

STATE PARKS
BANNACK
THIRD IN A SERIES
PORTRAIT



Assay Office (left) and Meade Hotel by Jim Blakeslee



THE STATE'S PREMIER
GHOST TOWN, BANNACK
STATE PARK GIVES
VISITORS A GLIMPSE OF
MONTANA'S COLORFUL
FRONTIER PAST

By John Barrows

Clappa, clappa, clap.

The old gray courthouse door, weathered beyond its 128 years, bangs slowly in the wind. If there aren't ghosts out prowling tonight in this abandoned gold rush town,

OF THE
WEST

there sure ought to be.

For Bannack, now a Montana state park, is a town of memories and lost hopes. Once the queen of Montana gold rush towns, and for a brief flash in history the fledgling territory's first capital, Bannack offers a glimpse into a lively era of boom and bust, brass and bluster. Thanks to the efforts of a few history-minded folks a half-century ago, the gunslingers, saloonkeepers, miners, dancing girls, and other ghosts of Bannack are still very much alive and waiting to be discovered.

A trip to Bannack, named for a tribe of American Indians who once camped nearby, is a trip back to the dusty days of early Montana. There is no glitz or glitter at this national historic landmark. You'll find no souvenir shops, no concessions, no motel rooms with cable. What you will find, however, is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in the West. An afternoon spent poking in

and out of abandoned buildings and looking at the hangman's gallows gives visitors a chilling and very real sense of those early days.

Bannack State Park sits in a canyon along meandering Grasshopper Creek, named for the swarms of leaping insects encountered by Jack White and John McGavin, who first found gold there in the summer of 1862. News of their discovery spread quickly, and practically overnight there was established a camp alive with speculators, miners, and other characters, often unsavory, attracted to the gold. This was truly the American West at its wildest, where work was dirty, liquor flowed freely, and laws were enforced from the barrel of a gun. In *Roadside History of Montana*, author and historian Don Spritzer offers this glimpse into Bannack's earliest days from Emily Meredith, one of the camp's few women, who wrote in 1863:

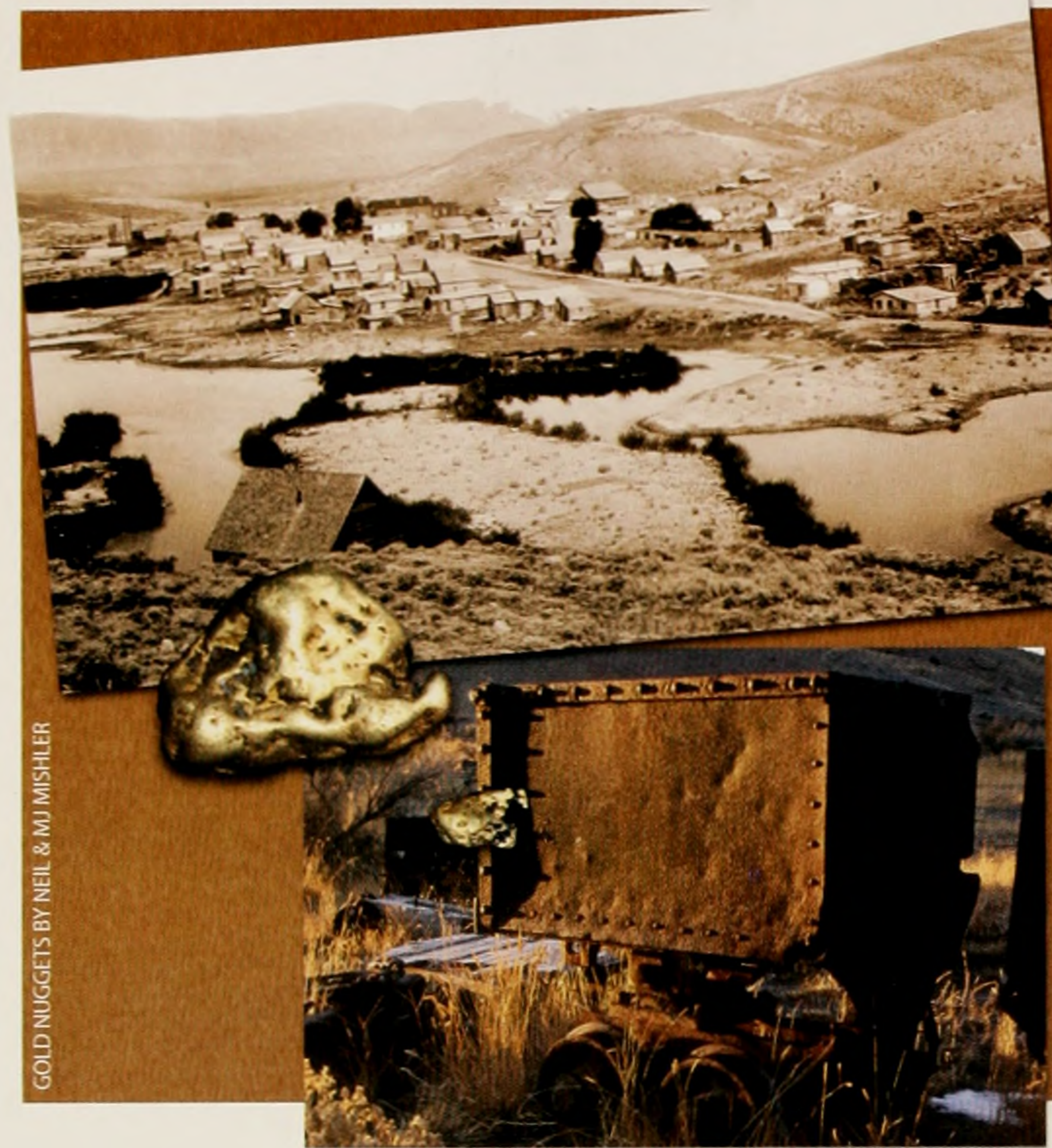
I don't know how many deaths have occurred this winter but that there have not been twice as many is entirely owing to the fact that drunken men do not shoot well... bullets whiz around so, and no one thinks of punishing a man for shooting another.

That same year began one of the most famous legends of Montana history, the story of the Vigilantes. This group of citizens, the story goes, banded together to rid Bannack, Virginia City, and other mining towns of murderous highwaymen known as the Innocents, headed by Bannack sheriff Henry Plummer. Though most Montanans still maintain that the Vigilantes were essential to territorial peace, the picture today is not as clear-cut as it once was.

Based on original accounts, many of them from participants or proponents of the Vigilantes, Plummer and 150 other cutthroats terrorized the region, robbing stagecoaches and killing dozens of men during their reign of terror.

In December 1863, citizens of Bannack and Virginia City organized a vigilance

John Barrows is editor of the Dillon Gazette.



GOLD NUGGETS BY NEIL & MJ MISHLER

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AL TROTH

GOLDEN AGE: In 1862, two prospectors found gold nuggets in Grasshopper Creek, and soon rails were laid and cars were hauling the precious metal from placer mines. By 1895, when the photo at top was taken, Bannack had lost much of its precious metal—and most of its residents. Today the town is populated mainly by tourists, ghosts, and the occasional mule deer or mountain bluebird.



ALAN G. NELSON

committee to combat the crime. On a cold January day in 1864, committee members captured Plummer along with his two deputies, Ned Ray and Buck Stinson. The trio was herded at gunpoint up what became known as Hangman's Gulch, on the outskirts of Bannack. In sub-zero weather, each man was lifted up and dropped from the end of a hangman's rope on a gallows built earlier by Plummer him-

self. The three paid with their lives for the robbery and murder they were accused of committing. Over the next two weeks, under the authority of the committee, as many as 18 others were apprehended and hanged.

In recent years, some have questioned the motives of the Vigilantes, as committee members called themselves. In several books published over the past few decades, historians have maintained that members of the vigilance committee may have been motivated more by politics and opportunism than by justice. Some recent accounts say that the Vigilantes were organized by Chief Justice Sidney Edgerton and his nephew, Wilbur F. Sanders, and that the two considered Plummer a political rival. Other accounts say jealousy, the Civil War, and the fraternal group the Masons may have played a hand in the Vigilante affair.

What is known for sure is that Sheriff Plummer was not implicated through traditional legal procedures but rather by testimony of a suspected criminal the Vigilantes had captured and interrogated.

"I think it's a pretty safe bet that some people were strung up by the vigilance committee who probably shouldn't have been," says Clark Whitehorn, editor of *Montana The Magazine of Western History*.

Today, there is still plenty of controversy over the guilt and innocence of both the Innocents and their executors. Passing by the replica of the gallows standing where the hangings took place, a visitor is reminded that ongoing debates over whether or not the executions were justified are a grave matter indeed.

There's no disagreement, however, that Bannack is a place worth saving, or that the state of Montana and its visitors owe a debt of gratitude to Alfreda Woodside and C. W. Stallings. In 1954 the newly formed Beaverhead County Museum and its indomitable matron

learned that much of old Bannack, even then essentially a ghost town, was up for sale. Woodside raised money for the purchase, but it was not enough. So Stallings, a wealthy businessman and longtime Bannack resident, bought the site at a tax sale. He then sold the town site and roughly 20 old buildings to the museum, which in turn gave the holdings to the state of Montana. Stallings later donated to the state several additional lots and buildings.

Eventually, Montana deeded the ghost town over to the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, which began a long process of preservation and additional acquisitions until the town site of Bannack, with over 60 buildings—including miners' log cabins, saloons, stores, and the Methodist Church—became a state park, securing an important part of Montana's heritage.

For Bannack was more to Montana than just a classic western boomtown. Within a year after gold was discovered, the town had attracted several thousand residents, a growing number of whom were eager to civilize the rough-edged community. In 1864, after Congress proclaimed Montana a territory, territorial governor Sidney Edgerton named Bannack as his capital and, that same year, convened the first territorial legislature there in a dirt-roofed cabin.

The boom ended nearly as quickly as it began. Gold found near Virginia City and other distant sites lured miners away from the fledgling capital. By 1880, fewer than 250 citizens remained, and by then the territorial capital had been moved to Virginia City. Still, Bannack was able to hang on for nearly 80 more years, as various methods of mining scraped up enough gold to keep the town from dying out completely.

Angela Hurley, Bannack State Park manager, is the keeper of the keys for Montana's first territorial capital. She relishes her job, as much for its variety and sense of responsibility as for the chance to meet and help thousands of visitors each year explore the historic site. Hurley, who stays at the old town as one of the park's permanent employees, has an endless supply of stories. And yes, some of them have to do with spirit visitors in the night.

Isolated and alone, Bannack certainly gives

the appearance of being a ghostly haven, and the stories about its otherworldly residents abound. Many of them center on the old Meade Hotel, once the courthouse, and its most famous guest, little Dorothy Dunn. Hurley says many visitors "feel" the presence of what some have identified as the spirit of the young girl, who drowned in a pond at the edge of town decades ago. Clad in a blue dress, Dorothy still walks the upper halls of the old brick building—or so they say.

And hardly a month goes by in the summer, says Hurley, when a visitor doesn't mention having heard the faint sound of babies crying. It's probably the wind—though Hurley does note that, years ago, the

Amede Bessett house was used to quarantine sick and dying children. Other stories abound, Hurley says, and true or not, they lend a spectral note to a Bannack visit.

Ghosts aren't the only attractions that lure people to the old gold camp. Bannack is like a window into history, Hurley notes, with its deserted buildings providing a peek into not just the earliest gold rush days but also the later years as the town continued its slow decline before being deserted.

A big part of her job is to make sure it all stays that way. That's why Hurley, along with a small staff of park employees and dozens of volunteers, works to ensure that visitors get a true look not only at Bannack the queen of the gold camps of the 1860s, but also Bannack the county seat of the 1870s and Bannack the old mining camp from the turn of the century.

And the Bannack of today. For even now, the town can ring with the very real sound of laughter, lectures, poetry, and music.

Rather than restore Bannack to its earliest days, Hurley says, park supporters decided instead to stabilize the town and preserve what was left of it when the state acquired the site in the mid-1950s. Unlike its sister gold camp, Virginia City—which has been partially restored, has become a major tourist draw, and is still a living

IF TAVERNS COULD TALK: An elegant antique bar in Skinner's Saloon invites visitors to imagine those who long ago bellied up for a whiskey or beer.

Background image (also on page 24): Residents of Bannack stand before the Goodrich Hotel sometime in the 1890s.



BILL CARTER



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



TIM EGAN

AMAZING GRACE: The elegant window frames in the Methodist Church, built in 1877, contrast against the straight, rough timbers that frame the building. Such contrasts exemplify life in frontier towns such as Bannack, where social grace struggled to find a place amid violence, lawlessness, and physical hardship.



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

town—Bannack has retained its abandoned, ghost town visage.

That does not mean the town has been neglected. Over the years, Hurley notes, substantial improvements have been made to the site, many of them not apparent to visitors. If you know where to look in the boardwalk that threads through town, you'll find sections that lift up, revealing water mains and fire hoses. Smoke and heat detectors are hidden away in almost every building. Many of the buildings have undergone substantial work, such as new foundations (hidden from view) built beneath buildings, old ripple glass added to windows, and new sill logs and ridge poles installed to prevent further decay. The idea, says Hurley, is to keep the town looking the way it did at the end of its useful life in the mid-20th century, preserving the many different eras of Bannack's short but vibrant life.

That can be expensive, exacting work. Preserving even a small building can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and a big job, like preserving the hotel, can run substantially more. But it's a need that can't be overlooked, Hurley notes, if Bannack is to survive the ravages of weather and the footsteps and curious hands of so many visitors.

Though many of its principal buildings have already received substantial preservation, many more need repair. A major project now underway is a fund-raising effort called Raise the Roof, aimed at putting a new roof on the Meade Hotel and preserving the building's interior.

The Meade Hotel is a Bannack landmark and one of the town's most widely recognized buildings. Built in 1875 as the Beaverhead County Courthouse, it was an example of immense civic pride. Little expense was spared, and over the years much of its splendor—like the winding staircase, stately courtroom, and several big iron safes—has survived. Just a few years after the courthouse was built, however, the county seat was moved to Dillon, and the building was converted into a hotel.

Though no longer lodging guests, the hotel still attracts thousands of visitors each year. During special events, its old dining room rings to laughter and the clink of dishes as volunteers heap breakfast plates with biscuits, eggs, and ham.

Bannack sees visitors during every season of the year. In winter, the old dredge pond resounds with the chatter of skaters, warming themselves by an outdoor bonfire or sipping cocoa in the warming house. Visitors don't even have to bring their own skates; the park provides them free of charge.

In spring the streets bustle with schoolchildren from across Montana making their annual pilgrimage to one of the state's most storied historical sites. It's a Montana rite of passage, like visiting the state capitol building, riding a horse, or catching a cutthroat trout. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, the visitor center is open, and guided tours are held daily. A series of Saturday programs known as Let's Raise the Roof, a nod to the fund-raising campaign, includes music and lectures on various aspects of Montana history and life. Like almost all park events, program fees are included in the regular park admission fee.

In June each year the park celebrates Dale Tash Montana History Day. Tash, a former park manager and noted Montana historian, did much to establish Bannack's place as one of the premier parks in the state, and his memory is honored with the annual event.

On October 24 and 25, the spirits of Bannack return for a Halloween bash during the annual Ghost Walk, when ghostly and ghastly tales of life in the gold camp



PHIL FARNES



BERT GILDART



VIGILANTE CABIN, MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The mystery of the so-called “vigilante code”

For years, the mysterious numbers 3-7-77 were posted on doors as a threat of banishment in Montana. Popular belief was that they had been used by the Vigilantes who hanged Bannack’s Sheriff Henry Plummer in 1874. But according to an extensive article in the Spring 2001 issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, the numbers were first used in 1879 to scare “undesirables” out of Helena. In the 1920s, they were pinned to the back of several men lynched by vigilante mobs. (Interestingly, the Montana Highway Patrol added the numbers to their shoulder patch and car door insignia in 1956 as a tribute to law and order.) The numbers have been thought to be a Masonic code, the dimensions of a grave, or the exact time—in hours, minutes, and seconds—vigilantes gave their targets to leave town. However, no records exist to prove any of these or other theories. The numbers’ origins, writes the article’s author, Frederick Allen, still remain “a complete and utter mystery.”

are told in the dark and spooky setting. And in January, local volunteers reenact the hanging of Plummer and his deputies.

The park’s centerpiece event is Bannack Days. It all began 27 years ago, during the nation’s bicentennial celebration, to bring a bit of Bannack’s history back to life. Since then, the third weekend in July has become a time to experience “the way it was,” as several thousand people attend the two-day event to eat pioneer foods, clap their hands to old-time music, and boo or cheer during the annual Women’s Suffrage Debate held on the steps of the Meade Hotel. Gun-fighters and wool spinners, black-powder enthusiasts and candle makers, fiddlers and hide tanners all show off the old crafts and lifestyles to three generations of visitors. Stagecoaches and horse-drawn buggies clatter down streets packed on either side with



JOHN BARROWS

YEAR-ROUND ACTION: Though still a ghost town, Bannack today can buzz with activity. The big bash is in late July during Bannack Days, which attracts up to 10,000 visitors. Activities include singalongs, black-powder rifle shooting, gunfights, and stagecoach rides. But even in winter Bannack is lively, as skaters glide across the frozen town pond between sips of cocoa.

revelers, giving a sense of the town’s energy and activity more than a century ago.

Hurley says Bannack Days and much of the park’s vitality and preservation wouldn’t exist without the help of volunteers. People from throughout the country come to Bannack each year to help out, often staying at the park campground.

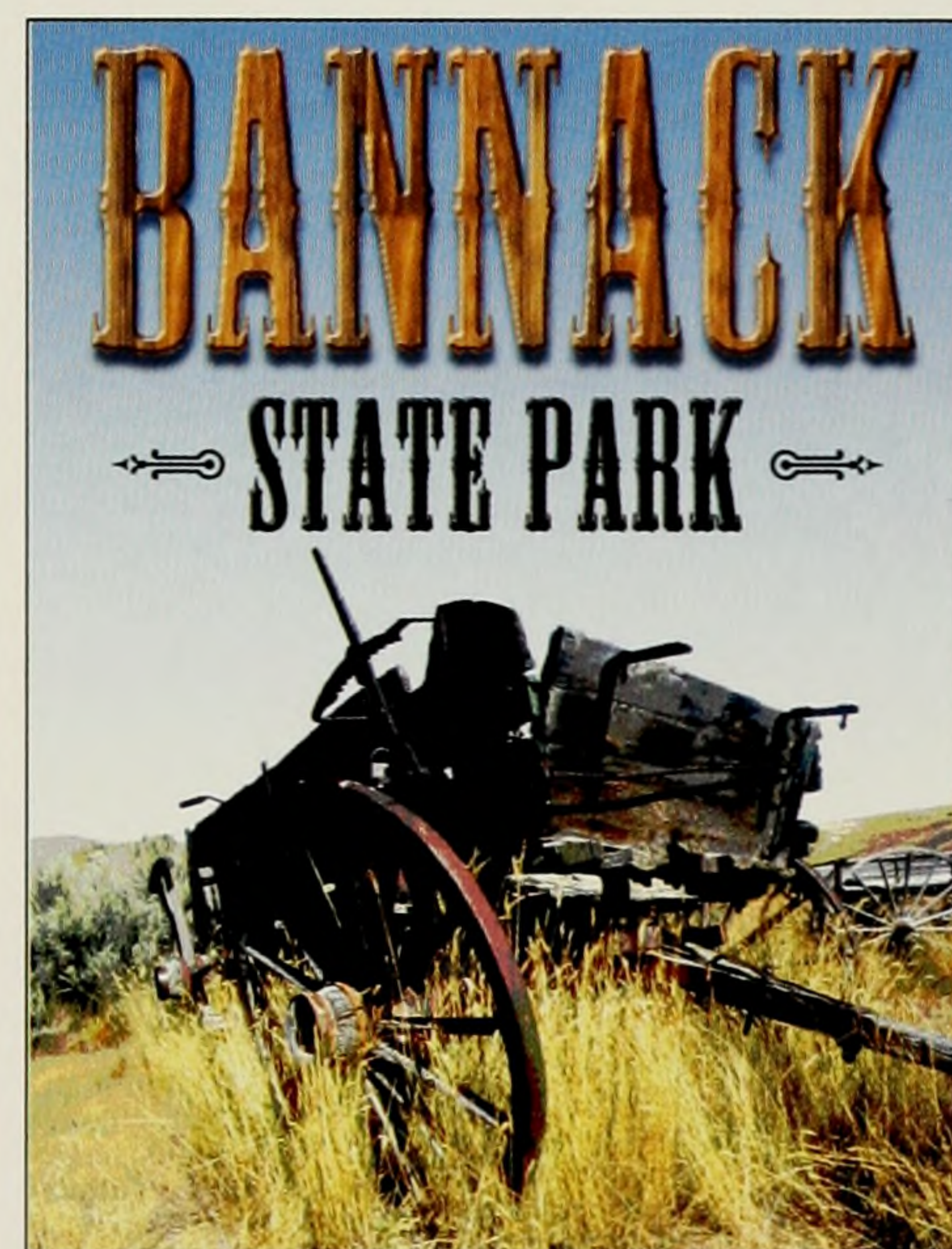
Volunteers park cars, serve food, clean and restore buildings, and demonstrate old-fashioned skills such as blacksmithing. Several would-be gunslingers even “die” in the streets during Bannack Days shootouts.

“Volunteers help with tasks that there just isn’t time or money for our limited staff to accomplish,” says Hurley.

Many are members of the Bannack Association, a support group of some 200 members who donate time and money for special park projects. Begun in 1991, the association publishes a newsletter and helps with historical research and other activities. According to Stan Smith of Dillon, a past president, the group provides a way for individuals to help out the park while gaining a personal stake in the area’s rich history. But most of all, being a member of the association is “just plain fun,” Smith says. And he should know, having helped fill the air with smoke as a gunfighter since the very first Bannack Days celebration in 1976.

Historical reenactments, myths, ghosts, legends, and more, Bannack State Park offers visitors a tangible link to the state’s rich heritage and a chance to ponder one town’s rich and sometimes-tragic past. On a recent evening stroll down Bannack’s empty main street, a lone visitor hears a tapping sound in the distance. Maybe it’s a

sheriff shuffling slowly to the gallows. Or the footsteps of a barefoot little girl, her hair dripping water, trying to get home. Or maybe it’s simply a weathered old shutter, softly knocking in the wind, asking if Bannack’s colorful past might be allowed to enter a passerby’s imagination. 🐾



MONTANA OUTDOORS

IF YOU GO

Open: Every day except December 24 and 25.

Hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. October through April, and 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. May through September.

Visitor center: Open Memorial Day through Labor Day.

Location: 3 miles south of Dillon on I-15, then 20 miles west on Montana Highway 278, then 4 miles south on a county road.

Activities: Picnicking, camping (24 sites and a rental tepee), birding, fishing, and hiking.

Park information: (406) 834-3413, or on the Internet at fwp.state.mt.us/parks.

Bannack Association: To learn more about this group, call the park office.