

Silver and Statehood

Tommy Cruse, the semi-literate millionaire Irishman, decked out in a Prince Albert coat and fancy white gloves, was having himself a wedding.

And it was a wedding, recalled Helena banker William C. Whipps, that “nobody who was in Helena at the time will ever forget. The occasion automatically called for a holiday. There was no proclamation, but all the banks and business houses closed up.”¹

Cruse, who discovered the fabulous Drumlummon Mine in Marysville, had recently sold out for \$1.5 million in cash and stock guarantees that were to bring him a total of some \$15 million. Soon he would open the Thomas Cruse Savings Bank, the first savings bank in the territory. But now, in 1886, he was marrying Margaret Carter, sister of Tom Carter, Montana’s first congressman and later a U.S. senator. The champagne would flow down Last Chance Gulch like water down a stream.

“Sixteen hundred quarts of champagne came all the way from Chicago,” recalled a witness. “They kept the water coolers in the Cosmopolitan Hotel filled with champagne all day,” said another.²

Whipps, later a mayor and banker in Kalispell, would write a fascinating if vituperative set of memoirs late in life, and his recollection of the festivities was in character.

“All the goody-goody church deacons of the town, of all churches, men who had never tasted anything to drink, stronger than water, before in their lives, took advantage of the free wine to get drunk, and did,” he said. “I saw many of them myself, prayer-making, psalm-singing men, the leading citizens of the town, simply abused poor Tommy’s hospitality and generosity and got beastly drunk at his expense, as everything was free and there were oceans of it, and it all was the highest priced, imported champagne....”

Be that as it may, that wedding marked the high point in

The Thomas Cruse Savings Bank occupied the lower right section of this building on Helena’s Last Chance Gulch.

Montana Historical Society

Tommy Cruse’s life. (Ten months later his bride would die shortly after childbirth, and his darling daughter Mamie would bring him years of grief before her death at 27.) But as Cruse and his lady rode away from the new hotel at the northeast corner of Sixth and Last Chance Gulch, leaving “the crowds still so big in the saloons you couldn’t get near the bar,” their happiness also serves as a fitting illustration of the times.

Montana was on the move. Telephones had arrived, with all that meant for modern commerce. “Mountain time” had come with the rails, locking the territory into step with the rest of the nation. (All clocks were advanced 27 minutes in Helena.) Even the children benefited: Dan Costello’s New Colossal Nickel Plated Circus had toured Montana with shows at 2 and 8 p.m.

Mining, cattle, railroads — everywhere you looked, the territory was alive with progress. And, politically as well as economically, Montana’s bankers weren’t just along for the ride. They were driving the team.

Montana’s Democratic “Big Four” — Sam Hauser, Charles Broadwater, William A. Clark and Marcus Daly — “wielded an influence fully as strong as the machine bosses in more eastern regions,” said historian Clark Spence. And, at least through the 80s, Hauser was the biggest kingpin of all. Not only was he “probably the most important single individual in Montana’s economic life for at least two decades before 1890,” in the words of John Hakola, but also, Spence said, he clearly “was one of the most important political manipulators in Montana for nearly 30 years.”³

So it wasn’t surprising that in 1885 Hauser’s name came up for nomination to the next governorship. Martin Maginnis, the long-time territorial delegate to Congress, wanted the job, as did William A. Clark and Hauser’s brother-in-law and bank cashier Edward Knight, but Hauser’s connections triumphed. It didn’t even matter that Broadwater, whose business concerns were butting against Hauser’s interests, joined the Maginnis faction. The “grand, gloomy and all-powerful Democratic boss” had won the day, said the “Dillon Tribune.” Later