

Growing with the Territory

The decade between 1873 and 1883 was a time of growth for banks and great transition for Montana. When the decade began, Montana's communities still existed as lonely outposts in what essentially remained an isolated frontier. The thunder and lightning of buffalo herds and warlike Indians still stormed across the wilderness. Transportation remained difficult, keeping prices high, and money continued to be scarce.

By decade's end, the buffalo had been slaughtered. The Indians had been overwhelmed, first by warfare, then by the disappearance of the herds. The coming of the railroads had brought a new order of civilization to the territory. Cattle were replacing the bison; the sheen of silver was beginning to outshine the glow of gold. In large part, the lonely placer had lost out to the clank and grind of expensive mining machinery.

Yet, as Montana's earliest successful camps grew into proper Victorian communities, their schools and churches and richmen's mansions well removed in ambiance if not in distance from the log cabin saloons and clapboard brothels thriving in the played-out gulches nearby, new mining camps, as lawless and rude as their citified forebears had been, sprang into existence with every new strike.

The steamboat "DeSmet" lies alongside the Fort Benton levee in the 1870s.

Montana Historical Society

The First National Bank and the Bank of Northern Montana (door at left) in Fort Benton, shown in 1880.

Haynes Foundation Collection Montana Historical Society

