Charles A. Bovey: Pioneer In The Preservation Of Montana's Living History

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CARROLL COLLEGE

CHARLES A. BOVEY:
PIONEER IN THE PRESERVATION OF MONTANA'S LIVING HISTORY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CARROLL COLLEGE
IN CANDIDACY FOR A BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE
WITH HONORABLE RECOGNITION

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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HELENA, MONTANA
APRIL 15, 2002
This thesis has been approved for honors recognition.

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PREFACE

In the summer of 2000, I worked as a curatorial assistant at the McFarland Curatorial Center in Virginia City, Montana. Not only did I work in Virginia City, but I lived there as well. The job was like a dream-come-true for me because I had always loved history. Little did I know that this summer job would change my life.

While living and working in Virginia City, I was able to learn a great deal about the area. I had known a little about Virginia City before I took the job because I had visited the former mining camp as a child and learned about it in my history classes from the time I was in elementary school, but I had never heard of the man named “Charlie” that everyone there was always mentioning. By the end of the summer, I knew that “Charlie” was Charles Bovey and that he was responsible for a great deal of the preservation work in Virginia City. I also learned that the State of Montana had purchased most of Virginia City and Nevada City from Charlie’s son, Ford, in 1997. Though I was able to catch little tidbits here and there about Charlie, when I returned to Helena at the end of the summer, I wanted to learn more. During the fall of 2000, I was given an opportunity to do just that.

As part of my course load at Carroll College, I was able to intern at the Montana Historical Society in the Archives. My job was to process a collection
that had recently been acquired by the Historical Society—the Charles A. Bovey
collection. In working with the collection, I became so interested in Charlie and
his preservation efforts in Montana that I chose him as the topic for my research
seminar class in history the same semester. Though the internship and seminar
class came to an end, my interest in Charlie did not, and I continued my research.
The result of that research is this senior honors thesis.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who
helped me make this thesis a reality. I would like to thank my family and my
husband, Chris, for their constant encouragement and support through the whole
process; Lois Fitzpatrick, who convinced me to keep working when I was ready to
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believing in me; my readers, Rev. Jeremiah T. Sullivan and Dr. Ronald S.
Stottlemyer, for their comments and suggestions; the Montana Historical Society
archives, library, and photo archives staff for their assistance while I researched;
and to Charles A. Bovey, without whom I would not have had a story to tell.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, many great figures have been immortalized in Montana history—Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Charles (Charlie) Russell, and Jeannette Rankin, to name a few. Though these names are familiar to many, there are also those people whose contributions to Montana have been just as great, yet whose names go largely unrecognized. While only a few may recognize the name Charles A. Bovey, he was a man who had an unprecedented impact on the preservation of Montana’s living history.

Charles Bovey was a wealthy Minnesota native who came to Great Falls, Montana, in the 1920s. He was a businessman, a farmer, a rancher, and a politician. Most significant, however, was his life-long devotion to preserving facets of Montana’s neglected, and in some cases nearly forgotten, history. Bovey’s pioneering efforts have resulted in the preservation of individual landmarks in many Montana cities such as Fort Benton and Craig; the restoration of Virginia City, Montana’s second territorial capital; and in the formation of several organizations dedicated to continuing the preservation efforts that Bovey began.

Though Bovey was a pioneer in preservation efforts in Montana, he was not alone in his efforts to preserve America’s living history. The preservation movement in the United States began in the years following World War I, largely in response to the invention and widespread popularity of the automobile. As the majority of Americans
came to embrace the automobile, great changes were made to the American landscape to accommodate the new mobile lifestyle. Highways, parking lots, and filling stations began to appear throughout the nation, replacing many historic buildings and landmarks in their paths. Despite the stimulation the economy received as a result of this increased mobility, there were a few who questioned the "progressive" nature of these changes.\(^2\)

Although it was almost always an uphill battle, this first generation of preservationists often dedicated their lives to trying to protect historic buildings and communities from being destroyed.

A breakthrough in preservation efforts came in 1926, when Dr. William A. R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., joined together to restore the entire historic community of Williamsburg, Virginia. Goodwin had been insightful enough to realize that Americans needed to have a place where they could experience pre-industrial America. He was fortunate enough to have been able to gain the support of Rockefeller, who was able to provide the financial backing and thoroughness such a task would entail. The restoration of Williamsburg revolutionized preservation efforts in the United States and increased the base of support for preservation efforts throughout the nation.\(^3\)

Another key turning point in the preservation movement came with the crash of the United States Stock Market in 1929. As Americans began to experience economic hardships as a result of the crash, many began to take a second look at the past. Americans became more aware of the importance of preserving the past and were supported through New Deal programs and the National Park Service. The National Park Service decided to boost preservation efforts in the United States by creating a national preservation program within the federal government. By 1935, the program included sponsoring forums for professional debates on preservation issues and scholarly research
in European preservation work; New Deal programs also helped boost preservation efforts by offering technical assistance to state governments through the Civilian Conservation Corp, under the direction of Ronald F. Lee.\textsuperscript{4} With this governmental coordination and support of restoration projects, historic preservation efforts were finally able to move beyond the eastern states and into southern and western states as well. In the South, local groups worked mainly to preserve historic districts, while in the West, a revived interest in the evolution of the Indian frontier and mining boom towns led to the preservation of a number of mid-nineteenth-century buildings.

In 1949, with the formation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the field of preservation took an important step forward. The first generation of preservationists had nearly faded away by the end of World War II and was replaced by a larger, more professional generation of preservationists. Charles A. Bovey was part of both of these generations. Though the preservation movement was working its way west, it was slow to arrive in Montana. Like those of the first generation, Bovey was an amateur preservationist who recognized that many historic buildings and communities near him were on the verge of disappearing. He knew that someone needed to take the initiative to try to save them, and he was willing to volunteer his time and resources. On the other hand, like those of the second generation, he gained the support of the local population, created a preservation organization with a membership program, and—though he did not live long enough to see it—succeeded in convincing others to adopt his goal as their own. Only a few early preservationists believed “that the public would unite to maintain the sense of continuity that a large group of old buildings could provide.”\textsuperscript{5} Bovey was one of these few, and his vision lives on.
Since 1950, a number of steps have been taken to ensure that preservation efforts, like those of Charles A. Bovey, continue. Legal protections such as zoning, historic district ordinances, and protective easements have been accepted. The National Historic Preservation Act, passed in 1966, expanded the National Register of Historic Places and created the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. After this Act, historic preservation offices were established in every state and territory in an attempt to identify and preserve important facets of history. The National Heritage program, established in 1978, went even further and combined preservation with conservation in an effort to protect the natural and cultural heritage of the people of the United States. Catalogs outlining products and services available for restoring homes have now become available to the public, and a number of publications have been created that are related to preservation. Numerous educational opportunities have been made available in the field of preservation, including not only architecture, archaeology, and history, but journalism, public relations, real estate, business and many others as well.

The preservation movement, though it has matured, still has much more work to do. As a task force studying the future of preservation in the United States once said,

Culturally significant places, though tangible and fixed, are fragile resources. If unrecognized and unprotected, they are subject to deterioration, indiscriminate alteration and destruction. Such diminishment of a heritage means not only the loss of usable resources but also the degradation of the intangible cultural values they represent.

A man ahead of his time, Charles A. Bovey knew this and dedicated his life to trying to get others to realize it as well. This is his story.
Fig. 1. Charles A. Bovey. (Reproduced from photocopy, Cascade County Historical Society Calendar, 1978, in Charles A. and Sue Ford Bovey vertical file folder at the Montana Historical Society Library, Helena)
NOTES

Chapter 1


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 6.

4 Ibid., 4.

5 Ibid., 227.

6 Ibid., 1067.

7 Ibid., 1069.

8 Ibid., 1074.
CHAPTER 2
BOVEY BEGINNINGS

Charles Argalis Bovey was born on May 1, 1907, at 1512 Harmon Place in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Charles Argalis, better known as “Charlie,” was the third of three children born to Charles Cranston and Kate Koon Bovey. Charlie’s older brother was Martin Koon Bovey, born in 1899, and his older sister was Ruth Alden (Bovey) Stevens, born in 1902. As children, Charlie and his siblings enjoyed many luxuries as a result of the family’s wealth, including electricity in their home and cabin and lavish trips to Europe. The family’s wealth was the result of a key decision made by Charlie’s grandfather, also named Charles Argalis Bovey, in the late 1880s.

After following his lumber company from Maine to Minnesota, the elder Charles A. Bovey decided to invest in the Washburn Crosby Company in Minneapolis. At the time Bovey invested in the milling company, it was just beginning to make a name for itself with its “Superlative” flour. In June 1880, the company’s popularity exploded when the “Superlative” flour won a gold medal at the Millers International Exhibition in Cincinnati, Ohio. Not long after the competition, the flour’s name was changed to “Gold Medal”—the name under which it became famous (Washburn Crosby was a forerunner of General Mills Incorporated.) At the time of the company’s success at the Millers Exhibition, Charlie’s grandfather owned nearly one-third of the shares of stock in the
company; hence, his fortune increased as the company became more and more successful.³

Charlie’s father, Charles Cranston Bovey, was connected to Washburn Crosby from the time he was a small child. Charles Cranston was good friends with one of the Crosby children, John Crosby, and even attended Phillips Andover Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, with him in the late 1890s. After completing his coursework at Phillips, Charles Cranston went on to study at Yale. He graduated in 1898 and became an important figure within the Washburn Crosby Company.⁴ Throughout his life, he worked hard to expand Washburn Crosby to increase its success. Charles Cranston was instrumental in the creation of a number of branches of Washburn Crosby throughout the United States and eventually became president of the booming company.

By the time Charles Argalis was born in 1907, the Boveys had enjoyed nearly thirty years of wealth and prosperity. As a result, the Bovey children enjoyed a life of affluence and rarely went without. Despite all of the luxuries the family enjoyed, however, Charlie, even at age five, could be found rummaging through wastepaper baskets and garbage cans looking for discarded treasures. On one particular occasion, when Charlie was about six or seven years old, he discovered four old car tires at a Minneapolis city dump and rolled each of them home in the hopes of using them to build an automobile.⁵ Throughout his life, Charlie would continue to scavenge through and collect items that had been tossed, neglected or forgotten—at first, with the intention of using them in his own projects, and later, because he knew that a valuable piece of history might be lost if he did not.
Even though Charlie was the first one in his family fascinated with collecting unconventional and seemingly worthless items, he was not the only collector in the family. His mother, Kate, whom Charlie credited for his appreciation of antiques, was also a collector, though one with much more expensive tastes than Charlie. Kate collected such items as fine oriental rugs, chairs from a Spanish Mission that were constructed around the 1500s, and a refractory table from a European castle—not the old toys and magazines which seemed to intrigue her son. In 1919, Charlie purchased a World War I Jenny airplane engine and propeller from a Popular Mechanics magazine; with this purchase, his mother decided that Charlie could no longer keep his collection at home. Consequently, Charlie was forced to look elsewhere for a place to store his treasures. Charlie moved his collection to his Grandmother Josephine Koon’s residence where it stayed and continued to grow in size until Charlie shipped the collection to his Sunnyside Ranch in Montana in the 1930s. Some of the items Charlie had amassed after moving his collection to his grandmother’s residence included horse-drawn carriages, buggies, and fire engines.

On September 11, 1923, like his grandfather, father, and brother before him, Charlie entered Phillips Andover Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. The time he spent at Phillips Academy was not pleasant for Charlie. Charlie often found it difficult to concentrate on academics and was, as a result, a poor student—so poor, in fact, that had it not been for his father’s influence and his family’s reputation, Charlie might never have completed the school’s curriculum. Charles Cranston constantly wrote letters to his son regarding Charlie’s poor performance in the classroom. Some letters were stern and scolded the boy for his carelessness, while others offered encouragement and support,
asking Charlie only to do the best that he could. For example, here are excerpts from two letters written to Charlie while he was at Andover:

I don’t understand this report that’s just come . . . . Your work is not good enough to permit any excuse . . . . I am afraid that if this continues it is going to count against you severely and it must stop. You have a big duty to perform at Andover and I don’t know why you don’t do it.¹¹

Now young man, you know what I want to say. Don’t let up in your efforts. You have sailed a boat long enough to know that when you pass another boat, if you are careless that other boat will soon pass you even though you are a little ahead. You have got to work to keep ahead. Let that same rule apply, won’t you, to your work . . . . Don’t wait until the exams are just upon you but keep every day’s work up. Try it out, old fellow. It’s only a few weeks more . . . .¹²

While many of the letters written by Charles Cranston to Charlie at this time concerned his academic performance, a number of the letters also expressed concern about Charlie’s spending habits. As a young man, Charlie was not a frugal person. He spent money quite freely and often borrowed a great deal of money from his father. Charles Cranston did not have a problem with lending his son money, but he was often disappointed in Charlie when he spent more money that what had been agreed upon.¹³ Though his father often requested that Charlie send him a record of where and how the borrowed money was being spent, Charlie rarely could provide a complete account. This, too, upset Charles Cranston, who wanted his son to act like a businessman and keep thorough, detailed records. Much to Charles Cranston’s dismay, Charlie did not have the keen business sense that both his father and grandfather had been fortunate to possess. Charlie would not learn the importance of this skill until much later in life.

Needless to say, graduation in 1926 could not have come soon enough for Charlie. As a reward for finishing school, Charlie’s father arranged for him to tour
Europe. Before departing, Charles Cranston also provided Charlie with an allowance for the trip, including enough money for his return passage home. Not surprisingly, Charlie did not spend his money wisely while in Europe and soon discovered that he did not have enough money to return to the United States. In desperation, Charlie telegraphed his father with the little money he had left that said “Bovey broke. Send money.” His father, not pleased with his son’s continuous lack of frugality, replied “Stay broke,” and refused to send Charlie money to return home. The young man was thus left to find a way home on his own. Charlie, though broke, had luck on his side. No sooner had he received his father’s telegram denying him money to return home than he found J. P. Stevens and his family. J. P. Stevens was the father of Nat Stevens—Ruth Bovey’s fiancé—and just happened to be touring Europe at the same time as Charlie. Charlie was able to borrow money from Stevens to return home to the United States.

Upon returning home from Europe, Charlie met with his father at the senior Bovey’s office in downtown Minneapolis. At this time, Charlie’s father gave him two options: one, Charlie could go to college at Harvard or Yale and his father would pay for the schooling, assuming, of course, that Charlie would take his studies more seriously than he had at Phillips; or two, Charlie could learn the milling trade and begin preparation to take his father’s place in Washburn Crosby. Charlie chose to learn the milling trade in the belief that he would be able to remain in Minneapolis and close to his family. No sooner had Charlie made his decision than his father, much to Charlie’s surprise, sent him out west to Great Falls, Montana, to work at the Royal Milling Company, a subsidiary of the Minneapolis-based Washburn Crosby Company.
Fig. 2. Royal Milling Company, Great Falls, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
NOTES

Chapter 2


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 3.

4 Yale University 1898 graduation program, Folder 10, Box 12, Manuscript Collection No. 298, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, Montana, hereafter cited as Bovey Collection.


6 Ibid., 9.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 10.


10 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Andover, 11 September 1923, Western Union telegram, Folder 6, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

11 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Andover, 24 March 1924, Folder 8, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

12 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Andover, 16 May 1924, Folder 8, Box 1, Bovey Collection.
13 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Andover, 5 May 1925, Folder 9, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

14 See John Ellingsen, interview, 16 November 1998, 12; and Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TL, 25 August 1926, Folder 10, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

15 John Ellingsen, interview, 16 November 1998, 12.


17 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3

THE ROAD TO VIRGINIA CITY

Charlie arrived in Great Falls, Montana, on the morning of October 22, 1926.1 A few days later, he attended the funeral of Charles Russell, the nationally acclaimed Montana cowboy artist. This event had such an impact on Charlie that years later, in October 1940, he purchased the horse-drawn hearse that had carried Mr. Russell to his grave.2 Charlie began working as a sweeper at the Royal Milling Company almost immediately after his arrival. He did not start in a high position, as might have been expected—and in fact held the lowest position, as his father felt that it was important for Charlie to earn his way to the top. Nearly a year after acquainting himself with the milling company and the Great Falls area, Charlie met his future wife, Rachael Sue Ford, the daughter of the wealthy president of the Great Falls National Bank, Lee Ford.

Charlie tried his best to learn the milling trade as his father desired, but after only two years he was tiring of the business. Though he had advanced his position in the company to millwright’s apprentice, the job was indoors and unfulfilling.3 After making friends with several local farmers and ranchers, Charlie soon began to consider taking up one of those professions instead. However, Charles Cranston did not approve of his son’s desire. At this time, the United States was beginning to experience economic recession, and the elder Bovey thought it would be best for Charlie to continue to pursue his career in the milling business, rather than become involved in a strenuous profession such as
farming. Charlie, however, did not follow his father’s advice and, with the help of Lee Ford, located a ranch to rent in the Great Falls area. After making a little money from working this ranch he called Sunnyside Ranch, Charlie decided to purchase the place for use as a wheat farm in June 1929.

While Charlie was working to change his profession, he was also continuing to expand his collection of antique vehicles. He purchased two antique vehicles from C. T. Grove in 1927 or 1928: a 1908 Anderson Motor Buggy and a 1909 air-cooled Cameron. In late February 1929, Charlie also purchased a 1903 Dort Roadster, one he described as “a regular buggy with a two cylinder engine under the seat,” from his neighbor James Sherwood—a purchase that Charlie was very proud of and, more importantly for Charlie, one that his father approved of.

Only a few short months later came the infamous United States Stock Market crash on October 29, 1929. The crash, however, did not seem to have an immediate effect on Charlie. Despite the poor economy at the time, Charlie continued to lead a privileged lifestyle. He was still profiting from Sunnyside Ranch, and on November 30, 1929, he bought a brand new Buick automobile for $1221.60. In 1936, he decided to invest his money in a sheep ranch near Monarch, Montana, called Deep Canyon Ranch, which he also purchased with help from Lee Ford. Ford had recently foreclosed on the ranch, and before long, he offered to sell it to Charlie. Around the same time, Charlie also purchased a small cattle ranch near Cascade, Montana. After making these purchases, Charlie soon realized that raising livestock was a much more difficult profession than raising crops. He refused to give up on ranching, though, and worked his ranches faithfully, despite poor markets and low demand.
Not only was Charlie adjusting to a new career, but he was also making significant changes in his personal life. On February 23, 1933, Charlie Bovey and Rachael Sue Ford (commonly known as Sue) were married—an event that almost never happened, or at least not on that particular day. Charlie Bovey had never been one to pay close attention to detail, and his wedding day was no exception—he forgot all about the marriage license! Luckily, Charlie was able to convince one of his friends to open the courthouse, write him a license, and put the official seal on it, thus avoiding a potentially embarrassing situation. Charlie and Sue decided to make their home in a little house on Sunnyside Ranch—a little house with no electricity, heat, or running water. The lack of these conveniences did not bother the newlyweds; in fact, they rather enjoyed the lifestyle. However, their parents did not approve of their children living in such primitive condition and soon convinced the couple to invest in modernizing the home.

A major turning point in Charlie’s life came on September 18, 1940, when he went to Fort Benton, Montana, to attend a horse sale. He stopped at a little café before heading to the sale, and while there, he became sidetracked. Charlie was introduced to the daughters of Joseph Sullivan, a saddler who had died a few years before. The women wanted Charlie to see the saddle shop that their father had owned, and Charlie, being the antique enthusiast that he was, accepted the invitation rather than attend the horse sale. Charlie was absolutely fascinated with the shop and its contents. The women signed over the deed to Charlie, and he began making arrangements to move the building to Great Falls. It was the first time in his life that Charlie had taken on a project which required that he pay close attention to every detail, as the building had to be dismantled in such a manner that it could be reassembled once it reached its new location.
By December 1940, the pieces of Sullivan’s Saddlery had been moved to the Livestock Pavilion at the Great Falls Fair Grounds. During the following months, Charlie devoted much of his time to collecting old buildings from locations around Montana and moving them to the Livestock Pavilion in Great Falls. By August 1941, he had collected such buildings as a barbershop from Elkhorn, Montana; a fire station from Boulder, Montana; Ebrel’s Blacksmith Shop from Augusta, Montana; and a saloon from Belt, Montana. He decided to use these buildings, along with pieces from his automobile collection that he had shipped to Great Falls from Minneapolis, to create an exhibit he called “Old Town”—an exhibit that remained a popular attraction for nearly twenty years. The display was often given high praises for being a place where the Old West could be experienced first hand. Charlie’s exhibit did not only result in high praises from the public, but also from his father, as it was the first time Charles Cranston really understood and appreciated his son’s desire to collect antiques. Near the conclusion of the first year of the display in August of 1941, Charlie began another collection that was unique in comparison to the items he had previously collected. He bought his first antique pianos and music machines. This new collection would be enhanced later on with the purchase of the Molinari Organ Company in New York and an antique carousel from Europe.

In 1942, Charlie decided to enter the political arena, a move that, according to Charlie’s father, no one in the Bovey family had ever made. Charlie ran on the Democratic ticket in Cascade County for a seat in the Montana House of Representatives for the 29th Legislative Session. He was elected and represented Cascade County in the House for two terms. After serving those two terms, Charlie decided to run on the
Fig. 3. View of Sullivan’s Saddlery on Main Street in “Old Town,” Great Falls, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)

Fig. 4. Charles Bovey’s antique vehicle collection in “Old Town,” Great Falls, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Cascade County ticket again for a seat in the Montana State Senate, a position he won and served in for six terms (1947-1965).

Charles Cranston had great faith in his son’s political ambitions and offered Charlie advice on many issues following his first victory in 1942. One of the major issues Charlie’s father was concerned with was food production.\textsuperscript{19} He was always pushing Charlie to encourage Montanans to produce more crops and livestock to support the United States both in World War II and afterward. Charlie, however, involved himself with other issues that were more important, at least to him.

Charlie was most noted in the legislature for his concern regarding the elderly and the mentally handicapped and his fight to pass legislation to benefit these groups of people. He was also present when Montana was making important changes regarding other issues. For the majority of his time in the legislature, Charlie served on the Committee on Highways and Transportation. He was a Senator when the proposal to repeal the Basic Speed Rule passed, and he was present when the proposal to allow the construction of Interstate 90 through Montana was finalized.\textsuperscript{20} He served when the bill passed requiring the installation of seatbelts in all motor vehicles, and the one that required all school buses to have two amber and two red flashing lights both on the front and rear of the vehicles.\textsuperscript{21} These successes were important to Charlie, but were not among the main goals he hoped to accomplish while in the legislature.

While Charlie served on the Committee on Highways and Transportation for many years, and was genuinely concerned with the well being of the elderly and the mentally retarded, one of his main goals was to create an organization to preserve important facets of Montana’s living history. In his first term in the House, Charlie
worked to put together a bill that would “set aside such historic communities as Virginia City, Bannack, Fort Shaw and Fort Logan, in the interests of keeping early-day history intact.” Charlie firmly believed that Montanans were “proud enough of their colorful history to cooperate” in the formation of such an organization. Though this bill was never introduced, Charlie did succeed in creating an organization dedicated to preserving Montana’s history—the Historic Landmark Society of Montana.

Before the formation of the Landmark Society, Charlie had attempted to preserve historic buildings in Montana on his own. He visited the Goodrich House Hotel in Bannack and offered to re-shingle the roof of the building, providing supplies and labor, for free. The community turned down his offer, fearing that Charlie would try to acquire a lien on the building and take it from the community. He was met with similar resistance when he made the same offer on the Cheap Cash Store in Radersburg, Montana. According to one person, “No one could believe that some man was wandering around the country with an offer of free roofs. It [sounded] like an aluminum siding salesman with a new twist.”

Thus, to solve his dilemma, Charlie created the Historic Landmark Society of Montana on July 29, 1944. The organization’s official purpose was “…[t]o preserve and restore historic landmarks of Montana; to encourage widespread public participation in Montana historical study … to acquire properties … of historical interest or significance to Montana … [and to] acquire funds …to hold, operate [and] maintain …” these properties. At the first formal meeting, Charlie Bovey was elected president of the organization and served in the position until his death in 1978. The organization was designed to raise monies through donations and memberships to the
organization. Membership dues were set at three dollars per year, or one could pay fifty dollars and have a life membership. However, not long after the organization’s incorporation, Charlie discovered that it was not possible for the Society to sustain its existence through donations and memberships alone.

Charlie had worked very hard to bring the Society into existence and did not want his efforts to have been in vain. As a result, Charlie invested a great deal of his own money in the Society throughout his lifetime. One of his contributions included giving all profits earned from admission charges into “Old Town” to the Historical Landmark Society. The headquarters of the Historic Landmark Society were moved in 1946 to “Old Town” in Great Falls, where Charlie utilized the display to promote the Society and its objectives—after all, what better way to entice the public to donate to the Society’s causes than to show them living history, first-hand.

The Historic Landmark Society began its work almost immediately after its inception. The first job undertaken by the Society was the preservation and restoration of the 1877 Stickney Sawmill near Craig, Montana, followed by the preservation of the Antoine Juneau Cabin near Fort Piegan and Loma, Montana, a cabin that was built circa 1855. The Society also boarded up the Fort Shaw barracks, due to its safety hazard, to prevent its destruction, and repaired the floor and ceiling of the Kleinschmidt Store in Fort Benton. By August 1945, the Society had made preparations to repair the J. E. Dougherty Store in Radersburg, one of the oldest in that area, and had made arrangements for restoration work on the Worden-Higgins Hellgate Store near Missoula, Montana, the state’s first retail store. The organization also played a key role in the efforts to restore and preserve Virginia City, Montana.
Charlie’s work in Virginia City consumed a great deal of his and the Society’s time from the very beginning. After his first visit to Virginia City in 1944, Charlie was very disturbed with the rapid deterioration of the fascinating little town near Ennis, Montana. As a result of the war shortages due to World War II, most of the aging structures in Virginia City were being picked apart board-by-board for firewood. Charlie was appalled at the lack of appreciation the community had for these amazing pieces of history and made a decision to do everything he could to prevent further destruction in the area.\(^{31}\) Unfortunately, Charlie had used almost all of his gas ration stamps to make his first visit to Virginia City. Charlie decided to use his remaining ration stamps, which should have been saved for the fuel to power his farm equipment, to travel back to Virginia City.

Upon arriving in Virginia City for the second time on October 20, 1944, Charlie approached Virginia City’s Vigilance Club to try to convince the members of the importance of preserving their town.\(^{32}\) Though the Club could understand Charlie’s concern, the organization had no money to invest in the effort and Charlie left disheartened. It was on this visit, however, that Charlie made his first purchase in Virginia City. He stopped at a small cafe before leaving the area and began conversation with a local man who was trying to sell his property in Virginia City. Charlie jumped at the opportunity and purchased the Henry Blake House for one hundred dollars.\(^{33}\) Rumors of the sale spread quickly through the small community and soon many other Virginia City property owners were selling out to Charlie, who had discovered that the best way to preserve the buildings in the town was to buy them himself. By July 1945, shortly after the birth of Charlie’s only child, Ford Bovey, on March 7, Charlie and the
Historic Landmark Society were hard at work restoring the little Alder Gulch mining community, a task that Charlie would devote the rest of his life to trying to finish.\textsuperscript{34}
NOTES

Chapter 3

1 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, 23 October 1926, Folder 10, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

2 Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, to Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, TLS, 6 October 1940, Folder 1, Box 3, Bovey Collection.

3 John Ellingsen, Interview, 16 November 1998, 15, 16. A millwright’s apprentice was one who did “fine carpenter’s work . . . mitering . . . and complicated woodworking tasks.”

4 See Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, to Charles Cranston Bovey and Kate Koon Bovey, LS, 2 March 1929, Folder 1, Box 3, Bovey Collection; Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TLS, 4 March 1929, Folder 13, Box 1, Bovey Collection.


6 See Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, to Charles Cranston Bovey and Kate Koon Bovey, LS, 2 March 1929, Folder 1, Box 3, Bovey Collection; Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, 4 March 1929, Folder 13, Box 1, Bovey Collection.

7 John Ellingsen, interview, 16 November 1998, 17.

8 Ibid., 18.


10 Ibid., 28.

11 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 9.

15 Ibid., 10.


18 Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TL, 14 July 1942, Folder 1, Box 2, Bovey Collection.

19 See Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TL, 10 November 1942, Folder 2, Box 2, Bovey Collection; Charles Cranston Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TL, 29 September 1943, Folder 3, Box 2, Bovey Collection; and Charles Argalis Bovey, Minneapolis, to Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, TL, 21 February 1946, Folder 8, Box 2, Bovey Collection.

20 Legislative Diary of Charles A. Bovey, written during 37th, 38th, and 39th Montana Legislative Sessions Helena, Montana, [1961, 1963, 1965], Folders 10-13, Box 4, Bovey Collection.

21 Ibid.

22 “Historic Landmarks Would Be Saved By Charles Bovey,” The Helena Independent, 8 January 1943, p. 3.

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid.

26 Department of the Secretary of State of the State of Montana, Historic Landmark Society of Montana Resolution (Helena, MT, 29 July 1944), art. 2.

27 Ibid., art. III.


30 Charles Argalis Bovey, Great Falls, to members of the Historic Landmark Society, TLS, 1 August 1945, Folder 6, Box 1, Bovey Collection.


32 Ibid., 26.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 28.
Alder Gulch was discovered in 1863 by six gold prospectors: Thomas Cover, Henry Edgar, Bill Fairweather, Barney Hughes, Harry Rodgers, and Michael Sweeney.¹ The men discovered gold in the gulch on their way back to Bannack from a prospecting expedition in the Yellowstone Valley. The news of the discovery spread quickly, and soon the gulch was filled with gold-seekers, developers, and merchants. The town of Virginia City was incorporated later that year by a mining court. By spring of 1864, numerous other little towns sprang up in the gulch, as the population of Alder Gulch surged to nearly ten thousand.² The new territory of Montana was created in 1864, and after the First Legislative Assembly met in Bannack at the end of the year, Virginia City was named the territorial capital. Until the capital was moved to Helena in 1874, the territorial government conducted all of its business from Virginia City.

The population of Virginia City dwindled to less the seven hundred by the end of the 1870s, due to the discoveries of gold in Last Chance Gulch in Helena and Confederate Gulch, just east of Helena.³ Though most of the prospectors had left, gold dredging operations continued in the area until 1937. In all, more than fifty-three million dollars in gold was removed from Alder Gulch mines.⁴ The 1940s were the bleakest for Virginia City, when the population decreased to less than four hundred people and only a few merchants and the occasional tourist sustained the town. Virginia City was in this
Fig. 5. Virginia City, MT, after 1875. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 6. Nevada City, MT, in Alder Gulch, 4 July 1865. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
stage when Charlie Bovey rediscovered the little community and began his crusade to save it.

The Historic Landmark Society started restoration in Virginia City in 1945 by adding new roofs and windows to several buildings in the town, including the Wells Fargo Building, the Vigilante Barn, and the E. L. Smith Store. The first major restoration project the Historic Landmark Society undertook, however, was the restoration of the Montana Post Building, which had housed Montana’s first newspaper. The structure had been gutted by fire, but the Historic Landmark Society was able to reconstruct the interior using vintage materials found in the Virginia City area. After the restoration on the Post was completed, Charlie moved his personal collection of antique printing press equipment into the building to provide the Post with a flare of authenticity.

It was at this newly restored location that Charlie began the publication of his own newspaper, *The Montana Post*, which was used to update the public on the activities of the Historic Landmark Society. The location would eventually be used to print copies of original *Post* issues from the 1860s for use as souvenirs, as well as to print posters to advertise tourist events, such as the Virginia City Players and the Brewery Follies, once Virginia City evolved into a tourist attraction.

As restoration efforts began in Virginia City, Charlie was buying more and more property in the little town. The year passed quickly, and by 1946, Charlie had acquired many buildings in the area, including the Cabbage Patch Dress Shop, the Frank Prasch Blacksmith Shop, the Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop, the Anaconda Hotel, the old Bale of Hay Saloon, and the Virginia Brewery. The Buford Block, which included the Wells Fargo Building, was purchased as well and was considered by some in the area to be one of the most valuable properties in Virginia City. As restoration efforts continued in
Fig. 7. Montana Post Building in the late 1800s, Virginia, City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 8. Montana Post Building, ca. 1920, before it was gutted by fire, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 9. Montana Post Building, ca. 1948, after restoration work was completed, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 10. Buford Block in the late 1800s, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Virginia City, Charlie became more and more interested in enticing people to come see
the place. He incorporated the Virginia City Trading Company, which became a business
that sold lumber, general merchandise, and antiques, in 1946. Soon he found himself
making plans to open a hotel, though it was not something he was very enthusiastic
about. To Charlie, the modernization had the potential to take away from the authenticity
of the town.

The Fairweather Inn, which opened for business in December 1946, sported a new
look, inside and out. The building had been reconstructed and remodeled on the outside
to resemble the Goodrich House in Bannack, Montana, while inside, the Inn was
furnished with golden oak furniture painted in pastel yellows and blues, colors that were
very popular in the late 1940s and 1950s. A coal furnace had been installed to warm the
building to try to entice winter travelers to visit Virginia City. Though it was a novel
idea, many travelers were unwilling to attempt the drive through Montana’s treacherous
mountain passes to visit the deteriorating, remote town. Those who did come to visit
rarely stayed long, though they enjoyed the town, because there was no place to eat in the
area. As a consequence, Charlie conceded once again to modernizing the town and added
a restaurant. The Wells Fargo Building reopened in June 1947 under the name, Wells
Fargo Coffee House.

By 1948, a great deal of Virginia City was in the process of being restored. In
order to better accommodate the influx of tourists, Charlie had restored the Bale of Hay
Saloon and Gilbert Brewery enough so that they could serve cold beverages, both
alcoholic and non-alcoholic. He also restored a variety of shops—including the Cabbage
Patch Dress Shop, Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop, a barbershop, and a jewelry store—that
the public could walk through. He filled these vintage stores with antiques and
Fig. 11. Anaconda Hotel (fourth building from left) before it was remodeled into the Fairweather Inn, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 12. Fairweather Inn, ca. 1961, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Fig. 13. Sauerbier Blacksmith Shop, ca. 1944, Virginia City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
mannequins representing the late nineteenth century so that the walk-through would be as authentic an experience as possible. Charlie also built several guest cabins near the Gilbert Brewery that, though modern on the inside, appeared to be from the Old West on the outside. Weather-beaten lumber had been used to create false store fronts on the cabins so that when visitors looked at the little cluster of cabins from a distance, it appeared to be a small-town main street.

Virginia City became a very popular attraction by the end of the 1940s, especially after Charlie added entertainment to the list of things to experience in Virginia City. In the late 1940s and early 1950s square dancing was a popular pastime, and in order to accommodate these dancers, Charlie installed a wooden floor in the old stone barn next to the Bale of Hay Saloon. A stage was eventually added to this dance hall, and theater seats lined the floor as the Virginia City Players, a slapstick comedy theatrical group hired by Charlie, rose in popularity with the public as well. In 1951, Charlie purchased an antique Cremona Photoplayer that had been discovered behind a hidden wall in a Deerlodge, Montana, drugstore. The 19th century, multi-instrumental, music maker allowed the public to hear authentic music of the Old West while enjoying the performances of the Virginia City Players. As of August 2000, this Cremona Photoplayer was still being used to accompany the Virginia City Players and was one of only two full-functioning instruments of its kind in the world.

Music was not the only form of entertainment in the area. Tourists could also take guided stagecoach tours of Virginia City, including a ride up to see the graves of five infamous road agents who were hanged by the Vigilantes in the 1860s. Visitors were also invited to visit the Thompson-Hickman Memorial Museum to see “Clubfoot” George Lane’s foot, a petrified Chinese birthday cake, as well as numerous other oddities.
While Virginia City was being frequented by many tourists, Charlie was also beginning another large project in the area. Since his “Old Town” exhibit in Great Falls was no longer popular, Charlie had been asked to remove the display from the Livestock Pavillion to make room for other exhibits. Charlie, not wanting to dispose of the exhibit, decided that the perfect place to move the display would be to Nevada City, Montana, a little ghost town less than two miles from Virginia City. Until the display was moved to the area in the early 1960s, Nevada City had faded to almost non-existence. From an old photograph, however, Charlie began reconstructing the old mining camp using pieces from the “Old Town” display. As Charlie worked to recreate Nevada City, he once again found himself scouring the area in search of buildings that would help make the town complete. One of the most popular exhibits Charlie was able to acquire for Nevada City was a two-story outhouse. He used this piece, along with a functioning eatery called the Star Bakery, to entice people to visit Nevada City along with Virginia City. Soon, enough buildings had been collected to complete Nevada City’s main street, but it would not be until the 1970s that Charlie would finish reconstruction of the rest of the town.

Though he was becoming more well-known for transforming Virginia and Nevada Cities into tourist attractions, Charlie’s preservation work in the area was not going unnoticed. The public showed great affection for Charlie, and he constantly received letters of praise and appreciation for the work he was doing in the little Montana towns. In 1952, Charlie and his wife Sue were even presented with honorary degrees from the University of Montana for their outstanding contributions to the preservation of the state’s history. In November 1961, Virginia City was finally designated a registered historic landmark by the United States Secretary of the Interior.
Fig. 14. Ghost town of Nevada City, MT. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
Left to Right: L. A. Garrison, Charles Bovey, Tim Babcock

Fig. 15. Virginia City is registered as a historical landmark. (Courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Helena)
The 1960s passed quickly for Charlie, as his calendar was always filled with projects he had started, others he had almost finished, and still more that he had not yet begun. A little railroad had been added that ran between Virginia City and Nevada City, making travel between the two cities easier and more convenient for tourists. He had sold two of his ranches, keeping only Sunnyside Ranch in Great Falls and reinvested the money into Virginia and Nevada Cities. Though the little cities yielded no profit, and were maintained for all but one year at a loss, Charlie was determined to keep working to preserve them. The Virginia City Trading Company, which had been incorporated in 1953, had evolved into Bovey Restorations, and Charlie now used the business to manage his properties in Virginia and Nevada Cities.

In 1970, Charlie was asked for the first time if Virginia City could be used as a movie set. Charlie was thrilled with the idea, and readily gave his permission for scenes from the movie Little Big Man, which starred Dustin Hoffman, to be filmed in Virginia City.13 Though this request was the first, it would not be the last. Permission to use Virginia City and Nevada City in films and television specials was still being requested, even internationally, in 2000. Scenes from films such as Missouri Breaks and Return to Lonesome Dove were filmed in Virginia City and Nevada City, as were scenes for a European television special which featured Nevada City’s Sedman House.

Not long after the filming of Little Big Man, Charlie hired John Ellingsen, a Great Falls native, to help him with the restoration of Nevada City. Charlie wanted to include a memorial to the Chinese when he rebuilt the town because he felt they made significant contributions in Virginia City and Nevada City, as well as to the West in general.14 His memorial included a Chinese Store and a Chinese Laundry—both of which had been found and moved from Harrison, Montana—as well as a Chinese Temple and a Chinese
Grocery Store, which had been moved from “Barton Gulch . . . in the upper Ruby.”15

After completing the memorial, Charlie and John then went to work on the rest of the town. They moved several cabins from Twin Bridges to Nevada City. Later, with the help of one of Charlie’s friends, Joe Kerfliet, they began constructing solid foundations for additional buildings moved to Nevada City to help recreate the town.

The last few years before Charlie’s death were very hard on him. He had been forced by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to start charging admissions to Nevada City, as well as fees to ride the railroad. He had to raise the prices in his restaurants and his hotels since the IRS would not recognize Bovey Restorations as a legitimate business if Charlie did not comply with certain federal tax laws. In order to charge admission into Nevada City, Charlie had to construct a fence around the town, something he hated to have to do. In his opinion, fencing around a town was about the most unnatural thing he could do.16 It took away from the atmosphere he wanted the area to possess, and consequently took away from the enjoyment Charlie felt in managing the place. In 1972, Charlie hired J Midyett to take over the management of Bovey Restorations. This gave Charlie more time to enjoy what he loved most—being with the people and his town—rather than having to worry about the business aspects of the operation.
NOTES

Chapter 4


4 Ibid., 53, 54.


6 Charles Argalis Bovey, Colorado Springs, to Charles Cranston Bovey and Kate Koon Bovey, Minneapolis, LS, 25 May 1946, Folder 1, Box 3, Bovey Collection.

7 Ibid., 41.

8 Elizabeth W. Kelsey, "Gold Mining Camp Restoration," *North Star Folk News* 7 (October 1951): 4-6.

9 Ibid., 49.

10 Inventory File folder on Cremona Photoplayer, in possession of Pat Roath, curator, Virginia City, MT.
The Vigilantes were a group of men in the Virginia City area in the early 1860s who took it upon themselves to serve as the law enforcement in the area. As legend has it, these men used the code 3-7-77 to drive troublemakers out of town. Though the actual meaning behind the code is not known, one theory is that a troublemaker’s grave would be three feet wide, seven feet long, and seventy-seven inches deep. In the case of the road agents, they were a group of men led by Henry Plummer, the corrupt sheriff of nearby Bannack, Montana, at the time. The men buried on Boot Hill are members of this infamous gang of road agents who were caught and hung by the Vigilantes. The graves include those of Boon Helm, Jack Gallagher, Frank Parrish, Hays Lyons, and “Clubfoot” George Lane, whose clubfoot was exhumed and can be found today in the Thompson-Hickman Memorial Museum in Virginia City.


Ibid., 3.

Ibid., 4.

On June 9, 1978, Charles A. Bovey died of a heart attack in his home in Nevada City. He was buried in Highland Cemetery in Great Falls on June 13 following a funeral service arranged by J Midyett and Charlie’s sister Ruth (Bovey) Stevens. Midyette continued to manage the business operations in Virginia and Nevada Cities until 1979 when Nancy Mittman was hired to take over the business. Nancy left in 1985, after which time the management passed through many different hands. Sue Bovey remained in Virginia City, helping out where she could, until her death in 1988. With Sue’s death, Ford Bovey—Sue and Charlie’s son—inherited the properties and hired Kirk Hansen as the new manager. Unfortunately for Ford, the management of his parents’ business proved to be a much more difficult task than he had anticipated. After several failed attempts to interest the federal government in taking over management of Virginia City and Nevada City, Bovey put the properties up for sale.

The state of Montana was given the first option to buy, largely due to the efforts of the Montana Historical Society Foundation. The Foundation’s ability to secure this purchase option bought the state of Montana time to try to get an appropriation from the legislature to purchase the properties. On behalf of the State, the Montana Historical Society and the Virginia City Preservation Alliance—a local organization dedicated to making sure the Bovey properties were maintained—began to work diligently for the
appropriation. While the legislature debated and delayed appropriating funds, Virginia City appeared on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s list of America’s Most Endangered Historic Places three years in a row—1992, 1993, and 1994. The legislature finally appropriated the funds to purchase the Bovey properties in 1997. The state soon set up an organization through the Montana Historical Society to care for and maintain the newly acquired properties in Virginia City and Nevada City. This organization was called the Montana Heritage Preservation Commission. Since the death of Ford Bovey in 1999, the Commission, along with John Ellingsen and Pat Roath who have been curators for the area, has worked hard to inventory, restore, and preserve the history that had been rediscovered by Charlie Bovey back in 1945. The Virginia City Preservation Alliance has also assumed an important role in the preservation of Virginia City. After securing the preservation of the Bovey properties, the community-oriented group broadened its purpose to include increasing public knowledge of the town’s history and raising money to fund preservation projects within the area. Some of their successes have included the purchase and restoration of the Hangman’s Building, the sponsorship of a variety of special fundraising events, such as an annual Victorian Ball and a summer lecture series, and the organization of a small membership program.

In 2001, the Montana Historical Society Foundation, which changed its name to the Montana History Foundation, launched a $4.5 million dollar campaign titled History Runs Through It. The campaign was launched to “underwrite the cost of [a number of projects related to Montana history] and to create an endowment to help fund public programming and collections acquisition”—seven of the fourteen projects included in the campaign focused on needs in Virginia City and Nevada City. Some of the projects the
Standing, Left to Right: Ward Shanahan, Mona Jamison, unidentified
Seated, Left to Right: Bill Van Canagan (Bovey Attorney), Ford Bovey

Fig. 16. Bovey properties are sold to the State of Montana, 16 May 1997. (Courtesy Montana Historical Society, Helena)
campaign hoped to fund included the development of an interpretive center in Nevada City called the Charles and Sue Bovey History Center, the restoration of a number of vintage music machines in Nevada City, the creation of a territorial legislative history exhibit, which would incorporate many of the original territorial government buildings located in Virginia City, and a traveling exhibit and program that would allow Montana schoolchildren and adults who could not visit these sites in person to be able to experience this part of early Montana history.

Also in 2001, the Montana History Foundation launched the Historic Virginia City and Nevada City Membership program, which was designed to help raise monies for history education programs and ongoing preservation and restoration efforts in the area, as well as to help boost tourism to the little mining towns. As of 2002, the Virginia City and Nevada City collections, amassed over a period of nearly fifty years by Charlie and Sue Bovey, contained “the largest collection of Western Americana outside the Smithsonian Institution, with 248 historic structures and more than 400,000 objects.”

Charlie Bovey was truly a pioneer in the preservation of Montana’s living history. Though he died in 1978, his dream did not. Charlie’s dream of being able to preserve a piece of the Old West for the enjoyment of the people of the state he so loved continues today through the many different individuals and organizations he inspired. When reflecting upon Charlie, his accomplishments, and the legacy he left behind, one ought to take a moment to consider these words spoken at his eulogy:

When one thinks of Charles Bovey, one tends to speak of his accomplishments—Rancher, Senator, Historic Landmark Society, Virginia City, Nevada City, Preservationist—Perhaps though, one has to keep these incredible accomplishments in perspective and remember that the accomplishments did not create the man, but rather the man’s abilities, love, and nature created the accomplishments . . .
Thanks to Charlie and his devotion to preserving Montana’s history, Virginia City, Nevada City, and many of the state’s nearly forgotten historic structures will be enjoyed for generations to come.
NOTES

Chapter 5


4 Russell, History Runs Through It, 3.

5 Ibid., 1.

6 Eulogy of Charles A. Bovey, Great Falls, Montana, [13 June 1978], Folder 4, Box 14, Bovey Collection.
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Bovey, Martin, Jr. “Virginia City, Montana.” TMs (photocopy). Folder 13, Box 3, Manuscript Collection No. 298, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, Montana.


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“Russell Painting Brings $105,000 at Bovey Auction.” Great Falls Tribune, 1 August 2000, p. 1.


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