bannack Masonic Lodge

On July 28, 1862, John White and other members of the “Pikes Peakers” discovered gold in the waters of Grasshopper Creek where Bannack stands today. News of the strike traveled fast and led to the greatest rush to the West since the California Gold Rush in 1848. Bannack quickly became known as the Eldorado of the North and by October the camp was home to more than 400 prospectors. Hastily built to accommodate the many miners flooding to the area, Bannack attracted all manner of transient men, including Civil War deserters

from both sides, river pirates, professional gamblers, outlaws and villains. Lawlessness ran rampant as holdups occurred daily, and killings were just as frequent. By 1863, the settlement had gained some 3,000 residents and applied to the U.S. government to become Bannock, named for the neighboring Indians. However, Washington goofed it up, spelling the name with an “a” – Bannack, which it retains to this day.

In May 1863, a group of miners discovered gold in Alder Gulch, about 80 miles to the east of Bannack. When they took their gold to Bannack to buy supplies, word soon leaked out and many of the area prospectors headed to Alder Gulch, which would soon become the thriving settlement of Virginia City. The road between Bannack and Virginia City became a very hazardous journey as road agents targeted the travelers making their way between the two mining camps.

By May 1864, Sidney Edgerton, the territorial chief justice, decided there were so many people in the area that they needed a new territory. Edgerton convinced the president and on May 26, 1864, it was made official, with Edgerton as the governor. Bannack became the first territorial capital and the legislature of Montana met in Edgerton’s cabin. In the summer of 1864, the number of school-age children had increased dramatically and the Edgerton home could no longer accommodate the classes. A crude log cabin was built to serve as schoolteacher Lucia Darling’s schoolhouse. By the fall of 1864, nearly 10,000 people crowded along the area hillsides, but for

these thousands of people the gold was already getting harder to find.

Skinner’s Saloon

Owned by Cyrus Skinner, who was an escapee from San Quentin Prison in San Francisco, CA, the saloon quickly became one of the wildest places in town. There were a number of shootouts in the saloon, including one where a bullet went astray, punched through the wall and killed a woman across the street. On another occasion, two gamblers in a dispute drew their guns and blasted rounds at each other. Though neither died, a bullet killed a drunken man on the floor.

Other Buildings

In 1874, realizing the need for a school, Bannack Masonic Lodge No. 16 built the combination lodge and schoolhouse. This building was constructed in a modified or western version of the Greek Revival style, with wood pilasters adorning the two front corners of the building. The Masonic emblem, “The Square and Compass,” was carved from hardwood and mounted above the windows on the second floor.

In 1875, the Beaverhead County Courthouse was built. In August 1877, the courthouse played a role in one of the most exciting events in Bannack’s history, when the town was threatened with an Indian attack. People from around the area gathered in Bannack to seek protection. Although the Indians killed four settlers in Horse Prairie, they never came close to Bannack. At the time, there was no church in Bannack and a Methodist circuit preacher named William Van Ordsdel

used the Indian scare to convince the townspeople to build a church as thanks for God’s deliverance. The church still stands in Bannack today.

Sheriff Henry Plummer

One of the most colorful characters of the Wild West, Henry Plummer allegedly played both sides of the law during his short 27 years. Though for more than a century he was thought to have been guilty of numerous crimes, today’s historians question whether he was truly guilty of the crimes he was accused of.

Born in Addison, ME, in 1832, he was the youngest of seven children. When Plummer was a teenager, his father died and the family began to struggle. Plummer promised his widowed mother that he could help the family by making his fortune in the West. In April 1852, 19-year-old Plummer sailed from New York on a mail ship to Aspinwall, Panama, traveled by mule train to Panama City, then boarded another ship for the rest of his journey to California. Twenty-four days after his departure, he arrived in San Francisco. Gaining a job at a bakery, Plummer soon earned enough money to move on to the mining camps of Nevada County.

About a year after his arrival in California, documents show that he owned a ranch and a mine. Some 12 months later, he traded some of his mining shares for the Empire Bakery in Nevada City. By 1856, the local residents, so impressed by the young man, persuaded him to run for sheriff. At the age of 24, he became marshal of the third largest

settlement in California. The young marshal was well liked by the Nevada City citizens and easily won the re-election in 1857.

Shortly after the election, he killed his first man. At the time, Plummer was said to be having an affair with the wife of a miner by the name of John Vedder. When he was confronted by Vedder, the two competed in a dual, which Plummer won. Plummer was arrested and tried in a sensational case that went twice to the California Supreme Court before he was finally convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 10 years in California’s infamous San Quentin Prison. He began to serve his sentence on Feb. 22, 1859. Among his comrades behind bars was Cyrus Skinner, who would later be connected with Plummer again. Plummer served time only until Aug. 16, 1859, when he was released due to his tuberculosis and pressure on the governor by petition.

After his release, Plummer returned to Nevada City, to the bakery, and became an avid customer to the many brothels of the settlement. Before long, he was penniless and soon joined a group of bandits intent upon robbing area stage coaches. In one such incident, the stage coach driver got away with his passengers and cargo, but Plummer was arrested. Standing trial for the attempted robbery, the former sheriff caught a reprieve when he was acquitted due to lack of evidence.

But trouble had begun to follow Plummer and soon he was caught up in a brawl over a “painted lady” with a man by the name



Bannack Beaverhead County Courthouse

of William Riley. When Plummer shot the man on Oct. 27, 1861, he was once again arrested. This time he escaped prison by bribing a jailer before he could be tried and fled for Oregon. Along the way, he met another bandit by the name of Jim Mayfield, who had killed the sheriff of a neighboring town. Both were obviously wanted men, and the ex-sheriff sent word to California newspapers that both he and Mayfield had been hanged in Washington. It had the desired effect, curtailing the need for the desperadoes to constantly look over their shoulders for the pursuing posse.



Bannack, Montana

In January 1862, Plummer landed in Lewiston, ID. Working in a casino, he soon ran into his old cellmate, Cyrus Skinner, and other individuals such as Club Foot George Lane and Bill Bunton. Forming a gang, the like-minded men began to rob the local families from area mining camps, and especially targeted gold shipments. Plummer began to roam the area between Elk City, Florence and Lewiston. In Orofino, ID, he killed a saloonkeeper by the name of Patrick Ford. When the saloonkeeper kicked Plummer and some of his friends out of the saloon, Ford then followed them to the stable, where he fired upon them. Plummer returned fire and killed Ford. When some of Ford's friends began to form a lynch mob, Plummer hightailed it out of there and headed east.

By September 1862, Plummer was beginning to feel the effects of tuberculosis and wanted to return home. Heading from Idaho across the Bitterroot Mountains, he traveled

to Fort Benton with the intention of going back east. Unfortunately, the upper Missouri River at Fort Benton was frozen and closed to riverboat traffic. Planning to hold over for the winter, Plummer went to work as a ranch hand at the Sun River Farm, a government ranch and Indian agency. Plummer headed to Bannack, MT, the most recent site of gold rush fever, in January 1863.

Plummer soon rounded up another gang. Calling themselves the Innocents, they began to relieve the gold-laden travelers of their valuables. The Innocents grew quickly and became so large that secret handshakes and code words were instituted so one "Innocent" could recognize another.

One night while Plummer was drinking in Bannack's Goodrich Saloon, Jack Cleveland, his old nemesis, began to taunt him by making numerous references to Plummer's outlaw activities. When Plummer warned him to stop, Cleveland continued to spout his accusations and Plummer fired a warning shot. Cleveland then pulled his own six-gun, but Plummer was faster and soon Cleveland lay on the floor mortally wounded.

Cleveland was taken to the home of a butcher named Hank Crawford, two doors down from the saloon. Crawford heard Cleveland's last words as he continued to extol the tale of Plummer's deceit and corruption. Three hours later, Cleveland was dead and Plummer was arrested. However, Plummer received yet another reprieve when he was acquitted based on witness testimony that Cleveland had threatened him.

By late spring 1863, lawlessness in Bannack had reached epidemic proportions. The citizens of the settlement decided that the outlaws had to be stopped and advertised for a sheriff. Two men, vowing to corral the outlaws, stepped up to the plate – Plummer and Crawford.

Plummer lost the election to the popular butcher, an event that fired his reckless temper, and he went after the new sheriff with a shotgun. However, a friend warned Crawford, who shot Plummer in his right arm, temporarily ruining his gun-fighting abilities. Undaunted, Plummer began to practice shooting with his left hand until his accuracy was deadly. When Crawford caught wind of this, he turned in his badge and left Bannack, never to return.

Plummer was made the leading lawman on May 24, 1863. Plummer was quick to appoint two of his henchmen, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray, as deputies. Unknown to the people of Bannack, Plummer's group of Innocents had now reached more than 100. Having the opposite of the desired effect for the citizens of Bannack, crime in the town increased dramatically after Plummer was elected. In the next few months, more than 100 citizens were murdered.

The Innocents stepped up their efforts at robbing travelers from the Montana camps and helped the sheriff to punish the "villains" of the community on a gallows that Plummer had erected. The Innocents were well organized and said to have killed anyone that might be a witness to their crimes, most

of which were easily covered up. Blatant killings went unpunished. Local residents who suspected anything feared for their lives and kept their mouths closed.

3-7-77 The Montana Vigilantes

By December 1863, the citizens of Bannack and Virginia City had enough. Men from Bannack, Virginia City and nearby Nevada City met secretly and organized the Montana Vigilantes. Masked men began to visit suspected outlaws in the middle of the night, issuing warnings and tacking up posters featuring a skull-and-crossbones or the "mystic" numbers "3-7-77." While the meaning of these numbers remains elusive, the Montana State Highway patrolmen wear the emblem "3-7-77" on their shoulder patches today.

The vigilantes dispensed rough justice by hanging about 24 men. When one such man, Erastus "Red" Yager, was about to be hanged, he pointed a finger at Plummer as the leader of the gang and all hell broke loose.

The residents were divided on whether Plummer was part of the murderous gang. But one night after heavy drinking in a local saloon, the vigilantes decided that Plummer was guilty and tracked him down. On Jan. 10, 1864, 50 to 75 men gathered up Plummer and his two main deputies, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray. The three were marched to the very same gallows that Plummer had built.

Legend has it that Plummer's grave was broken into on two occasions. The first time,

allegedly the local doctor, out of curiosity, severed the right arm from the body to search for the bullet that had hit Plummer when he went after Hank Crawford. Reportedly, the doctor found the bullet "worn smooth and polished by the bones turning upon it." The second break in occurred around the turn of the century, reportedly by two men who, after spending several hours in a local bar, decided to dig up the grave. To prove they had done it, they severed the head and carried it back to the Bank Exchange Saloon, where it remained on the back bar for several years, until the building burned, along with all its contents. Yet another legend states that the skull found its way into the hands of an unnamed doctor who sent the specimen back east to a scientific institution to try to figure out why Plummer was so evil.

Interestingly though, even after Plummer and several of his henchmen were hanged, the robberies did not cease. Many historians today think that the story of Plummer and his gang was fabricated to cover up the real lawlessness in the Montana Territory – the vigilantes themselves. Many of the early stories, on which the outlaw tale is based, were written by the Virginia City Newspaper editor, who was a member of the vigilantes.

The vigilantes continued their antics, and three years after Sheriff Plummer was hanged, they virtually ruled the mining districts. Finally, leading citizens of Montana, including Territorial Governor Thomas Meagher, began to speak out against the ruthless group. In March 1867, the miners issued their own



Bannack, Montana gallows erected by Sheriff Henry Plummer

warning that if the vigilantes hanged any more people, the "law abiding citizens" would retaliate "five for one." Though a few more lynchings occurred, the era of the vigilantes was past.

Bannack the Ghost Town

By 1870, there were no more easy diggings in Bannack, and within just a couple of years its population shrank to just a few hundred. In 1895, Bannack was revived for a time when the first electric dredge was invented. In no time at all, Grasshopper Creek supported five of them. Unfortunately, it was

these dredging operations that destroyed several hundred of the buildings erected in the 1860s. By the 1930s, the businesses and social community had left Bannack and very few people remained. By the 1940s, there would be so few students that the school would have to close and Bannack became a ghost town.

– Kathy Weiser

Kathy Weiser is the owner and operator of Legends of America (<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/>), an online magazine with more than 5,000 pages on various destinations. Weiser has a deep-seated love for history, travel, writing and almost anything falling within a creative realm.

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Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Gahlberg Gallery



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