
***MORE FROM THE QUARRIES
OF LAST CHANCE GULCH***

Cast in Stone

John Stedman's Foundry to be new home for wild animals

Last weekend over two hundred people in Helena turned out for a dinner and auction to benefit one of the most imaginative and important projects underway in our community - the Spring Meadow Wild Animal Center. With special guest Jim Fowler and a cast of wild critters, the people at the Mikal Kellner Foundation and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks kicked off plans for a center that will care for orphaned and injured wild animals from across the state.

The Spring Meadow Wild Animal Center is slated to open on a site overlooking Spring Meadow Lake, where three old stone buildings remain that housed the John Stedman Foundry and Machine Company from 1892-1901. These three stalwart stone buildings, with their thick masonry walls, brick casting remains, enormous window bays and lofty interiors, are now one of Montana's best preserved examples of 19th century mill-type construction. Plans for the center include stabilizing and refurbishing the historic buildings to serve a new use, making the most of the large open interiors and many high windows that provide natural lighting and stunning views of the lake to the north and Mount Helena to the south.

Born on a farm in Maine, John Stedman came to Helena along the gold rush trail. He journeyed to California in 1855, sailing by way of Nicaragua. From the California gold fields, he ventured to the Frazer River in British Columbia, and from there, in 1867, he rode by horseback through Oregon and on to Helena. Once here, he opened the first lumber planing business in Helena, planing wood milled at the A.M. Holter sawmill.

In 1877, Stedman opened a foundry and machine works on Clore Street (now Park Street), one block west of Last Chance Gulch. Stedman's foundry manufactured and repaired all kinds of machinery, and specialized in mining equipment and an array of "brass castings, stamps, seals and brands." It was the second foundry to open in Helena, after the Helena Iron Works, owned by B.K. Tatem. Stedman's company began small, employing only one worker in addition to himself, although soon enough the demands of local industry caused the foundry to grow.

Metal founding is a hot, dirty industrial process requiring ample space for casting hearths and furnaces, large hoists and smokey chimneys, as well as storage and loading. For these reasons perhaps, as the foundry grew it clung to the edges of the expanding town, moving from Clore, to 6th, to



*The stone buildings are one of Montana's best preserved examples of 19th century mill-type construction.
IR photo by Gene Fischer*

Fuller and finally to the western outskirts of town, by Ten Mile Creek.

The Ten Mile site was well suited to a foundry's needs. Set apart from town with open surroundings, the location isolated the smoke and fiery metal work well away from the densely settled town. Not surprisingly, some of Stedman's nearest neighbors on the Ten Mile were other large manufacturers, notably the Kessler Brewery and the Kessler Brickworks. For many years, these businesses made the area one of the town's industrial sectors.

In addition to machinery, Stedman began to manufacture glorious cast iron elements for ornate storefronts. The open storefronts that began to line Helena's business districts during the 1880s and 1890s are the legacy of the J.R. Stedman Foundry and the Helena Iron Works, for together these foundry's produced most all the cast iron in the growing town. Their nameplates are still in place throughout downtown on numerous building fronts, a testament to both the productivity and the skill of these early founders.

At its peak the Stedman Foundry employed some 50 workers and was known as "one of the best equipped foundries and machine shops in Montana" able to "make anything in the way of brass or iron castings, from a door-key to a ten-thousand-pound casting." Stedman's crowning achievement was the creation of the fully cast iron facade for the Windsor Hotel, which has been known ever since as the Iron Front. Nationwide, very few such buildings were ever created, and Helena's Iron Front Hotel is a masterpiece of the technology.

John Stedman died in 1897, and the foundry remained in operation through the turn of the century. In 1901, equipment was sold off and by 1904 the company dissolved. During the 20th century, the site housed a wire fencing manufacturer, a metal assaying and refining operation, and Helena Sand and Gravel during the 1930s. The gravel pit, which operated for three decades north of the buildings, is now the Spring Meadow lakesite and state park that so many of us enjoy.

Today, the Stedman Foundry is about to begin a new chapter in its history. With money from private donors as well as the Montana Legislature, the buildings will be renovated, and the facilities expanded for animal care and shelter, and public visits and education. It's a noble second hundred year endeavor for a place whose history was entwined with the creation of our town.

(Donations to support the new Spring Meadow Animal Center are gratefully accepted by the Mikal Kellner Foundation for Animals, P.O. Box 389, Helena, MT 59624. For more information, you may contact the foundation at: 443-6532.)

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