

STATE GUIDE

MONTANA

by PAULA STUART-WARREN

FROM WESTERN MONTANA'S lofty Rocky Mountains to the great grasslands of the east, the state known as Big Sky Country lives up equally well to its other nickname, the Treasure State. Among its geographic wonders are Glacier National Park and the White Cliffs of the Missouri River—the “scenes of visionary enchantment” that inspired Corps of Discovery explorer Meriwether Lewis to wax prosaic in his journal. “So perfect indeed are those walls,” he wrote, “I should have thought that nature had attempted here to rival the human art of masonry.”

Upon the Corps’ return to civilization in 1806, glowing news reports lured itchy-footed settlers to the frontier; later, gold discoveries and government land giveaways enticed more. Montana Territory—carved from Idaho Territory in 1864—contained 20,595 residents as of 1870 (that year’s census didn’t count most of the state’s American Indians, though). By the time Montana became the 41st US state in 1889, roughly 140,000 people lived there.

EARLY ARRIVALS

In 1807, Manuel Lisa established a fur-trading post on the Bighorn River. Rival firms sprang up, including the North West Co., Rocky Mountain Fur Co. and American Fur Co., but business faltered by the 1840s as animals grew scarce. Mid-19th century ore strikes made gold, copper and silver mines flourish, and mining camps such as Bannack, Diamond City and Virginia City spread across

the territory. Richard Grant kicked off the ranching industry when he brought the first cattle herd from Oregon in the 1850s; ranches proliferated after the Homestead Act of 1862 opened land. Wheat farming was popular until a drought and post-WWI drop in market prices forced many farmers to abandon the state.

Most early settlers arrived by covered wagon or, particularly between 1860 and 1880, by steamboat up the Missouri River from St. Louis. Later migrants used railroads, the first of which—the Utah and Northern—rolled into Montana in 1881. The legendary Northern Pacific Railroad came on the scene two years later. If your ancestors were early arrivals, check the Montana Pioneer Society’s 1899 index at rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mtgenweb/pioneer-t.html.

The influx of settlers led to conflicts with American Indians. About 20 tribes, including the Assiniboine, Crow, Kutenai and Shoshone hunted or lived in Montana; see www.accessgenealogy.com/native/montana for a list. The Lakota and Cheyenne victory over the US Army at the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn—“Custer’s Last Stand”—was short-lived. In 1877, the Nez Perce succumbed to reservation life after the Army hotly pursued Chief Joseph and his people almost to Canada.

More than 6 percent of modern Montanans are American Indians. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1889
- ★ **First federal census:** 1860
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1907
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1943
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 11 in 1870; 24 in 1900; 56 today
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Department of Public Health and Human Services, Office of Vital Records, Box 4210, Helena, MT 59604, (888) 877-1946, dphhs.mt.gov/vitalrecords

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<archives.gov> holds Bureau of Indian Affairs records, as does the Montana Historical Society (MHS) <mhs.mt.gov>, which serves as the state archives. See the October/November 2016 issue of *Family Tree Magazine* for more tips on tracing American Indian ancestors.

RECORDS RUNDOWN

True to their state's nickname, Montana researchers have a wealth of sources to mine. You'll rely primarily on the following records:

★ **VITAL:** State-level birth and death registration began in 1907, but full compliance didn't happen until the 1920s or later. Contact the state vital records office (see the Fast Facts box) for death and birth certificates. You might find some pre-1907 death records at that office and at county



The state that so enchanted Lewis and his companions will get under your skin, too.

clerks' offices. Find overlapping indexes to births and deaths from 1840 to 2007 at FamilySearch.org <www.familysearch.org>, Ancestry.com <ancestry.com>, and the Montana State Genealogical Society website (see Toolkit). Don't forget to check in county-level datasets as well as statewide ones.

Some early counties have marriage records dating to the mid-1860s. A statewide index to marriages and

timeline

1807

Manuel Lisa opens Montana's first trading post on the Bighorn River

1841

Jesuit Pierre-Jean De Smet establishes St. Mary's Mission, the first white settlement in modern Montana

1846

The American Fur Co. builds Fort Benton, now Montana's oldest continuously populated town

1862

A gold discovery in Grasshopper Creek sets off a mining boom

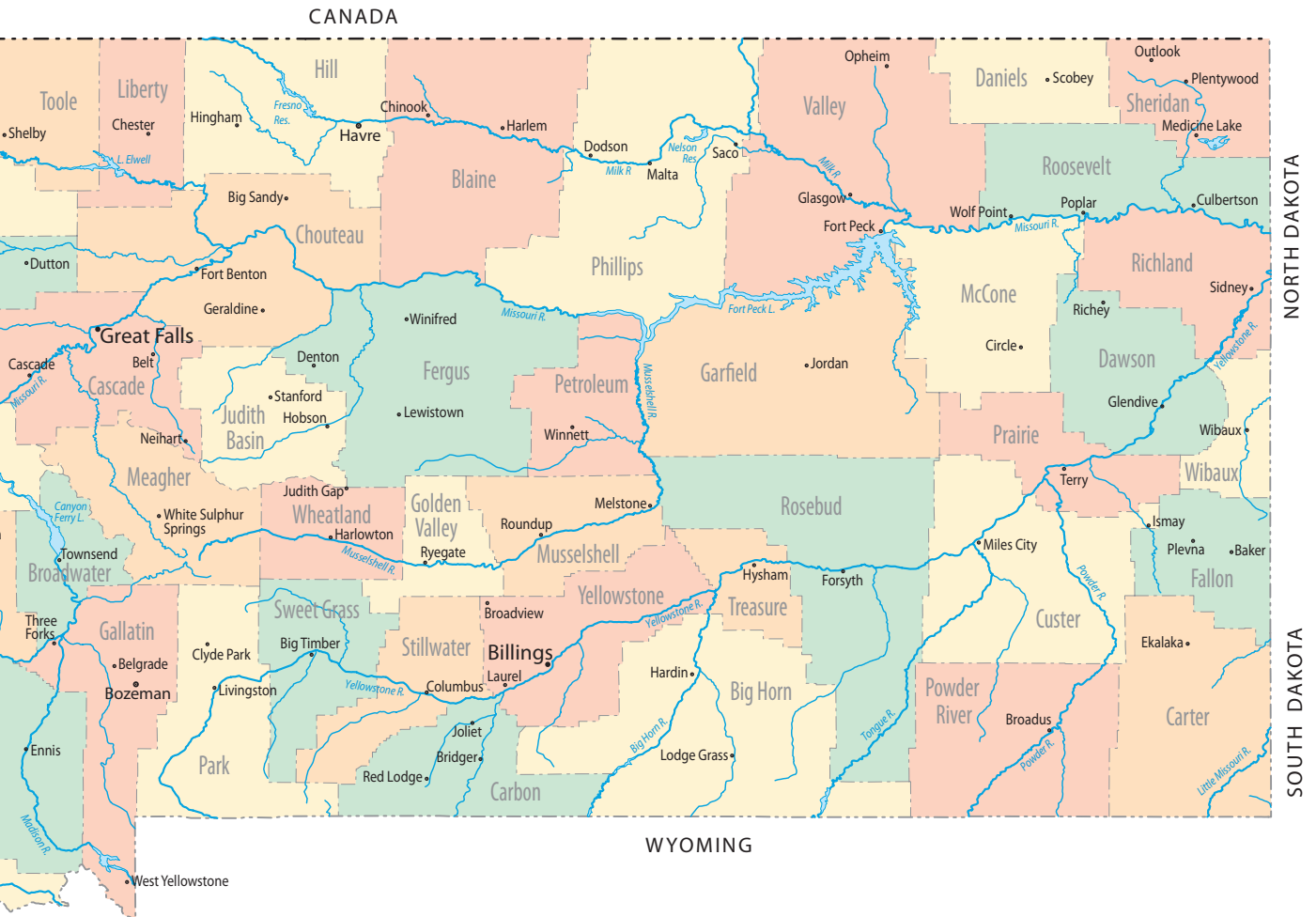
1876

Lt. Col. George Custer perishes at the Battle of the Little Bighorn

1881

The Utah and Northern line comes to Butte, turning the town into the "Pittsburgh of the West"

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divorces begins in 1943, but request the records from your ancestor's county. Many records on microfilm at the Family History Library (FHL) are now also searchable at its website. The Western States Marriage Record Index <abish.byui.edu/specialCollections/westernStates> lists more than 20,000 Montana marriages and related microfilmed records.

★ **FEDERAL CENSUS:** The 1860 Nebraska Territory census counted some residents in southern Montana; the 1870 and 1880 US censuses enumerated Montana

Territory separately. Treasure Staters' first post-statehood census— 1890—was lost to fire. The only remaining portion is a schedule of Union veterans and widows. Montana hasn't taken any state censuses.

★ **LAND:** Montana is a public-land state—the federal government originally owned the land, and sold parcels to individuals via the General Land Office. Search a free index to these land patents at <www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov>. Then order your ancestor's land entry case file, which may contain more records, from NARA (see

1914

Montana women win the right to vote in presidential elections

1916

Jeannette Rankin of Missoula is the first woman elected to Congress

1996

The FBI captures Unabomber Ted Kaczynski in a cabin near Lincoln

2002

The PBS reality show "Frontier House" re-creates Montana pioneer life for three modern families

2009

The Glacier Wind Farm becomes Montana's largest wind farm

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Montana <cyndislist.com/us/mt>

Montana Genealogy Forum <genealogy.com/forum/regional/states/topics/mt>

Montana GenWeb Project <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mtgenweb>

Montana Memory Project <mtmemory.org>

Western States Marriage Record Index
<abish.byui.edu/specialCollections>

Publications

Bibliography of Montana Local Histories by Coburn Johnson (Montana Library Association)

Montana: The Magazine of Western History (Montana Historical Society)

Montana's Genealogical and Local History Records by Dennis Lee Richards (Gale Research Co.)

Names on the Face of Montana: The Story of Montana's Place Names by Roberta Carkeek Cheney (Mountain Press Publishing)

Archives & Organizations

Bureau of Land Management, Billings Field Office
5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59101, (406) 896-5013,
<www.blm.gov/office/billings-field-office>

Montana Historical Society 225 N. Roberts St., Helena, MT 59620, (406) 444-2694, <mhs.mt.gov/research>

Montana State Genealogical Society Box 5313, Helena, MT 59604, <montanamsgs.org>

Montana State University Library Box 173320, Bozeman, MT 59717, (406) 994-3171, <lib.montana.edu>

National Archives at Denver 17101 Huron Street, Broomfield, CO 80023, (303) 604-4740
<archives.gov/denver>

Billings Public Library 510 N. Broadway, Billings, MT 59101, (406) 657-8258,
<ci.billings.mt.us/index.aspx?NID=258>

University of Montana—Archives & Special Collections 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812, (406) 243-2053, <www.lib.umt.edu/asc>

<archives.gov/research/order>). Records of subsequent land sales usually reside in county courthouses.

★ **MILITARY:** MHS has rolls of male citizens subject to WWI military duty as well as enlistment cards for Montana National Guard members serving from the Spanish-American War through World War II. It also has records for some posts of the Grand Army of the Republic—a Union Civil War veterans organization formed in 1866.

Check <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mtgenweb/military.html> for information and links to databases of Montana Spanish-American War Battalions, 1940 National Guard rosters and other military service-related documents. For help locating records of those who entered the military directly, go to NARA's website and click on Veterans' Service Records.

★ **NATURALIZATION:** Your immigrant ancestors could have applied for naturalization at any court level—a good place to start looking is their county courthouse. The FHL and MHS have some county naturalization files on microfilm. Applications made through federal courts are at the FHL and NARA's Denver office <archives.gov/denver>.

★ **NEWSPAPER:** MHS' extensive historical newspaper collection includes 101 papers published in the state <montananewspapers.org>. Dozens of Montana papers have searchable, digitized issues at the free Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

★ **PROBATE:** Find probate records in county courthouses or on FHL microfilm as far back as the 1860s. (For example, the FHL's microfilm of Jefferson County probates dates to 1869.) Find these and records for other counties by doing a keyword search in the FHL catalog for *Montana probate*.

RESOURCE CENTRAL

Browse more of MHS' genealogy resources—obituary indexes, city directories and a smorgasboard of institutional records—at its website: Click on Research Collections. You can keyword-search the MHS magazine *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (1951–2012) for an ancestor's name or historical topic at <svcalt.mt.gov/his/magazine/ReferenceIndex.asp>.

The Montana GenWeb Project <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mtgenweb> links to an assortment of databases. These include name indexes to histories, such as Tom Stout's 1921 tome *Montana, Its Story and Biography*. Ancestry.com hosts indexes to myriad Montana sources, including cemeteries and newspapers. To see what's available, go to <ancestry.com/search> and click Montana on the US map.

The state that so enchanted Lewis and his companions will get under your skin, too, should you follow our advice for unlocking its genealogical treasures. ●