THE GRAND UNION HOTEL, FORT BENTON, MONTANA

A SYMBOL OF AN AGE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
VITA		ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		iii
LIST OF PLATES		vii
ABSTRACT		viii
INTRODUCTION		ix
Chapter		
I.	THE CLIMATE THAT PRODUCED THE GRAND UNION	1
II.	THE GRAND UNION REFLECTS FORT BENTON'S PROSPERITY	14
III.	EXPLORING THE GRAND UNION HOTEL	43

Plate I. First Floor Plan
Plate II. Second Floor Plan
Plate III. Third Floor Plan
Plate IV. Front Elevation
Plate V. Front Street Elevation
Plate VI. River Side Elevation
Plate VII. Rear Elevation
Plate VIII. Brickwork Details
Plate IX. First Floor Exterior Doors and Windows
Plate X. First Floor Interior Woodwork
Plate XI. Second Floor Woodwork and windows
Plate XII. Third Floor Woodwork, Windows, and Rear Windows
Plates XIII and IV. Staircase Details
Plate XV. Desk
Plate XVI. Hardware
Furniture

IV.	THE STEAMBOAT ERA	95
V.	CATTLEMEN AND HOMESTEADERS TAKE OVER	115

Chapter Page
VI. THE RESTORATION OF THE GRAND UNION 139

EPILOGUE 146

BIBLIOGRAPHY 148

LIST OF PLATES

Plate		Page
1.	First Floor Plan	45
2.	Second Floor Plan	54
3.	Third Floor Plan	61
4.	Front Elevation	63
5.	Front Street Elevation	66
6.	River Side Elevation	68
7.	Rear Elevation	70
8.	Brickwork Details	72
9.	First Floor Exterior Doors and Windows	75
10.	First Floor Interior Woodwork	79
11.	Second Floor Woodwork and Windows	82
12.	Third Floor Woodwork, Windows and Rear Windows	84
13.	Staircase Details	85
14.	Staircase Details	86
15.	Desk	89
16.	Hardware	92

ABSTRACT

The Grand Union Hotel, located on Front Street, Fort Benton, Montana, has been called the "most historic edifice in the State." William H. Todd furnished the incentive to build the hotel. The present owner is Harold Thomas and the structure is still used as a hotel. Walls are of solid brick and bearing. The building is three stories high. The style is "Grand Union Victorian" or "eclectic." Thomas Tweedy was the architect and he, Frank Coombs, W. G. Jones, and others built the hotel. Construction was started August 15, 1881 and completed November 2, 1882.

Built at the height of the steamboat era on the upper Missouri, the Grand Union welcomed weary travelers to spend a few nights in its luxury at the very head of navigation before they set out to less "civilized places" like Virginia City, Helena, Missoula, Idaho and points west on the Mullan Road or a thousand other booming towns that are now only ghosts. To the docks near where the Grand Union stands, steamers brought everything from stamp mills and boilers to square grand pianos and crystal wine glasses, which were then transferred to ox team freight wagons. The Fort Benton that was this Great Transportation Center is reflected in this very substantial building. Its design shows the pride and hope for a prosperous Montana and the developing frontier.

The architectural character of the building is unique. The bricks, made in Fort Benton, are carefully fitted into excellent bold decorations. Each room was once heated by its own wood stove and had its own fancy chimney. All windows have segmental arched tops. The ground floor windows predate the arrival of the railroad and plate glass commercial facades, so are of wavey sheet glass in wooden frames.

The interior is especially historical. The lobby is dominated by a wide, black walnut staircase. The lobby desk is very ornate. All the interior mouldings were made by hand, using wooden planes. A saloon, saddle room where cowboys stored their saddles for the winter, dining room, kitchen, and a secret lookout room where guards watched gold shipments occupy the first floor. A ladies' stair leads to elegant parlors above, for ladies never entered rooms adjoining saloons at that time. The bedrooms are still furnished with black walnut, marble topped sets which were shipped by way of the river. The fine furnishings added $150,000 to the $50,000 cost of the building alone. The hotel, called the "best in the West," was the social center of a captive society before the age of railroads, and continues to serve its original function in an excellent way today.

INTRODUCTION

Speeding northward from Great Falls on the smooth blacktop of Highway 91, tourists in passenger cars and truckers in giant semi's completely bypass Fort Benton today. From the quick glimpse of the grain elevators, machinery houses, and gas stations that one gets from the highway, Fort Benton appears to be a typical agricultural community with the addition of trees. From the road one would never guess that Fort Benton once planned a future parallel to that of St. Louis or Minneapolis.

If, however, the casual tourist chances to descend into the town, he will find several things unusual. Most obvious, in the center of quiet, rural Fort Benton is a large hotel. Above the chain stores, filling stations, and the red boxes of wheat trucks, its three stories of ultra-Victorian brickwork are visible for several blocks. Its large, old fashioned sign reads simply "GRAND UNION." Obviously, the building is out of place in a small rural village of 1,887 people. Not only is it large, but its architecture is of a style that would be outstanding even in the architecturally-spectacular city of Helena. Why is it here?

Upon further exploration, the tourist will find that Fort Benton is no ordinary agricultural community. The name of the street upon which the hotel is located, Front Street, is one clue. Others are the towered houses, wide parkings, old fashioned store facades, the fancy court-house, and everywhere, giant cottonwood trees. Fort Benton is "old." Even the most casual history student knows that it predates Great Falls, Butte, Helena, Virginia City, even Bannack.

The freight trucks roar past Fort Benton now on the paved bypass, but at one time their counterparts, fourteen yoke of oxen pulling up to three huge wagons hitched in tandem, began their runs in Fort Benton. The commerce of a vast region once passed over Fort Benton docks. Fort Benton promoters did not have to stretch their imaginations far to see their town as one of the greatest cities in the country. It was this Fort Benton that built the Grand Union Hotel as its symbol of the prosperous future that lay in store for the city at the Head of Navigation on the mighty Missouri.

I became interested in the Grand Union Hotel and wondered why it existed long before I started research for this paper. One of my earliest memories is of going to Big Sandy on the Great Northern bus on Decoration Day, 1951. During the rest stop in Fort Benton, my Mother took

me inside the Grand Union to see the stairway, up which a cowboy rode his horse, and the square grand piano "that came up the river on the first steamboat." Already fancy furniture and woodwork fascinated me, even at age four.

The Grand Union has been called "the most historic edifice in Montana." This claim would be as hard to prove as another boast the hotel once made, "the best hotel in the West." While the former statement has a good deal of backing, its proof has not been the goal of this study. I have tried to record in this paper the social importance of the hotel at a time when steamboats brought passengers to a new and open land, and at a time when the snow and ice of winter locked the doors on those who lived in the West. I have tried to look at Fort Benton, the booming river city, and to discover why the magnificent building was built. Investigation revealed the construction and methods used in building the hotel to be interestingly different from those of today. Even Helena buildings, only a few years younger than the Grand Union, were built in a different manner because of the presence of the railroad. A few incidents from the considerable folklore concerning the hotel are related. Finally, the reader may watch as the Fort Benton reflected in the Grand Union fades into the quiet little town of today.

Another purpose is to help save the Grand Union, should the need ever arise. If Fort Benton is ever confronted with the forces of "progress" that are destroying certain other historic landmarks in Montana, I hope that this collection of data will convince those in charge that the Grand Union is worthy of preservation despite the monetary cost. One man, present owner Harold Thomas, has saved the building and returned it to a very useful role in the community. I sincerely hope future generations will do as well.

Much history can be learned from physical objects such as buildings. These are the things from which history is made. They had more bearing on the immediate lives of the people than many of the actions of Congress, especially before the days of radio, television, or world war. The Grand Union Hotel is an exceptional example.

CHAPTER I

THE CLIMATE THAT PRODUCED THE GRAND UNION

The shrill scream of a steamboat whistle echoed off the fantastic white sandstone formations that lined the steep canyon-like walls of the Missouri River. The jar of its vibrations sent a few white pebbles tumbling into the slowly drifting waters. A couple of deer, frightened by the sudden shriek, crashed through the underbrush revealing their hiding place. From the deck of the Rosebud, passengers and crew looked in wonder at the weird terrain through which they were passing. Here were Gothic cathedrals, grotesque faces and groups of figures, walls a hundred feet in height so uniform in thickness and with courses so perfect they looked as if they had been the enclosure of some ancient human castle, now left to ruin. The passengers of the Rosebud were not the first to be amazed by the talents of nature in the art of masonry. Many of the residents of Montana Territory and the northern Rockies had passed these cliffs aboard steamboats borne on the placid waters of the Missouri. In fact, the Rosebud was at that moment passing the mouth of Eagle Creek where Lewis and Clark camped the

night of May 31, 1805.[1]

"Imagine that!" some traveler may have thought. "That was almost eighty years ago. At that time they were the first white men to see these formations. How much things have changed since then. Montana has now been a territory for nearly twenty years. Hundreds of towns are thriving. Quartz mining is booming. Helena is the capital, but Fort Benton is the center of commerce and trade. Tomorrow we will reach Fort Benton!"

Excitement must have filled everyone aboard as the goal of Fort Benton at last grew near. Some had been there and could exaggerate their stories to the thrill of the first-timers. Everyone probably had his own ideas about what the wild west would really be like. There had been plenty of time to wonder during the two months that the boat had been plying up the winding stream. There had been many moonlit nights when the stillness was broken only by the slosh of the paddle wheels and the gentle puff of the steam engine. Later, when the channel became treacherous, the steamer had to lay up for the night and the only sounds were the lapping of the little waves and the distant howl of coyotes. There had been many days spent peering into the dense undergrowth of the cottonwood covered islands to

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[1]Reuban Gold Thwaites, Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Vol. II, Part 1 (New York: Mead & Co., 1904), pp.100-105.

see the deer whose leaps sent crackling crashes echoing through the river breaks. During the day one watched the deck hands as they sounded the shallow bottom, or one stared at the foamy ribbon that drifted off the paddle wheel and floated away down the river toward one's old home which grew further away with every slosh and every puff.

Walking to the other end of the boat and gazing toward the future, one looked to catch the first glimpse of the new land around the next bend. One passed miles and miles of emptiness where only buffalo and antelope, and Indians lived. Sometimes Indians would trade skins and buffalo robes, but more often the boat stopped only for taking on wood from the huge piles maintained along the banks. All these long, monotonous two months, the new Westerner was ever in anticipation of the Head of Navigation, that isolated trade center that had not seen the arrival of a freight shipment in nine months. "Fort Benton, the furthest inland river port in the world--what would it be like?[1,2,3]

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[1]Daniel H. Weston, Diary (Helena: Montana Historical Library, 1866), entries of June 28 and 29, 1866.

[2]Lottie A. Townsend, Diary of James Harkness of the Firm of LaBarge, Harkness & Co., Vol. II of Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1896), pp. 343-349.

[3]Captain William Howard, Log of the Steamer Benton Fromt St. Louis, Missouri to Fort Benton, Idaho, Vol. II of Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota (Bismark: Tribune Printers, 1908), pp. 312-313.

On May 12, 1883, the Rosebud rounded the last bluff and Fort Benton came into view. The excitement on the bright, electrically lighted river boat seemed more than matched in the town. It was early in the year for a boat, but preparations had been made and at 8:30 that evening when the tooting whistle was heard and the brilliant electric headlight was seen thrown on the opposite bank, the entire town turned out to welcome the first boat of the season. A giant bonfire was lit in front of the Overland Hotel and a man named Foster prepared to fire his cannon in salute. People lined the banks now, blinking in the glare of the electric lights. At last the whistle blared, the cannon boomed, and the citizens of Fort Benton resounded in a yell that made the sheet iron of the warehouses along the river rattle in reverberation. Each burst of the whistle met with an additional salute from the cannon and crowd.[1]

The passengers might have expected such a welcome from a river community that had been landlocked for three-fourths of a year, but they were no doubt a bit surprised to see ahead in this wild frontier town a huge new brick building right at the water's edge. From its pediments

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[1]The River Press (Fort Benton, Montana), May 19, 1883, p. 3.

tall spires bristled skyward, an unexpectedly elegant piece of architecture to be found on what they had thought was the wild frontier.

The Rosebud slowly passed the cheering crowds and drew nearer the great three story brick edifice. Lights shown from every window and ladies and gentlemen stood on its balconies to welcome the first boat. The gallant Rosebud glided past the big building and docked at "Wetzel's Warehouse." As soon as the gangplank was thrown out, Bentonites flocked on board to extend an individual welcome to every passenger.[1] One question sure to have been asked was "What is that big building that we passed?" The newly arrived Montanans, especially those who envisioned Fort Benton as a crude fur trading post where the residents guarded palisades while Indians camped in tepees outside, were no doubt quite surprised to learn that the big building, complete with its dual-colored brickwork and arch-topped windows, was a hotel. And the proud Bentonites made it no secret that they considered it "the finest and largest hotel building in the West"[2]--no less--and at least the equal of

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[1] Ibid.

[2] The Benton Record (Fort Benton, Montana), December 7, 1882, p. 8. Statements to the effect that such and such was the "finest," the "best," and so on were always being made. The author has used the superlatives of the age throughout this report not because he believes that the

any hotel in the East, for that matter. Residents of 1883 "Benton" took a special pleasure in refuting the popular beliefs about the "frontier." "Sure, all those wild things might be going on in some mining camp, but here in Benton you are in Civilization just like back in the States," a resident may have said, "and if you want proof, just visit our new Grand Union Hotel."

The Grand Union Hotel, then just six months old, was the boast and pride of the whole territory and the special showpiece of Fort Benton. It symbolized the spirit of the town, which optimisitc citizens believed to be the most up and coming city in the region. Of the hundreds of towns in Montana, Fort Benton in 1883 seemed to have the

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Grand Union Hotel really and honestly was the "finest," "best," or anything of the sort, but to give the reader the feeling of the times. It is the belief of the author that whether the hotel really was the finest or not, the residents of Fort Benton in 1882 believed that it was or at least said they did. An opposing point of view is taken by the world traveler Montague Davenport, Under the Gridiron (London: 1876), p. 138, quoted by Paul F. Sharp, Whoop-Up Country (Helena: Historical Society of Montana, 1960), p. 208. "Visiting Europeans found little difference in the optimism, the ruthless energy, and the 'American brag' of Yankees where ever they found them. 'No matter what part of the country one is in,' discovered a visiting Britisher in 1876, '. . . there is to be found "the finest in the world." This is a stock phrase and a part of his creed he is never tired of quoting.' For Westerners to speak of their little log-cabin villages as the 'finest in the world' annoyed even the most seasoned traveler who viewed the scene through the hard, clear eyes of realism rather than through the magnifying glass of the boomer's unbounded faith and unlimited desire."

greatest future as a trading center.[1] Goods bound for a thousand booming mining towns were first heaped in piles a mile in length on Benton's river banks and levees. From the town, the Mullan road led west, the trail to Helena branched south, and to the north the Whoop-Up Trail wound toward the Canadian Frontier. Studying the lessons taught by history, Fort Benton merchants and promotors noted that Chicago, St. Louis, and other cities had grown to greatness under exactly the same circumstances. The future seemed filled with the promise of prosperity, and for the present, "all trails lead out of Fort Benton."[2,3,4]

A half century earlier, in 1831, the American Fur Company at Fort Union sent Joseph Kipp out to build Fort Piegan, a temporary trading post at the mouth of the Marias. The winter trade was good and in 1832 David Mitchell and Francis Chardon constructed a new post, Fort McKenzie, six miles above the mouth of the Marias on the North bank of the Missouri. A decade later, a Blackfoot war party burned

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[1]The Benton Record expressed these views almost constantly, for instance on December 21, 1882. The River Press also delighted in expounding upon "Benton's future prosperity." See Paul F. Sharp, Whoop-Up Country (Helena: Historical Society of Montana, 1960), p. 157.

[2]River Press, 1887 Holiday Edition.

[3]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part C, p. 1.

[4]Sharp, p. 157.

Fort McKenzie. Alexander Culbertson, then in charge, decided to have another fort built further up the river. He selected a spot five miles above the present site of Fort Benton, on the opposite bank. In 1843 a man named Cotton supervised the construction of the cottonwood-log fort. The fort bore his name for a short time, but Culbertson renamed it Fort Lewis in honor of the leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Strategically, the site was very poor because the Indians with whom the trade was to take place lived on the other side of the river. Therefore, in 1846, Culbertson had the post moved to its present location, an easy matter as the logs were simply floated downstream.[1,2,3,4,5]

The fort retained Lewis's name until Christmas night, 1850, when Culbertson christened it "Benton" after Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Senator Benton had

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[1]Hiram Martin Chittenden, "The Ancient Town of Fort Benton in Montana," The Magazine of American History, XXIV (December, 1890), 409-425.

[2]W. S. Bell, original notes in Fort Benton file, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena.

[3]W. S. Bell, Old Fort Benton (Helena: 1909), pp. 7-12.

[4]Merrill G. Burlingame, The Montana Frontier (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1942), p. 59.

[5]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part C, p. 1.

rendered "valuable services" to the fur company by getting it out of trouble in 1844 when the U. S. Government found that it had been selling whisky to the Indians. Benton had "fixed things" so the Company could escape with a $12,000 fine.[1] The re-dedicated fort was rebuilt using adobe bricks from about 1850 to 1856.[2]

Since Columbus, men had dreamed of finding an all-water route to the Orient, a "northwest Passage." The closest they ever came to that water route through North America was Fort Benton. In 1860 the first steamboat to dock at Fort Benton, the Chippewa, arrived July 2. It was just in time for the opening of the Mullan Road, a 640-mile connection to the Columbia River, the Pacific, and the legendary lands of eastern Asia.[3] Few travelers came, however, until 1862, when gold was discovered in the gulch where Bannack soon flourished. Alder Gulch and Virginia City, the richest placers of them all, were discovered the next year. Fort Benton quickly became the supply center of the region. Goods and men bound for the gold fields crowded the steamboats. The stampede reached its climax in 1866,

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[1]Bell, Old Fort Benton, p. 14.

[2]Edwin A. C. Hatch, "Fort Benton Journal" (unpublished manuscript, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena), June 7, 1856-October 13, 1856.

[3]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part C, p. 1.

when over ten thousand miners arrived. Both the Diamond R freighting outfit and the great I. G. Baker Company were established in 1864. T. C. Power arrived in Fort Benton to begin his career as a transportation king in 1867.[1]

As quartz mining replaced the placers during the 1870's, the steamboats found even greater use. Heavy crushers and stamp mills were nearly impossible to carry overland for great distances by wagon, but steamboats easily floated them up the river. Moreover, luxury items such as square grand pianos, fine dishes, marble topped furniture, and fancy yard goods could all be shipped without difficulty on the boats. Such items had to be well packed, however. The Chicago Tribune of December 8, 1868, warned shippers to have everything

> . . . packed in the strongest and most thorough manner. Recollect that they are to be subject to rough handling --to railroad, steamboat and bull-team freighters, all of whom though proverbially careful, may yet have the misfortune to 'start' some delicate package. Three or four thousand miles of mixed-dray, rail, river and road-carriage may prove too severe a strain on some unfortunate cask, box or bale. Often to lighten the load, in passing over some Missouri River sand bar, the goods will be tumbled into a flat boat, and then thrown back again, after the obstruction is passed. These frequent changes are very hard tests for the very strongest packages.[2]

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[1]Sharp, p. 213.

[2]Alton B. Oviatt, "Fort Benton, River Capital," in A History of Montana, by Merrill G. Burlingame and K. Ross Toole (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1957), p. 143.

From the docks of Fort Benton, the goods headed overland to the gold camps of Montana, over the Mullan Road to Washington or Idaho, and to Canada via the Whoop-Up Trail. Freighters preferred oxen for use as draft animals because they could travel much farther without water, but mules were also used to a large extent. Freight outfits seldom included horses since they tired too easily under the heavy loads and long distances. Throughout the season of open water, the "big rigs" of the day jammed Benton's Front Street:

> I was familiar enough with ox yokes but here were eleven of them in front of the lead wagon strung out like beads upon what I thought was a continuous chain. The wagons were gigantic things, broad gauge, long coupled, with large wheels and boxes five feet high, above which were arched bows covered with heavy canvas. The second and third wagons had short tongues and were close coupled to the wagon ahead. Each wagon was fitted with a brakemechanism which was an entire novelty to me. On one side of the lead wagon there was a 10 gallon water keg with a faucet and cup. Just above it was a long rifle in slings.[1]

River traffic lasted only from early May to mid August, when the water started to recede dangerously. Boats arrived almost daily during these months, and the docks were piled high with a mile long assortment of containers which had survived the hazardous trip. The freight now began its trip to the final customer, as the bull teams strained to

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[1] Ibid. p. 144.

pull the "trains" over the first big hill west of town. Canadian freight left immediately, but freighters bound for southern points had to wait until the water level was low enough so that they could ford the river.

Freight wagons and oxen loaded to embark on the treacherous trails through Wolf Creek Canyon to Helena and Virginia City, over the Mullan Pass to Idaho gold fields, or to the British Northwest, jammed Fort Benton's mud streets throughout the summer. Profit seekers of every description, mostly male, crowded the towns sidewalks (or rather the porches of its stores). The noise of creeking hubs, clanking chains, snorting bulls, and cussing drivers mingled with shouts and steam whistles to create a din of excitement.

By 1879, the biggest year on the river, forty-seven boats brought 9,444 tons of freight to Fort Benton,[1] a strange metamorphosis was sweeping the little city. Women had invaded the male world at the end of the river. In 1876 I. G. Baker had built the first really permanent building, a huge, fancy brick store and warehouse. Also that year the first newspaper, the Benton Record, started publication; in 1879 they were building a four story, mansard roofed plant. Fort Assiniboine, the Army's magnificent, new

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[1] Ibid., p. 153.

million dollar brick post, was now providing a fine market for Fort Benton's merchants. The military leased quarters in Fort Benton as well. "Benton," as the residents preferred to call it, was the hub and the supply depot of the entire region, and it now had a strange new yearning for "civilization" that would match its prosperity.

CHAPTER II

THE GRAND UNION REFLECTS FORT BENTON'S PROSPERITY

In 1879 there were at least three hotels in Fort Benton, all of which were evidently doing a rushing business with the travelers enroute to the gold fields and other attractions of the West. A hotel company could "make a mint." Evidently, that is exactly what one Mr. William H. Todd planned to do with a hotel which would put all others to shame. Todd, an agent of the Murphy Neel Company, dealers in hardware, groceries, and general merchandise, had been planning this for a long time. In the middle seventies, he was photographed sitting on a pile of barrels on the Murphy Neel dock.[1]

On December 12, 1876, Mr. Todd bought the land where the barrels had been piled, better described as Lot One, Block One, forty two feet of which fronted on Front Street and one hundred feet on Bond Street, in the original townsite of Fort Benton, Montana Territory. He paid John W. Tattan, the Probate Judge of Choteau County and

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[1]Picture in the Fort Benton Picture File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, reprinted in Nora E. Harber, Our Fort Benton (Fort Benton: River Press, 1934).

Ex officio Trustee of the Townsite of Fort Benton, the sum of $10.00 for the lot.[1] And with that formality, W. H. Todd officially began enacting his dream.

In September, 1878, Mrs. Carrie Adell Strahorn, who traveled 15,000 miles by stagecoach during her life, was resting from one of her journeys with Mr. and Mrs. Todd. Mrs. Todd revealed to her that she was a Southern belle by birth and had never made a fire in her life before she suddenly found herself planted in remote Fort Benton. Mrs. Todd, equally well versed in cooking and housekeeping, credited her husband with teaching her everything she knew. The Todds took the Strahorns on a jaunt to view the Great Falls, during which the main topic of conversation was evidently Mr. Todd's ambitions for lot one, block one. The Strahorns departed "sincerely congratulating the traveling public on the prospect of a new brick hotel, which would afford better accommodations than were possible to obtain then."[2]

By 1880, Todd had been bubbling over with hotel plans for an entire year and was "champing at the bit" to

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[1]"Miscellaneous," Book A (records of Choteau County, Montana Territory), p. 54. Handwritten original in Clerk and Recorder's Office, Choteau County Court House, Fort Benton, Montana.

[2]Carrie Adell Strahorn, Fifteen Thousand Miles by Stage (New York: G. P. Putnams of New York, the Knickerbocker Press, 1915), pp. 130-138.

get something started. The Utah and Northern Railroad, a spur of the Union Pacific, entered Montana in March, 1880, heading for Butte.[1] Undoubtedly it would soon begin to steal freight traffic from Fort Benton at an alarming rate, and Todd wanted to make his mint before Fort Benton passed. 1880 had been another "boom" year for the steamboats, however, and Todd easily convinced the optimistic business men of Benton that the time had come to build a great hotel, a hotel better than any other in Montana. If Fort Benton were to engage in such an endeavor, Todd may have said it would help to insure Benton's prosperity by convincing all that Benton was not a temporary mining camp, "like Helena or Butte," but a truly civilized and permanent community with a great future.[2] Finally, on September 9, 1880, a corporation joined together to obtain funds to carry out Todd's dream:

> Certificate of Incorporation
>
> This is to certify that the undersigned have this day united themselves and formed a corporation under the corporate name of "The Benton Hotel Company"
>
> The Company is formed for the purpose of building and constructing an hotel in the town of Fort Benton, Choteau County Montana Territory; for acquiring by purchase or otherwise such real and personal property as may be deemed necessary by its trustees to complete and construct the same and to properly manage and carry on said enterprise; to purchase and sell real estate and personal property for the benefit of the Company and

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[1]Merrill G. Burlingame, The Montana Frontier (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1942), p. 147.

[2]The River Press said this sort of thing in almost every issue; for example December 21, 1882, p. 4.

to let, rent and lease the same; to hire or build such houses as the Company may need to rent; and generally to possess powers sufficiently ample and extensive to meet the requirements of the increasing business in which said corporation may engage.

The amount of capital stock of said Company shall be thirty thousand dollars divided into Six hundred shares of fifty dollars each.

The principal place of business of said corporation shall be located at Fort Benton, in Choteau County, Montana Territory and the time of its existance shall be ten years.

There shall be three trustees to manage the business of said Company for the first three months after the formation of this incorporation whose names and residence are as follows:

William H. Todd Fort Benton, Montana Territory
William S. Wetzel " " " "
Timothy E. Collins " " " "

In witness whereof the undersigned have hereunto set their hands and seals this 9th day of September, 1880.

(Signed) William H. Todd (seal)
William S. Wetzel (seal)
Timothy E. Collins (seal)[1]

Thus the hotel company began its existance and the cost of the structure they planned was set at $30,000.00.

The ambitious company lost little time starting the project, which the River Press (now one of the oldest continously published news papers in the state) commenced immediately to promote. On October 27, 1880, their first issue announced that the contract for furnishing the brick for the "new hotel" had been awarded to Storer and Storer.

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[1]"Certificate of Incorporation of the Benton Hotel," original handwritten document in Incorporations File, vault of the Clerk and Recorder, Chouteau County Courthouse, Fort Benton.

"The building will not be completed until spring," they stated with sadness.[1] Storer and Storer ceased brick making for the season two weeks later, after firing a kiln and making a quarter of a million bricks to be used in W. S. Wetzel's new house and "the new hotel." After describing the many brick buildings built in 1880, the River Press brick yard correspondent concluded: "The demand is greater than the supply and the rapid growth of this firm is the best indication of the progress of Benton that could be named."[2]

On November 24, 1880, a cold snap stopped all building for the season.[3] Nearly three months had passed since the last steamer shoved off for the Mississippi. Ice now spanned the Missouri, and Fort Benton knew again that it was cut off from the rest of the world until spring. As the long cold winter of isolation set in, Fort Benton kept up its spirits by planning.

The River Press, only three months old at the end of December, 1880, reviewed its career in the printing business and the accomplishments of the thriving city of Fort Benton in a flowery special edition. They described in

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[1]River Press, October 27, 1880, p. 8.

[2]Ibid., November 10, 1880, p. 8.

[3]Ibid., November 24, 1880, p. 8.

detail the Murphy Neel Building, the addition to the school, the kitchen of the long-established Choteau House hotel, their own building at Main and Bond Streets, and the "Irregular Mansard" cottage of E. R. Wilton, which was of brick and cost the huge sum of $2,200.[1] They also noted that coal was very scarce and that it was very needed. The thermometer at the U. S. Army Signal Service building registered fifty-nine degrees below zero. However, before the paper was off the press, a chinook hit, raising the temperature to thirty-five degrees above and warranting a special article.[2] This optimistic note was almost as good as the symbolic future prosperity predicted by the building of the "new hotel," which received one of the largest articles in the paper:

> The Benton Hotel Co., a joint stock association formed last fall, will commence as early as possible the erection of a magnificent hotel building on the levee, corner of Front and Bond street. The plans have not yet been received from the East, and so we are unable to give a complete description as we desire. It will be brick, be three stories high and 80 x 110 feet on the ground. The main entrance will be on Front Street, and there will be an entrance on the Bond Street front and on the levee. The estimated cost is $30,000, and when completed it will be a structure of which Benton may well be proud.[3]

W. H. Todd, Secretary of the Benton Hotel Company, called a meeting on January 8, 1881, to adopt by-laws.[4] In

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[1] Ibid., December 29, 1880, p. 8. [2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid. [4] Ibid., January 8, 1881, p. 8.

February, Fort Benton, already an "ancient town," became quite concerned about its past for the first time; and the River Press started issuing a front page "Historical Series" with the opening set of articles on "I. G. Baker, his Company and House."[1] On February 9 it was reported that "the ice groans." The breakup of the Missouri constituted the most exciting event in several months. The ice cracked and the water rose. At the ungodly hour of two A.M., the ice begun to move, causing flooding, sweeping away wagons, and creating "a general disaster." The whole town came out to walk the streets and watch, ready to flee to the bluffs if too much glacial action started to sweep away everything.[2]

A month later Storer and Storer deemed it warm enough to resume work on the T. C. Power store. Todd, now a member of the Barker Road Committee, announced on March 30, 1881, that Storer and Storer were making brick again, the first lot to go into the "new hotel."[3] However on April 20, Storer and Storer dissolved partnership and the usual paragraph about the progress of the new hotel ceased to appear in the news papers.[4] Weeks went by. The River Press

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[1] Ibid., February 2, 1881, p. 1.

[2] Ibid., February 9, 1881, p. 3.

[3] Ibid., March 30, 1881, p. 8.

[4] Ibid., April 20, 1881, p. 8.

historical series reported on the Old Fort (which was now thirty-five years old and a "total wreck"). The Rosebud and the Dacotah tied for the fame and profit of being the first boat up the river on June 8, 1881.[1] The Chapel at Fort Assiniboine was completed[2] and a huge prairie fire raged over the Marias and Highwood ranges.[3] But the "new hotel" did not even receive oneword of fine print buried deep in the "Locals" column.

Finally on July 20 the reason came. "The RIVER PRESS hopes soon to record the fact that the hotel project is not dead, nor even sleeping."[4] Evidently gossip had spread the word that the Benton Hotel Company had been on the verge of the grave since the breakup of Storer and Storer, and it took some artifical respiration from the newspapers to revive it. The next week's local news proudly began: "The RIVER PRESS is assured Benton will have a new hotel."[5] The prompting and prodding continued in the following issues. The August 3 paper editorialized: "Our

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[1] Ibid., June 8, 1881, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., July 7, 1881, p. 8.

[3] Ibid., August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

[4] Ibid., July 20, 1881, p. 4.

[5] Ibid., July 27, 1881, p. 8.

Hotels are crowded, and the need for a new and more commodious structure is everyday manifest."[1] The next week it was announced proudly, "The new hotel will be commenced as soon as the material is at han[d]."[2]

On Monday morning, August 15, 1881, the ground was finally broken for the Grand Union Hotel.[3] John W. Dewey surveyed the site and laid out the lines.[4] It had been almost five years since Todd purchased the land for the building and nearly a year since the incorporation of the Benton Hotel Company. But at last construction had started.

A full basement was something quite unheard of at that time, even for such an ambitious building as this. The excavations consisted of a deep ditch with a carefully graded bottom, into which the foundation stones would be laid. The eight foot deep trenches formed three huge rectangles and showed the general plan of the first floor with its two interior fire walls.[5]

In a large front page article, the River Press went into more detail than ever before about the New Hotel, which

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[1] Ibid., August 3, 1881, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., August 10, 1881, p. 8.

[3] Ibid., August 17, 1881, p. 1.

[4] Benton Record, August 18, 1881, p. 5.

[5] Author's survey of the Grand Union Hotel, March 17 and 18, 1970.

was to be the symbol of not only the coming prosperity of Fort Benton, but of the future of Montana and the whole northwest as well. An excerpt reads:

> After a long & tiresome siege of talk on the subject the project fell into the right hands and will now be carried through to completion without any more foolishness. The following parties & firms are the principal stockholders in the new hotel:
>
> W. S. Wetzel & Co. [Dealers in wines, groceries, hardware, and patent medicines]
> Murphy Neel & Co. [Hardware, groceries, and general merchandise]
> Bank of Northern Montana
> Kleinschmidt & Bro. [Groceries, wines, and liquors]
> Gans & Klein [Clothing
> Hirshberg & Nathan [Clothing
> F. C. Roosevelt [Furniture
> Paris Bigson [Rancher, founder of Great Falls in 1884]
> James McDevitt [Livery Stables]
> Davidson & Moffitt
> A. W. Kingsbury
> and W. H. Todd.
>
> W. H. Todd has general charge of construction. Thomas Tweedy is the architect and will have direct superintendence of the work.
>
> The plan is modeled to some extent after the first hotel projected, the chief difference being that the present structure will not be so large. The house will be three story brick, 75'4" [on Front Street] by 80 feet 4 inches (on Bond Street) in dimensions. The principal entrance will be on Bond Street, and the ladies entrance on Front Street. The former entrance is into a public office, which, including the stairway room and all, will be 25 x 51 feet in dimensions. The dining room (22 x 60 feet) will front on the river and have two entrances. The room at the corner of Front and Bond Street will probably be the saloon and billiard hall (22 x 40 feet) and it will be a most desirable room for that purpose. The south room on Front Street, (23 x 27 feet) will probably be for rent, and would be just the location for a barber shop. The culinary department is in the rear of the dining room and has been well looked after by the architect. There will be altogether

about forty five sleeping rooms, some arranged in suits, [sic] the average size being about 10 x 12 feet. The fronts on both Front and Bond Streets will be finished in fine style and altogether the building will be a most handsome one and highly creditable to the enterprise of Benton citizens.

Mr. Todd informs us that all the material that goes into the building will be productions of Montana--the company believes in patronizing home industries--and that wcrk [sic] on the same will be prosecuted rapidly. He says the building will be inclosed [sic] this season without a doubt, and probably neared completion . . .

"Have you christened the new hotel yet?" inquired a River Press man of one of the principal stock-holders the other day. "I believe not. The proposition has been suggested, however, that the hotel be named after the stockholder who will raise his subscription to $5,000, but no one has yet come forward seeking such immortality."

The probable cost of the building will be $30,000. At first it was thought that $22,000 would be the limit, but it is already apparent that the latter figures will not cover the expense bills. It is proposed to have the building completed early next season, and a "mine hoist" duly installed as early as practicable.[1]

Evidently when the hotel company was first formed, an Eastern architect was engaged to do the preliminary designs.[2] His plans were evidently too extravagant even for the prosperous city of Fort Benton. Thomas Tweedy, a local architect, either revised the plans, reducing the size of the building while keeping the elegant ornamental aspects, or else invented a new building of his own design. Legend has taught that the hotel had no architect; instead the craftsmen simply designed it as they built. This is true

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[1] River Press, August 17, 1881, p. 1.

[2] His plans are discussed on p. above.

in part, as will be discussed in the pages dealing with the floor plans. But the plans and elevations must have been at least sketched, though they were probably not furnished to the workmen in the form of blue prints. The exterior dimensions given in the article correspond to the actual measurements of the hotel to the inch, a remarkable feat.

Thomas Tweedy's name crops up in several scattered places in Montana History, but his life and other building accomplishments are obscure. He arrived in Montana on October 7, 1863, and was a member of the Society of Montana Pioneers.[1] Tweedy did the interior finish of the St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Helena in early 1879.[2] In 1880, he came to Fort Benton, where he did "all the work on the Episcopal Church except the glass."[3] Tweedy was a partner of Frank Coombs, a brick layer by trade. Tweedy and Coombs "alone" laid three million bricks in Fort Benton in 1882.[4]

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[1]James U. Sander, Society of Montana Pioneers I (Akron, Ohio: The Werner Co., 1899), p. 168, listed Thomas Tweedy as having come to Montana October 7, 1863, at which time he was a miner. The book listed Tweedy's address as Helena.

[2]William C. Campbell, From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, I (Helena: Montana Record Publishing Co., 1951), p. 85. The church at the corner of Warren and Grand Streets was torn down in the winter of 1970 by the Helena Urban Renewal Project, but the corner stone had been removed prevoiusly and placed in the new church.

[3]River Press, December 1, 1880, p. 8.

[4]Charles D. Greenfield (?), History of Montana (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co., 1885), p. 503.

Since much black walnut was used in the interior of the hotel, the statement about all Montana materials being used in the construction seems extremely doubtful. The "mine hoist" (elevator), had it been installed, would have been the first in Montana, but it was never introduced.

The granite foundation was completed and the first bricks laid on August 31, 1881. Frank Coombs supervised all the brickwork.[1] Tweedy refused to use any but the best seasoned wood for floor joists and held up the brick construction a week to wait for the arrival of proper lumber. The River Press, always optimistic, said the three story brick walls would be finished in six weeks.[2] It took a bit longer than that, even with the incentive that the Overland Hotel was feeding over 100 people at every meal.[3] Lack of lumber held up work again in late September, but the River Press was sure the building would "go briskly as soon as enough lumber arrives to keep a large force of carpenters busy until the structure is completed."[4]

A cold wave descended on the town by Halloween, and the newspaper sadly noted ". . . it will not be enclosed

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[1]River Press, August 31, 1881, p. 3. [2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., October 19, 1881, p. 3.

[4]Benton Record, September 22, 1881, p. 5.

this season."[1] The weather then turned warm again and the walls continued to rise. $1.50 per day was offered to teams hauling brick.[2] The River Press again stated its often-expressed sentiments of encouragement: "It will be the finest hotel in the Territory by a large majority."[3]

The annual "progress edition" gave every business in the bustling little city at least a brief paragraph. The list of hotels included the Choteau House ($3.00 per day with meals), the Overland ($2.00 per day), and the Centennial ($2.00 per day). The unfinished "new hotel" again received the biggest paragraph. It was no longer a dream: one story of it had actually been built! Snow now clung to its empty arched windows and laid on the lobby floor joists. But by June 1, the paper declared, the building would be gay with life. For the first time the cost rose to an estimated $50,000.00, a most impressive figure in 1881.[4]

T. C. Power and Brother installed the first elevator in the city in their store during February, thus ending the "new Hotel's" ambition to have that honor.[5] Apparently the

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[1] River Press, October 16, 1881, p. 4.

[2] Ibid., November 2, 1881, p. 5.

[3] Ibid., November 30, 1881, p. 5.

[4] Ibid., December 28, 1881, p. 2.

[5] Ibid., February 1, 1882, p. 5.

elevator was then cut out of the plan. T. E. Collins, president of the Benton Hotel Company, and W. H. Todd, Secretary, announced that a ". . . large amount of material for finishing purposes will be ordered from the East."[1] The list of expenditures totaled over $16,000.00 by March 1, and the Company decided to spend an additional $30,000.00 during the coming year.[2] Work at last recommenced on the hotel on Monday, March 13, 1882.[3] From then on, the paper ran a standard line in the "In and Out of Town" column: "The New Hotel is proceeding rapidly."[4]

"Brickwork has been interrupted by the scarcity of lime," the Benton Record reported in mid-April, "but Castners teams have brought in an abundent supply & work will be pushed rapidly to completion."[5] The Centennial Hotel was preparing to erect a new building at this time, but had no pretentions of competing with the "New Hotel" for grandeur, and was planning only a modest frame building.[6]

The arrival of the Josephine on May 3 touched off

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[1] Ibid., February 8, 1882, p. 5.

[2] Ibid., February 15, 1882, p. 8.

[3] Ibid., March 15, 1882, p. 5.

[4] Ibid., March 22, 1882, p. 5.

[5] Benton Record, April 13, 1882, p. 5.

[6] Ibid., April 27, 1882, p. 5.

the great opening-of-the-river celebration for 1882.[1] From that date on, the boats arrived almost daily, and many carried items bound for the New Hotel. The manifest of the Helena, which arrived in Benton on May 15, included six rolls of carpet, twenty-six special pieces of lumber, thirty-one heating stoves, and a grand piano.[2] The Benton, which had been traveling up river from Sioux City since April 12, arrived on May 23 with carpeting, 5,000 board feet of ceiling, and 5,000 board feet of 4d flooring.[3] The Butte brought five bales of "k-d chairs," seventeen dozen common chairs, and fifty boxes of glass, all from St. Paul Minnesota.[4]

On June 5, "Pres Lewis," who had taken a "train" of furniture to the A. P. Curtin Company of Helena on May 24, arrived back in Benton with a large load of materials for the new hotel.[5] The next day the Helena unloaded a long-awaited shipment including five cases of hardware, 22,000 pounds of finishing lumber, a box of marble, a clock, and twenty-eight bundles of walnut boards, which were destined to be assembled into the Grand Union's staircase.[6]

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[1] River Press, May 3, 1882, p. 1.

[2] "Up-River Freight Book" (T. C. Power Papers, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena, 1882), pp. 15, 17.

[3] Ibid., p. 36. [4] Ibid

[5] River Press, May 24, 1882, p. 4.

[6] "Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 49.

The plastering contract for the hotel was let on June 7 to Bond and Company of Butte.[1] The doors and windows for the building, made in Auoka, Minnesota, arrived on the Black Hills a few days later.[2] The hotel furniture came on the Benton's second trip. Its manifest included seventy-five "W. L. Chairs," several sofas, settees, ladies' desks, boxes of marble, and a long list of dressers, beds and bureaus, all from Duluth.[3] The hotel safe arrived at Wackerlin's warehouse from St. Paul after its journey up the Missouri on the Benton's third trip, July 9.[4] Since the plastering had not been completed, the interior woodwork and furnishings were, of course, stored in various warehouses.

A flag staff which had been cut by W. O. Dexter in April was erected on July 19.[5,6] It was a few days too late to celebrate the Fourth by flying the thirty-eight star flag of the Glorious Union, but its placement did mark the completion of the soldered copper roof. That day Roosevelt and Company received six bales (11,650 pounds) of mattresses

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[1] River Press, June 7, 1882, p. 5.

[2] "Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 53.

[3] Ibid., p. 64.

[4] Ibid., p. 82.

[5] River Press, April 11, 1882, p. 1.

[6] Ibid., July 19, 1882, p. 7.

from St. Paul on the Helena's third trip.[1] On July 26, 1882, the Rosebud amazed residents of Fort Benton when it turned on its electric lights, the first ever seen in northern Montana.[2]

As the heat of summer lowered the water level in the Missouri, boats could no longer reach Fort Benton. The Butte landed at Coal Banks on August 22 with seventy barrels of china which would later grace the tables of the New Hotel.[3]

On Saturday afternoon, September 9, 1882, while surveyors were laying out Lewistown's first lots,[4] the final strip of lathe was plastered over in the hotel.[5] Harry Ringwald and Mr. Spitzley had closed a contract to manage "the finest hotel in the northwest" a week before,[6] and were now engaged in ordering finishing touches.

The River Press finally cleared up the matter of the name on September 27 when they announced the title at last chosen, "Grand Union." They made no mention of why the name had been picked, but it obviously referred to the recent

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[1]"Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 99.

[2]River Press, July 26, 1882, p. 7.

[3]"Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 109.

[4]River Press, September 13, 1882, p. 5.

[5]Ibid., September 13, 1882, pp. 5, 7. [6]Ibid., p. 7.

uniting of the North and the South after the War Between the States. Though it is said to have appeased both the Confederates and the Boys in Blue, both of whom were flocking to Montana and were to use the facility, the title rather heavily favored the North. The term "grand" was likewise a favorite at the time, and the combination of the two words seemed absolutly elegant. The Grand Army of the Republic veterans and the capitalists who included "Union" in the names of their mines, mills, and smelters no doubt approved exceedingly. In light of the era, "Grand Union" was the perfect name for the "best hotel in the west."[1]

The same day the Grand Union Hotel was "christened," A. A. Martin was hired as head cook.[2] Bentonites' feet resounded on a board side walk in front of the hotel beginning on October 11.[3] Two weeks later the 2,200-pound cast iron safe was installed in final position in the wall and the desk set in place.[4] Baker and Le Lorimier, interior decorators, spent the last few weeks putting down carpets, hanging curtains, tacking up oil cloth, and ironing for the

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[1] Ibid., September 27, 1882, p. 7. Another "Grand Union Hotel," located at Saratoga Springs, New York, held the title at least a decade before Fort Benton's hotel, and there were probably others as well.

[2] Ibid. [3] Ibid., October 11, 1882, p. 7.

[4] Ibid., November 1, 1882, p. 7.

first time the new linens.[1] Everything had to be polished and perfect for the first big night.

The "Grand Opening" of the Grand Union promised to be the grandest affair ever staged in Fort Benton. Ads such as the following urged residents to dress accordingly:

> NOTICE TO LADIES
> All ladies who intend going to the Grand Union Hotel opening next Thursday evening should examine Messrs. Kleinschmidt & Bro's. articles of adornment.[2]

On Thursday, November 2, 1882, the curious citizens of the River Capital of the West got their first look inside their new hotel. The River Press, promoter since the beginning, summed up its reaction:

> The finest hotel in Montana and one of the best in the West will be formally opened this evening under the most favorable auspices. For the past weeks the propritors [sic] have been busy as bees in the . . . preparation. . . . The ball will doubtless be largly [sic] attended, & that the supper will be one of the best ever spread in Benton is a fact fully assured. A large number of rooms already engaged . . . is complete assurance that the Grand Union will start out as a paying institution, while within a short time it will become a veritable bonanza to the lessees.
>
> It is only a short time since it was impossible to rustle a sufficient number of ladies in Benton to dance on cotillion. Last night there were almost, if not quite, a hundred ladies at the Grand Union Ball.[3]

The Benton Record was even more generous in describing the building and its opening:

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[1] Ibid., November 8, 1882, p. 7.

[2] Benton Record, November 2, 1882, p. 5.

[3] River Press, November 8, 1882, p. 3, 7.

GRAND OPENING.

The Grand Union Hotel of Benton.

Ball and Supper--Description of the Building, Its Arrangements, &c.,&c.

The grandest affair of its kind ever witnessed in Benton, and most probably in the Territory, was the opening ball of the largest hotel in Montana, the Grand Union of Benton, by Messrs. Stephen Splitzley & Co., last evening. For some time past the proprietors have been busily engaged in preparing for the coming ball which took place last night, and the number of lives of chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese which Mr. A. A. Martin, chief cook, and his able corps of culinary assistants, will have to answer for is perfectly overwhelming. The affair commenced by using the following invitation:

GRAND OPENING.

Yourself and ladies are respectfully invited to attend the opening ball at the Grand Union Hotel, Fort Benton, Montana, Thursday, November 2d, 1882. Tickets with supper, $3.00.

INVITATION COMMITTEE:

T. E. Collins, J. H. Rice, Joseph Hirshberg, J. F. Murphy, David G. Brown, A. C. Johnson, J. W. Power, John J. Healy, F. C. Roosevelt, John C. Bothine, L. H. Rosencrans, A. W. Kingsbury, W. B. Settle, Paris Gibson, E. G. McClay, Horace R. Buck, Jno. Lepley, S. G nzberger, sic S. Kohlberg.

RECEPTION COMMITTEE:

Charles E. Conrad, Jos. S. Hill, W. S. Wetzel, T. A. Cummings, J. L. Stewart, L. Hoitman, H. J. Wackerlin, W. L. Kueedler, Jere Sullivan, John Hunsberger, M. A. Flanagan, Wm. H. Hunt, Jr., Wm. H. Burgess, John W. Tattan, Geo. W. Crane.

FLOOR COMMITTEE:

W. S. Baker, Charles L. Spencer, W. C. Riddle, Ford S. Caldwell, Charles G. Griffith, W. P. Wren, Tom J. Todd, George L. Overfield, P. C. Goodrich, A. B. Hamilton, Geo. D. Patterson, D. J. Price, Samuel L. Kelly, A. B. Keeler, I. Churchill.

When yesterday evening arrived the social world was on the tiptoe of expectation. ABout 8:30 p.m. the guests began to assemble and before 9:30 between 200 and 300 guests had arrived and were in the different dressing rooms and the hotel dining room which was used for the dancing hall of the evening, on the river side of which was erected a raised platform about three feet high and upon which were the members of the Benton String Band, together with Mr. Claus Peters, who furnished the music for the occasion. The dancing commenced soon after the arrival of the guests in the dining room, which was admirably adapted for the purpose for which it was used. The following gentlemen were the floor managers: Messrs. W. P. Wren, G. L. Overfield, and W. C. Riddle, and the programme for the evening was as follows:

PROGRAMME.

1.....Grand March
2.....Quadrille
3.....Waltz
4.....Quadrille
5.....Schottische
6.....Lanciers
7.....Waltz
8.....Quadrille
9.....Polka
10.....Lanciers
11.....Waltz
12.....Quadrille

SUPPER.

13.....Quadrille
14.....Waltz
15.....Lanciers
16.....Varsouvienne
17.....Quadrille Waltz
18.....Tucker
19.....Schottische
20.....Lanciers
21.....Waltz
22.....Quadrille
23.....Polka
24.....Medley

THE DANCING.

There were a large number of ladies present, and the floor had eight to twelve sets dancing quadrilles at the same time, and all seemed to enjoy themselves immensely.

THE LADIES.

The ladies, as they always do, looked beautifully, [sic] and a great many of them were very tastefully dressed. Among many others of them who attracted a great deal of admiration, may be mentioned the following few whose names were learned:

Miss Annie M. Schulz, now living, we believe, at Sun river, [sic] who attracted general admiration. She was beautifully dressed in white tarleton, and wore a white satin sash. Mrs. W. S. Wetzel very prettily dressed in cardinal satin, Miss Eda Brinkman, tastefully attired in a velvet skirt, and cardinal satin over-dress. Miss Oviatt was nicely dressed in white. Mis Julia Rowe, daughter of Mr. Thomas Rowe, was very nicely dressed in blue. Mis Nellie Marsten was very prettily dressed in white Swiss and lace. Mrs. Joseph Hirshburg looked very pretty, and was very nicely dressed. Mrs. Daniel Dutro looked remarkably well. Miss Rachel Davis, of New York City, and sister of Mrs. Hirshberg, was dressed in wine colored brocade silk, in the latest style, and trimmed with white cashmere bodice, and looked like an angel.

SUPPER.

The supper was announced at 12 o'clock and was a grand affair, and did credit not only to Messrs. Stephen Spitzley & Co., but also to Messrs. Martin, Flowers and Jones, the cooks. The bill of fare was as follows:

MENU:

Lobster Salad, Chicken Salad,
Loin of Beef, Haunch of Mutton,
Spring Chicken, Boned Turkey,
Spiced Beef, Ox Tongue,
Boned Leg of Veal.

FRUITS:

Green Apples, Nuts, Macediome Fruits,
Charlatte Russe, Ice Cream,
Assorted Cake.

The dancing was kept up until a very late hour, when the assembled guests retired to their homes delighted with the festivities of the occasion, and at having been present at the grandest affair of its kind ever witnessed in Benton, and with the pleasant manner in which they had been entertained by Messrs. Spitzley, Ringwald, Todd, and Mrs. A. L. Marsten, and their corps of able assistants.

DESCRIPTION OF THE HOTEL.

An account of the grand opening would be incomplete

without a description of the hotel itself. It is about 115 feet long and 85 feet wide, and is built of brick, three stories high. It faces down the river, with the Missouri river on the right, and Front street on its left, and has a plank sidewalk on its front and left sides about twelve feet wide. The following are the names of the employees of the Grand Union Hotel:

W. H. Todd, clerk; Mrs. A. L. Marsten, housekeeper; Edward B. Smith, barkeeper; Lafayette Hall, poster; A. A. Martin, chief cook; J. Flowers, second cook; Samuel Jones, third cook; Henry Courtney, head waiter; Frank Martin, waiter; and Mrs. Henrietta Johnson, chambermaid.

THE OFFICE.

The office is under the superintendence of Mr. W. H. Todd, who officiates behind one of the finest hotel counters in Montana, which was made by Messrs. Jones & Merrill of Benton. It is 16 feet long on its longest side, and then curves back six feet, and upon it is stained glass set in a frame, and an aperture through which the clerk can see all that is going on and receive payments. The entrance behind the counter is through a glass door secured by a Yale lock. The entire counter arrangement is finished up by those first class Benton painters, Messrs. Keenan and Payne, and is in imitation of both American and French walnut, mahogany, and oak veneering, beautifully and tastefully done, and the counter both in its fabrication and painting reflects great credit upon Messrs. Jones & Merrill, and Keenan & Payne in their respective crafts. Behind the counter there is a large elegant iron safe weighing two tons, made by the celebrated Mosler Safe and Lock Company, of Cincinnati, expressly for the Grand Union Hotel. Inside of this safe are iron burgler proof boxes each secured by safety locks, partitions for account books of various sizes and descriptions, and a large number of smaller drawers for the purpose of keeping valuables belonging to the guests of the hotel, and there are four double eight flange doors, with two combination locks to secure the entrance to the safe. In the office is also a table twelve feet long covered with cloth, for the use of guests in writing and holding newspapers. [What would today be called the "lobby" was called the "office" at this time, thus "office" refers to the whole lobby, and not just the area behind the desk.] From the centre of the office is the main stairway of the hotel to the second story, about five feet wide, with a landing about half way up, that renders it of very easy ascent, and the banisters of which

stairway, are of black walnut. Behind the office and connecting with the clerk's department, is a small room expressly adapted for small bundles and packages. To the left of the office and the right of the main entrance of the dining room, is an elegant hat rack made in regular eastern style.

THE BAR ROOM

is on the northwest corner of the whole building, and in a room which is about 20x25 feet, and which has just been furnished, and which is kept by Mr. Edward S. Smith.

WASHROOM.

Immediately in the rear of the office is the wash-room, 12x18 feet, containing six marble basins, and just behind them is a heavy zinc tank about three feet high for supplying the water used in the basins, and which is done by fassets. [sic] Underneath the basins is a sink and sewer, which connects with the Missouri river about 100 feet from the building, for the purpose of draining the waste water.

THE DINING ROOM

is 30x60 feet. The residents of Benton have visited it so much as to scarcely require any description. There are six dining tables, three of which are extension tables, and the others are ordinary tables. The ordinary ones are 6x3 feet. A side-board also occupies this room at its lower end, painted by Messrs. Keenan & Payne in imitation of veneering of various woods. It has eight drawers, two to each series, three inches deep and three feet long, and underneath them are two closets for dishes, glasses, or other crockery.

THE PANTRY

is 16x15 feet and contains shelving which is already filled with dishes, glassware, &c, and is immediately in the rear of the dining room.

THE PASTRY ROOM

is immediately east and connecting with the pantry, and contains a large table for the purpose of making every sort and description of pastry, and which, altogether it now has a few articles pertaining to pastry, is not yet fitted up at all for the purpose for which it is intended.

THE KITCHEN

is not yet fitted up or completed, but it contains a large Charter Oak range, made by G. W. Filley, St. Louis, Mo., and we understand there is to be a still larger and finer range to be put up next spring. There is also in the kitchen a very fine force pump, connecting with the Missouri river, which is just outside the door.

The kitchen is 35x25 feet, and is immediately in the rear of the pantry. The kitchen is entered from the pantry and immediately to the right of the connecting door is a large table for the purpose of setting dishes to wash, and immediately in front of the door, about 20 feet from it, is where the waiters give their orders for meals to the cook, who stands just behind this table. Behind the table where the dishes to be washed are set is a place for washing the dishes, with a sink underneath, and just to the left of it is a place for heating and keeping hot water. The kitchen is entered by four doors, one on each side of the room, communicating with other parts of the house and with the yard outside.

LADIES'PARLORS.

There are two ladies' parlors, both of the same size, 35x20 feet. These rooms are connected together by folding doors but are not yet finished. The rooms are finely located, one above the office and the other on the northwest corner of the building, [notice that the writer avoided saying it was over the saloon] and each room is lighted up by three windows which command a complete view of the town, especially the levee and the Missouri river as far as the promontory below town.

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER.

The bridal chamber is adjoining the ladies' parlor, with which it communicates by a door, and is not yet quite fitted up. The carpet is laid, and in the room is a bureau, washstand, together with a bedstead costing $200.00.

THE LADIES' ENTRANCE.

The ladies' entrance is on the west side of the building, and has a large double door opening into a hall in which is the stairway connecting it with the upper floor and the ladies' parlor. To the right of the ladies' entrance is the barber shop of Messrs. Bryar & Anderson, who are too well known to require more than a mere mention.

BED ROOMS.

There are 60 bedrooms for guests in the house, amongst which are six suits [sic] of rooms for families with folding doors.[1]

The Benton Record then continued to discuss at length every piece of furniture in the hotel and from whom it was

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[1]Benton Record, November 9, 1882, p. 3.

procured. The Central Market furnished a total of 288 pounds of meat for the Grand Opening Ball, including 81 pounds of beef loin and 72 pounds of veal. H. J. Wackerlin & Co. supplied the chandeliers used in the hotel, all of which were "of the latest English designs." They also furnished the cut glass decanters used in the bar and the other saloon glassware, the plateware in the saloon, and the kitchen range. Thomas Todd supplied the liquors and cigars to be dispensed in the elegant new surroundings.[1]

The furniture in the hotel was purchased from the T. C. Power Co., and the F. C. Roosevelt Furniture Company. From T. C. Power came the French marble topped bedroom sets[2] which had arrived on the Benton on June 14,[3] a "gentleman's arm chair," five oil paintings "executed by Wilkins," several mattresses, and the drapes used in several rooms. From the Roosevelt store came the black walnut dining room tables and light oak chairs, rustic settees and hardwood chairs for the saloon, and the furnishings of the ladies parlors, the bridal suite, and the other bed rooms. Baker and De Lorimier supplied and installed the ingrain carpeting used throughout the hotel, Napier matting for the saloon and dining room, the table linen and napkins, and most of

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[1] Ibid., p. 5.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 64.

the draperies throughout the building.[1]

The bar and back bar of black walnut came from the Murphy Neel Comapny, as did the heating stoves, kerosene lamps and extra lamp chimneys, the dining room glass ware, and the groceries for the kitchen. Kleinschmidt and Brother also supplied crockery and china, as well as much glassware and some of the original stock of groceries. The dining room linen was worth $250.00 and came from the I. G. Baker Company. The very expensive dining room silverware was purchased from Ringwald Brothers and Company, and was the best made by the Rogers Brothers Company of Waterbury, Connecticut.[2]

So the Grand Union Hotel, which had been planned for over seven years and which took one year, three months, and eighteen days to construct, at last opened to the public. It symbolized the future of both Fort Benton and Montana. Together, those two futures seemed bound in a truly "grand union."

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[1]Benton Record, November 9, 1882, p. 3. [2]Ibid.

CHAPTER III

EXPLORING THE GRAND UNION HOTEL

The Grand Union Hotel is an exceptional example of history expressed in physical form. This chapter will explore the amazing structure through the blue prints of the building as it was actually built and as it stands today. At the danger of some repetition, the function, decoration and historical significance of the various rooms will be described in detail. The parts of this chapter may be thought of as long captions describing the many points of interest found in the hotel.

The sixteen drawings in this set are technically "Diazo" prints made from origincal drawings by the author and drafted in the 1880's style using a ruling pen and India ink; they represent well over three hundred hours of preparation in themselves. These drawings are meant to be of the high quality of the Historic American Buildings Survey, a branch of the National Park Service. The measurements were taken by the author at the Grand Union Hotel on March 17 and 18, 1970, through the courtesy of Mr. Harold Thomas, present owner of the building.

The Historic American Buildings Survey was started

in the 1930's to record structures which best represent our country's historical heritage. This is done by means of measured drawings which would allow reconstruction in future generations should the building be destroyed.[1] A second purpose of the lengthy descriptions accompanying each plate parallels that of architectural specifications--they define the quality of the work, the materials, methods, colors, and other items which are better expressed in words. The various architectural features are also compared with other buildings in an attempt to show the change of style and the development of different building techniques as the West evolved from the steamboat to the railroad era within the span of a single decade.

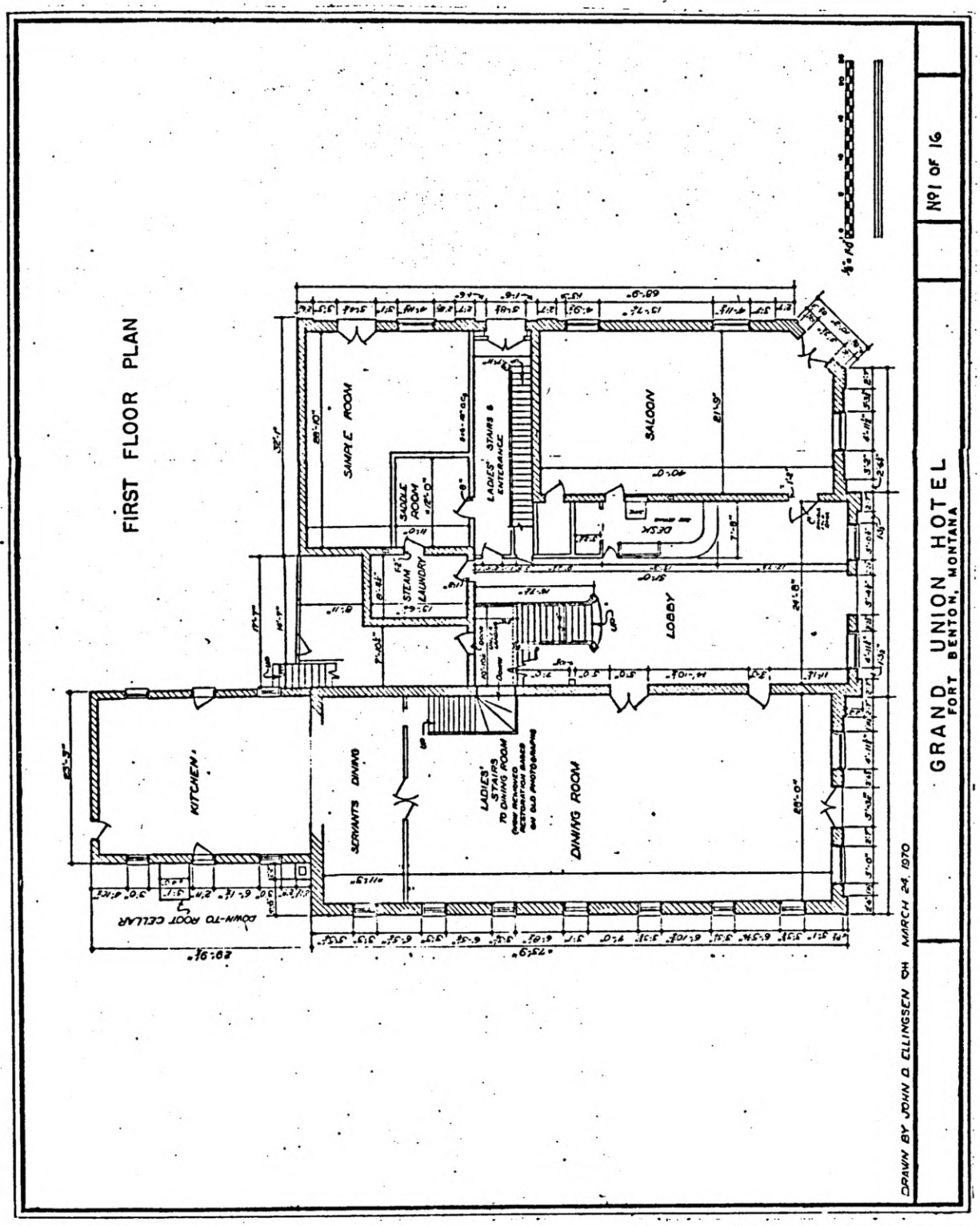
Plate I. First Floor Plan

John W. Dewey surveyed the site for the Grand Union Hotel on August 14, 1881, and ground was broken for the building on the next day.[2] The excavations consisted of trenches eight feet deep. Footings consisting of granite blocks 16 inches thick and 3 feet 6 inches square were placed in these ditches and upon these were built granite foundation walls 2 feet, 3 inches thick made up of blocks 3 feet by 2 feet, 3 inches by 16 inches. Though no basement space

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[1]John N. DeHaas, Jr., Montana's Historic Structures Bozeman: Montana State University, School of Architecture, and the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1969), p. vi.

[2]Benton Record, August 18, 1881, p. 5.


FIRST FLOOR PLAN
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
№1 OF 16
DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN 9H MARCH 24, 1970
SAMPLE ROOM
SADDLE ROOM
LADIES' STAIRS & ENTRANCE
SALOON
DESK
STEAM LAUNDRY
LOBBY
KITCHEN
SERVANTS DINING
LADIES' STAIRS TO DINING ROOM
DINING ROOM
DOWN-TO ROOT CELLAR

was provided, the building has three cellars: a root cellar under the kitchen, a wine cellar under the saddle room, and a boiler room installed in 1899 under the rear of the dining room.

Thomas Tweedy, the architect, and Frank Coombs supervised the laying of the first bricks above ground level on August 31, 1881.[1] A foot square beam resting on posts and granite footings supports the center of the floor joists, 2 by 12's, 16 inches on center, running parallel to Bond Street.

While Tweedy evidently drew some plans for the hotel, it is unlikely that they were actually used in construction and were probably mainly for Todd to exhibit to visitors and for display in the River Press office. While the blue print process of reproduction was well know even in the 1840's, it seems unlikely that a blue print machine was used in Montana until at least about 1886 when Helena began its great building boom.[2]

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[1] River Press, August 31, 1881, p. 3.

[2] Northwest Reprographics, 110 Broadway, Helena, Montana is the source of the author's information concerning the invention of the blue print machine. For those unfamiliar with the blue printing process, a short description might be worth while. True "Blue printing" in the most exact sense is a blue sheet of paper with white lines. What are usually called "blueprints" today (the type of prints included in this report) are actually Diazo prints, ie. they have blue or black lines on a white paper.

The first step in making either type of print is the

The entire Grand Union Hotel is laid out to the module of the 2½ by 4 by 8½ inch common brick, and all brickwork was done so that whole, full sized bricks would be used. The windows and other mill work was then custom made to fit the masonry. The windows have the odd width of 4 feet 11½ inches, which makes the bricks come out evenly. Walls were built "so many bricks long" and "so many bricks high" at a time without trying to follow exact dimensions. It is interesting to note that, though the craftsmen did their best to make the hotel come out perfectly, it is

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production of a tracing. This is a drawing done on very thin, transparent paper, on linen cloth, or Mylar drafting film, a plastic. The tracing medium must conduct light. The tracings can be drawn in pencil, but India ink produces the best prints.

The tracing is used as a negative, and when run through a blue print machine with the coated paper, a print results. In true blue printing, a print can be made much as in photography: the tracing and paper are exposed to the sun for a length of time and then washed in chemicals and water to bring out the blue color, leaving the lines white. The process of exposure is speeded by us of an electric arc lamp and machine.

Diazo prints are made in a machine that exposes the print and paper to ultraviolet light. They are then developed in ammonia fumes. Any number of prints can be made from a tracing in either case, and copy tracings called "sepias" can also be produced.

Original architectural plans in the Montana Historical Society Library which were made in the late 1870's and early '80's were drawn in ink on a stiff, opaque paper which would not make blue prints. However by the time Helena was building its "fabulous" business blocks in 1886-1889, it is almost certain that true blue prints were being produced from tracings. The Tobin family, descendents of T. C. Power, still own the tracings of the Power Block in Helena.

actually 8 inches wider in the back than in the front.

The first floor is actually four separate brick buildings divided by fire walls.

Lobby

The lobby (or office as it was called in 1882) was designed not only for use by the guests of the hotel, but also as a local meeting place. Men predominately used it, and spitoons were numerous. Since it opened into the saloon, women seldom entered the lobby. More about the desk and staircase will be found on pages 83 and 88.

Saloon

The saloon was a most important part of a high class hotel in the 1880's, and the Grand Union had one of the best in Montana. Even more important to the profit of the hotel than the lobby, the saloon occupied the pre-eminent corner location. A card room lay in the rear behind the back bar. Doors connected the bartender's domain to the desk and to a large closet used for storage of liquor.

Ladies' entrance

This mysterious little stairway is probably the most revealing social feature of the hotel. (It now exists only at the top steps which hang in space, since the elegant hall it once occupied has been made into a tiny office.)

During the era of the Grand Union, gentlemen gave ladies special respect, even in the East. In the West, where women were rare, the preponderant male population granted the ladies extra veneration. By this stairway, ladies could reach their rooms without passing the open door of the saloon, or suffering exposure to the indecency and embarassment of the lobby, where men were chewing tobacco and spitting, and using profane terms to describe their business. The Grand Union was designed with the protection of the ladies' morals in mind, and it provided the gentle sex with the utmost in dignified manner.[1]

Dining room

The dining room, designed to serve not only the hotel guests but the rest of the town as well, occupied nearly one-third of the first floor. Even more important than a saloon to a high class hotel of the 1980's, dining rooms were made as elegant as possible. A huge kerosene chandelier, its many lamps sporting clear cutglass globes,[2]

[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, Grand Union Hotel, Fort Benton, March 18, 1970, is the source of information concerning the ladies' stairs. The material concerning the respect afforded to ladies in the late 1800's is borne out as true by numerous other accounts and buildings.

[2]Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970 stated the original chandeliers were kerosene, of the type described, and showed the author several examples of the remaining parts. A complete chandelier can be found in the General Store of the Museum of the Rockies, Montana State University, Bozeman. The Grand Union's fixtures, however, were much larger.

originally graced the Grand Union's pressed metal ceiling, made to resemble the embossed plaster ceilings found in the finest Eastern restaurants. The Grand Union tossed out a few of the formalities of the East, however, when it came to serving. Its customers preferred their meals served family style at ample tables. But the head waiter tolerated no laxness in the cuisine, china or silver.

Another ladies' stairs leads to the dining room. Ladies met their escorts outside the parlor on the second floor and proceeded to the dining room, thus avoiding the lobby.

Kitchen

The Benton Record described the kitchen in detail (see page 39). An ice house stood behind the hotel. Ice cut from the Missouri was stored there for use in the saloon and for preservation of meat during the summer months. Later a steam engine ran an artificial ice plant in the gabled, stable-like ice house.

Steam laundry

When the hotel opened, travelers found this room elegantly fitted with marble wash basins (see page 39 for an interesting description of the plumbing). The management soon converted the room into a small steam laundry. The washing of about one hundred sheets, fifty pillow cases,

towels, and many linen table cloths and napkins made semi-automated laundry facilities necessary even in the 1880's. The windowless brick room must have been unbearably hot for laundry work. The mortar eventually burned off the chimney of this room, testifying to the heat generated by the small steam boiler that shared the space with other equipment and several laundresses. The men's rest room now occupies this space.

Sample room

Bryar and Anderson's Barber Shop and Bath House occupied this room when the hotel opened. A large copper water tank stood atop the coal heater for warming shaving water, and the most elegant of marble topped, black walnut fixtures graced their shop.[1] Later, when the barber shop moved to other quarters, commercial travelers used this room to display their wares. Traveling salesmen constituted a fair portion of the business of hotels during their great era, and sample rooms were essential.

Saddle room

One of the most interesting and historically significant rooms was this one especially designed for the storage of saddles and related gear. After the great

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[1]Picture of the Grand Union Hotel Barber Shop in Fort Benton Picture File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.

steamboat era passed, the Grand Union became winter headquarters for a large number of cowboys. They brought in their one great asset, their saddle, and stayed in the hotel all winter on the credit they received for it. In the spring the hotel would own the saddle and the cowboy would be broke, but his employer bailed him out, payed his bill, and all summer the cowboy worked to earn his saddle back. When fall came he could repeat the whole process again. Thus he was always in debt to somebody, but he never had to worry about it. The room contained special racks and pegs for the saddles and accompanying leather goods, but recent remodeling--essential when a reinforced concrete post was installed to support the second floor--made it necessary to remove the original interior. The hotel collection contains saddle tags with numbers corresponding to the bed rooms.[1]

Secret spy chambers

A window is located in the lobby above the desk and another over the kitchen door in the rear of the dining room. These windows are the only entrances to a pair of small rooms. Because the rooms are dark, the glass windows act as mirrors and make it impossible to see what is inside. But looking out, a person commands a perfect view. The

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970.

Grand Union Hotel was headquarters for all the stage coaches leaving Fort Benton, and for valuable shipments on the steamers as well. A considerable quantity of gold passed through its lobby. When a large shipment of gold came in, a guard kept full time vigil from one or both of these rooms, shot guns ready to hault any foul play. Most people never even noticed the windows, which blended into the camouflage of flowered wallpaper and ornate picture frames. Those who saw the windows assumed them to be ventilators. Not even the newspapers, which delighted in expounding on all ingenious features, dared call attention to the spy chambers.

Plate II. Second Floor Plan

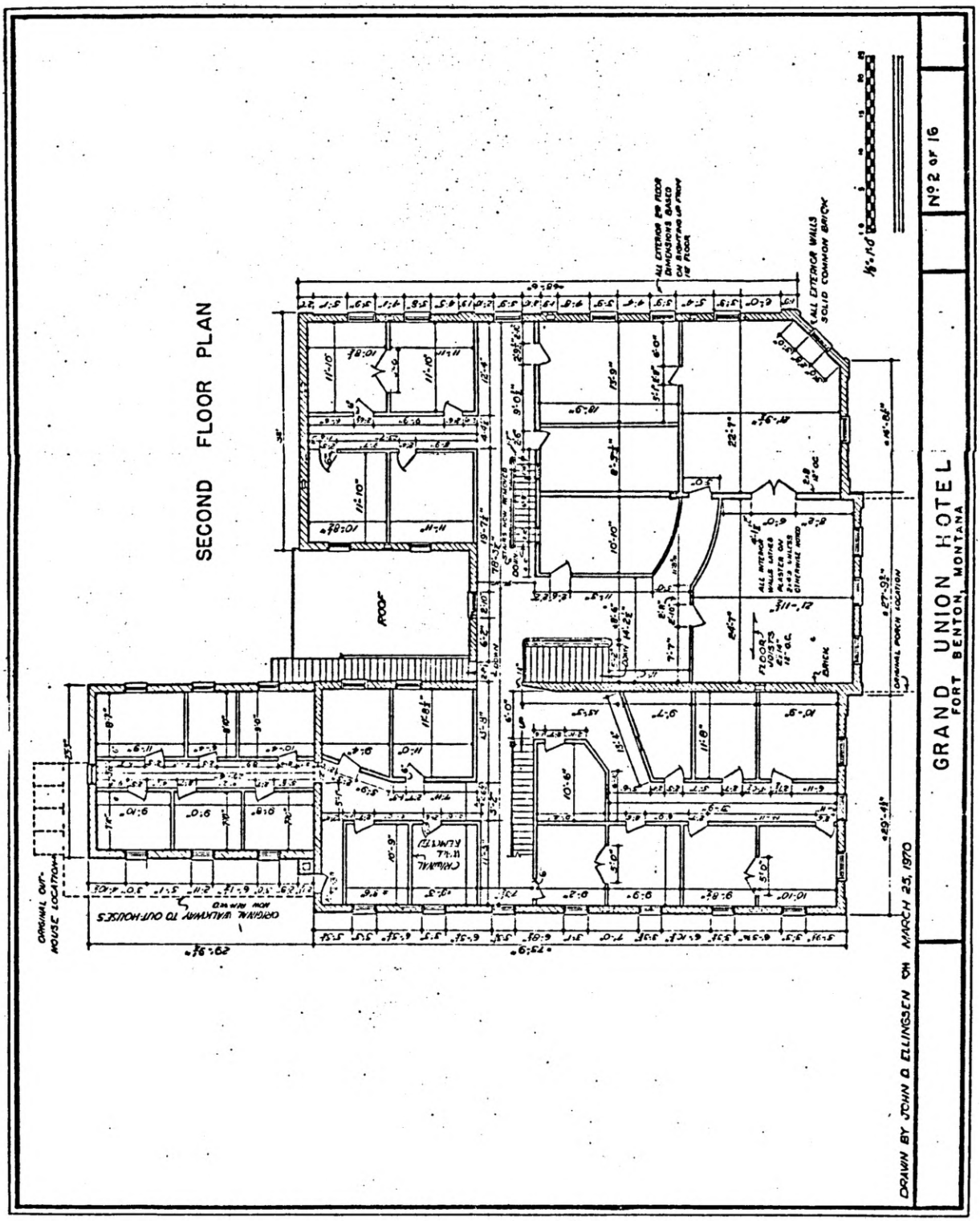
Brickwork on the second floor resumed on March 13, 1882.[1] The second floor joists are 2 x 14's, twelve inches on center. As Harold Thomas, present owner of the hotel says, "You could run a locomotive through here on a floor like that."[2] You almost could too--such a floor will support 177 pounds per square foot without deflection,[3] or

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[1] River Press, March 15, 1882, p. 5.

[2] Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970.

[3] F. E. Kidder, Building Construction and Superintendence, Part II, Carpenters' Work (New York: William T. Comstock, 1898), p. 533. This is the strongest type of floor listed in Kidder's tables, which he states were approved by the New York Building Codes.


SECOND FLOOR PLAN
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
DRAWN BY JOHN A ELLINGSEN ON MARCH 25, 1970
No 2 of 16
ALL EXTERIOR WALLS SOLID COMMON BRICK
ALL EXTERIOR 2ND FLOOR DIMENSIONS BASED ON RIGHTING UP FROM 1ST FLOOR
ROOF
ORIGINAL PORCH LOCATION
ORIGINAL WALKWAY TO OUT-HOUSES NOW REMOVED
ORIGINAL OUT-HOUSE LOCATIONS

a total of one million, sixty two thousand pounds if it was fully loaded.

Notice how oddly planned the second floor is. It was built this way so that the largest rooms would occupy the best locations. The inside or "dark" rooms, which would rent cheaply no matter how large they were, occupy odd shapes and corners. Buildings in Helena in the later Eighties solved the problem of dark rooms very well by using light wells, clerestories, and balconies, and the Grand Union provided skylights for the dark rooms on the third floor. But the only light these second floor rooms received came over the transoms and through tiny high windows.

The ladies' parlors occupied the two huge corner rooms, both over twenty feet square; and managers spared no cost in making the parlors equal to such rooms anywhere. Heavy velvet draperies decorated the windows with the somber tones of "black and old gold" and "red and old gold." The black walnut furniture was upholstered in "heavy silk velvet plush damask."[1] A picture rail covered with fragile plaster and gold leaf topped the imported French wallpaper. Many pictures in wide gilt frames added to the wall decorations. Along with the various rockers, couches, arm chairs, settees, and "French plate" mirrors, the furnishings

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[1]Benton Record, November 9, 1882, p. 5.

included a fine reed organ and expensive upright piano.[1] In these refined surroundings, women freely discussed feminine subjects well beyond men's hearing. From the moment they ascended the ladies' stairs, they stayed in a "world apart," never exposed to the "indecent male domain."

The bridal chamber, finest sleeping room in the hotel, adjoined the ladies' parlors.

> F. C. Roosevelt & Co. have furnished the entire furniture for the bridal chamber, and have done so with the exquisite taste for which Mr. Chambers is famous. It consists of an elegant suite of three pieces, the bedstead of heavey [sic] carved black walnut and French walnut veneering, dresser and washstand to match, with fine Leponto marble tops.[2]

The carpenters who framed the second floor walls probably introduced the very unusual curved walls. Tweedy no doubt left a good deal of leeway in his plans for the craftsmen's own imagination, and Tweedy and Todd may have done much of the planning on the rough floor, using chalk. There are almost no square corners or straight lines of sight on the second floor. To the author's knowledge, only two dimensions in the entire building involve the figure thirteen, but many include the figure seven, considered

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[1]Picture of the ladies' parlor in the Grand Union Hotel collection. A copy is in the Fort Benton Picture File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena

[2]Benton Record, November 9, 1882, p. 5.

lucky. Most second floor rooms are interconnecting for use by large families or as sample rooms. All the hall doors are staggered, so that one cannot look into another's room from his own.

Throughout the hotel, a definite hierarchy of rooms exists. The desirable front rooms are large, while those in the rear and facing the court are small, and those over the kitchen smallest of all. Hotel servants, mostly Swedish girls, occupied the rooms over the kitchen. The head housekeeper locked the girls inside their portion of the building at night to prevent any "hanky-panky." But even with these precautions, the manager found it difficult to keep his staff.[1]

The servants never used the front stairs, always the stairway in the rear. This long staircase, which led directly outside, could also be used by men who, because of their intoxicated condition or for other reasons, wished to avoid the lobby.

Every bedroom in the hotel had its own chimney. From 1882 until 1900, individual wood stoves heated each

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970. Mr. Thomas found numerous Swedish suitcases and newspapers in the hotel root cellar when he purchased the building in 1951, but since they were saturated with years of sink drainings which had run into the cellar, they could not be saved. The accounts of locking the girls in at night are from interviews conducted by Mr. Thomas of Fort Benton pioneers.

room. The hotel employed two wood packers to carry in wood and coal, split kindling, and remove ashes. The chimneys are now sealed and capped above the roof.

One of the most interesting features of the hotel is its lack of a modern sanitation system. Though the Grand Union was labeled "the largest and finest hotel in the West," and "the equal" of those in the East, it lacked the convenience of indoor bathrooms. Flush toilets, which the ancient Romans knew well,[1] became lost until about the Civil War era in the United States and Western Europe. Even then, only the extremely rich included them in their mansions.[2] The original Grand Union Hotel at Saratoga Springs, New York, a seven story, block square monster of a building, installed "Water-Closets" only in 1872.[3]

The Grand Union's outhouses, ingenious two story affairs,[4] were situated behind the hotel, much too close

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[1]Sir Banister Fletcher, A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method (New York & London: Scribner's, 1896, 1963), p. 202.

[2]John Mass, The Gingerbread Age (New York: Bramhall House, 1957), p. 12.

[3]Ibid., p. 127. In Montana, the Masonic Temple built in 1885 (now State Publishing Co., Broadway and Jackson, Helena) was one of the first buildings to include toilets, considered a very new invention and a great luxury at the time.

[4]The outhouses behind the Nevada City Hotel, Nevada City, Montana, show how the facilities worked.

to the well and root cellar for comfort. A walkway led from the main part of the building, designed for use by the fine ladies and gentlemen who were guests of the house. The servants over the kitchen had the facilities much closer, just outside the door.[1] In 1900, a major remodeling of the hotel removed the outhouses, so that their interior is a matter of conjecture, but "beaded ceiling" paneling probably made them a far cry from the rough structures usually pictured.

If a forty-below temperature and a high east wind were making the suspended walkway to the outhouses a bit chilly and the beaded ceiling interiors less than cozy, one could relieve himself without leaving his room. A white china pot, kept either in the piece of furniture called the commode or under the bed, was always provided. The commode also held a washbowl and pitcher, a hot water pitcher, and a soap dish. A slop jar beside the commode provided a convenient deposit for used water, and a matching spitoon completed the commode set. All this must have made the life of the chamber maid slightly less than a gay frolic among the grand surroundings.

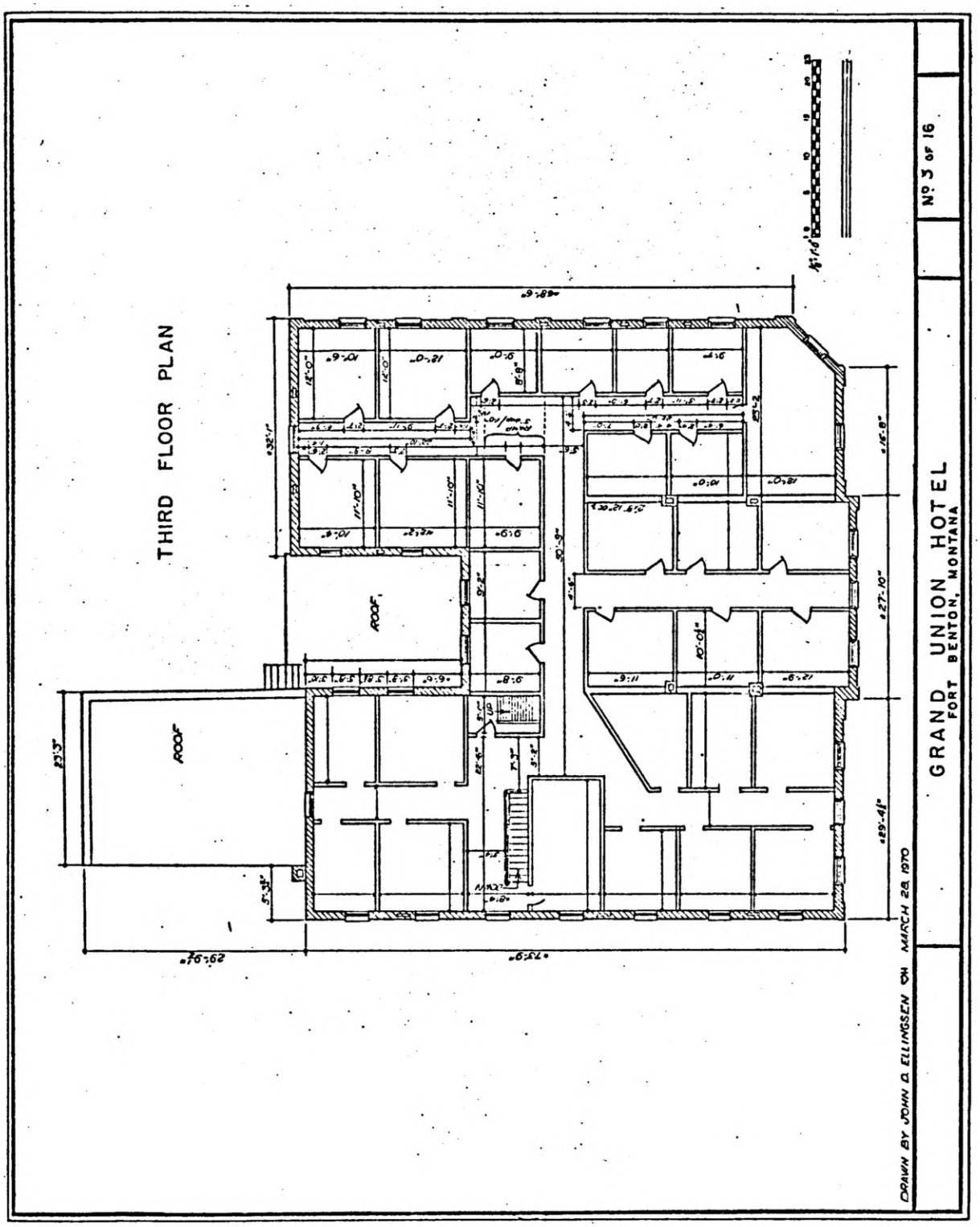
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[1]A picture of two unidentified people in a yard west of the Grand UnionHotel shows the outhouses and walkways in the background. The picture is in the Grand Union Hotel Collection; copy in Fort Benton Picture File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena.

Plate III. Third Floor Plan

As is clearly seen in both the small size and the very simple woodwork (see Plate XII, page 84), the third floor rooms did not have as high a status as those on the second floor. Their arrangement is logical, without so much regard for placing big rooms in the front as was found on the second floor. Only one stairway leads to the third floor. (Fire escapes provide emergency exits today but were not installed until 1952.) Individual stoves heated each room, and each had its own chimney. Because the outhouses did not extend to the third floor, guests had to descend a flight of stairs to use the facilities. Though several rooms on the third floor had no outside windows, skylights made them more pleasant than the dark rooms on the second floor.

Originally, kerosene lamps provided the only light in the hotel, except for candles. Gas lights began to provide illumination only a few years later. A private acetylene generator, which worked on the same principle as a carbide miner's lamp and was buried well out in the yard lest it explode, furnished the gas. In 1900 exposed "knob and tube" style wiring began to furnish electric lights. In the 1950's, Harold Thomas completely rewired the building for "full housepower." Thus the Grand Union completely spans the transition in lighting which is one


THIRD FLOOR PLAN
ROOF
ROOF
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 3 of 16
DRAWN BY JOHN A ELLINGSEN ON MARCH 28 1970

of the most important accomplishments of the modern era. Large, modern apartments occupy the third floor today, and ample private baths are provided for every sleeping room.

A steep stairway from the third floor led to the roof. A tin-copper alloy put down in strips about one foot wide with flat seams made up the original roofing. All the seams were hand soldered, a tremendous task considering that there was a little over a mile of soldered seam to be made water tight. The roofers did a good job: the roof never leaked until after the big hail storm of July, 1956.[1] A built-up roof now covers the copper.

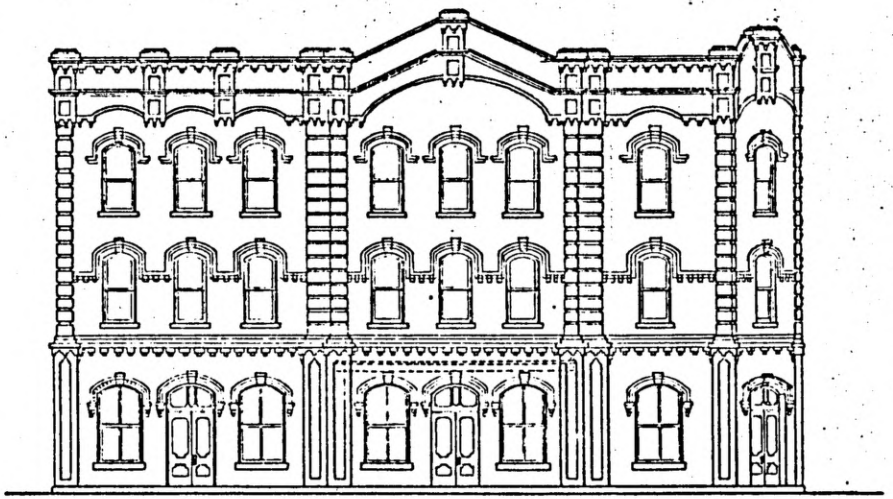
Plate IV. Front Elevation

The "Bond Street Front," which contained the main entrance to the lobby, appears in this scale drawing. The exterior design of the hotel is its most interesting and unique architectural feature. Though it does not fit into any historically recognized pattern, it has elements from several historical styles.

While the term "Victorian" describes the style of architecture of the Grand Union, the term also denotes such dissimilar buildings as the Pittsburgh Block and Novelty Building of Helena, the weird Corn Palace of Minot, North Dakota, the gingerbread covered carpenter-gothic mansion of

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970.



FRONT (NORTH EAST) ELEVATION

DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN 'OH MARCH 24, 1970

	GRAND UNION HOTEL FORT BENTON, MONTANA		Nº 4 or 16	

Nevada City, Montana, the Richardsonian Romanesque City-County Building in Salt Lake City, the Mormon Temple, the J. K. Wells Hotel in Garnet, and the "irregular mansard cottage" of E. R. Wilton in Fort Benton. In short, anything built between 1850 and 1910 can be called Victorian.

Elements of French Renaissance origin are most predominant in the facade of the Grand Union. Such features include the window caps, pillisters, and the exterior doors (see Plate IX, page 75). The deep "rustication" grooves in the upper pillisters derive from England. However, the rest of the front has little historical precedent.

Turning from the strictly historical architectural features to those of American origin, the Hotel fits into what has been termed the "General Grant" style; but it has more elaborate brickwork than most "Grant" buildings.[1] Unique features found on the Grand Union include the paneled chimney bases, the pediments, and the elaborate string courses. During the Grand Union era, there was a general tendency to copy details in brick which were obtained from cabinet work such as the lower paneled pillisters and the simulated mouldings. The Grand Union

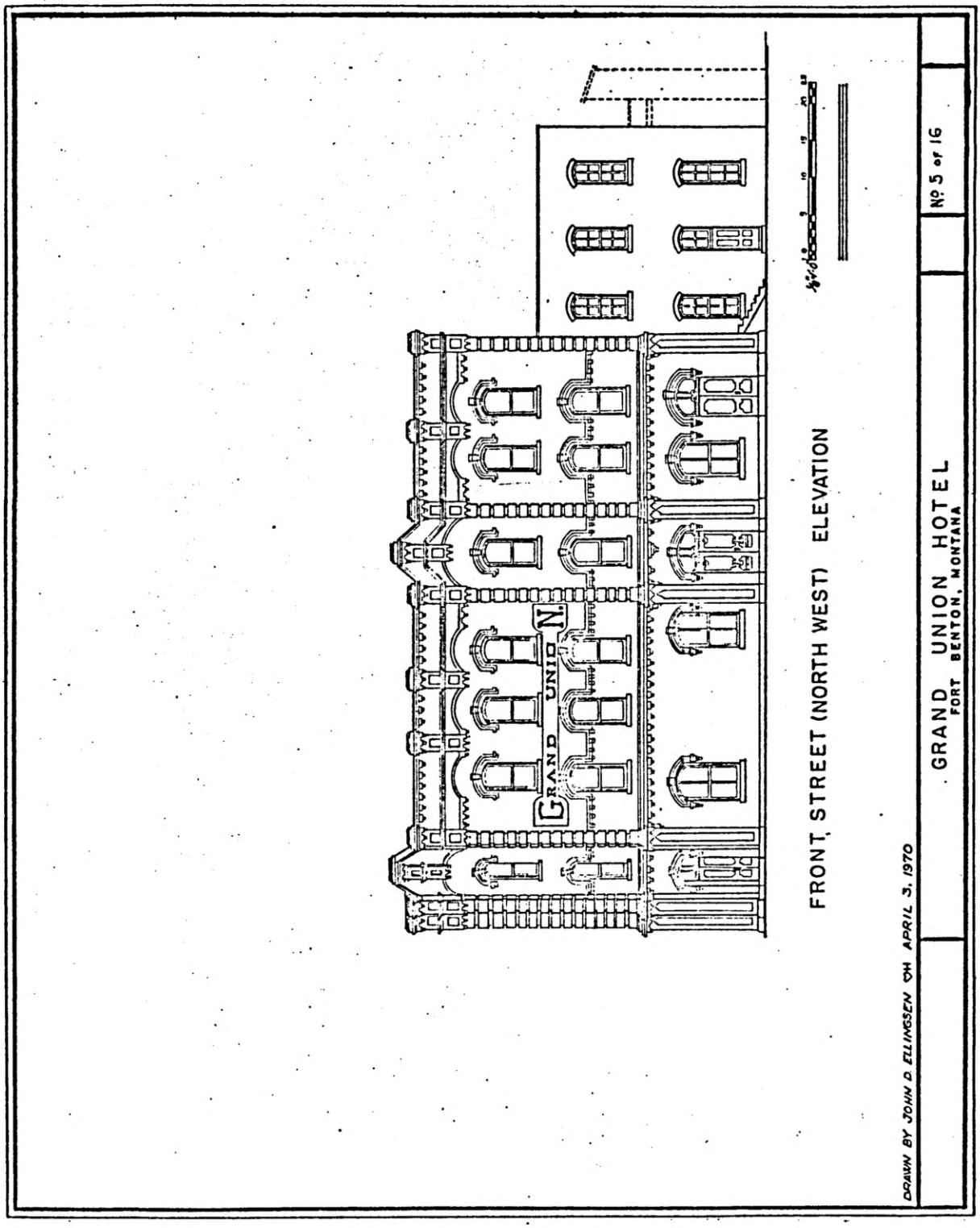
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[1]The U. S. Assay Office, 206 Broadway, Helena, Montana, is a typical "General Grant" style of building. Plain or Champhered stonework, plain, solid brickwork, and very little detailing in brick except the cornice, plus a mansard roof, are the usual earmarks of the style.

demonstrates these features well. The official Historic American Building Survey Registration calls the Grand Union's style "eclectic," meaning it was derived from various sources; but it would almost be possible to put it into a separate style named "Grand Union" which would designate it and many similar buildings of the same era.

Plate V. Front Street Elevation

The most distinctive facade of the Grand Union faces what is actually Fort Benton's main thoroughfare, Front Street. Unlike most river and sea port towns, Fort Benton's water front neither lost its status as a business district nor became a "blighted area" as the town moved away. This tendency was anticipated by Main Street, located a block north of Front Street. But Main Street has remained residential in most respects and was never the location of the major banks or stores. One reason for this may be that, as steamboating died, the docks and water front took on a sentimental, historical connotation. Shortly after 1900, the whole river front was converted into a park. But a more important reason is found in the Grand Union. This hotel, the dominant and the finest building in town, rose right at the river's edge. The banks and stores, which were built about the same time, clustered about this great status symbol. The only large business


GRAND UNION
FRONT STREET (NORTH WEST) ELEVATION
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN OH APRIL 3, 1970
No 5 of 16

blocks built on Main Street were the 1876 I. G. Baker Company store and the 1879 Record Building.[1]

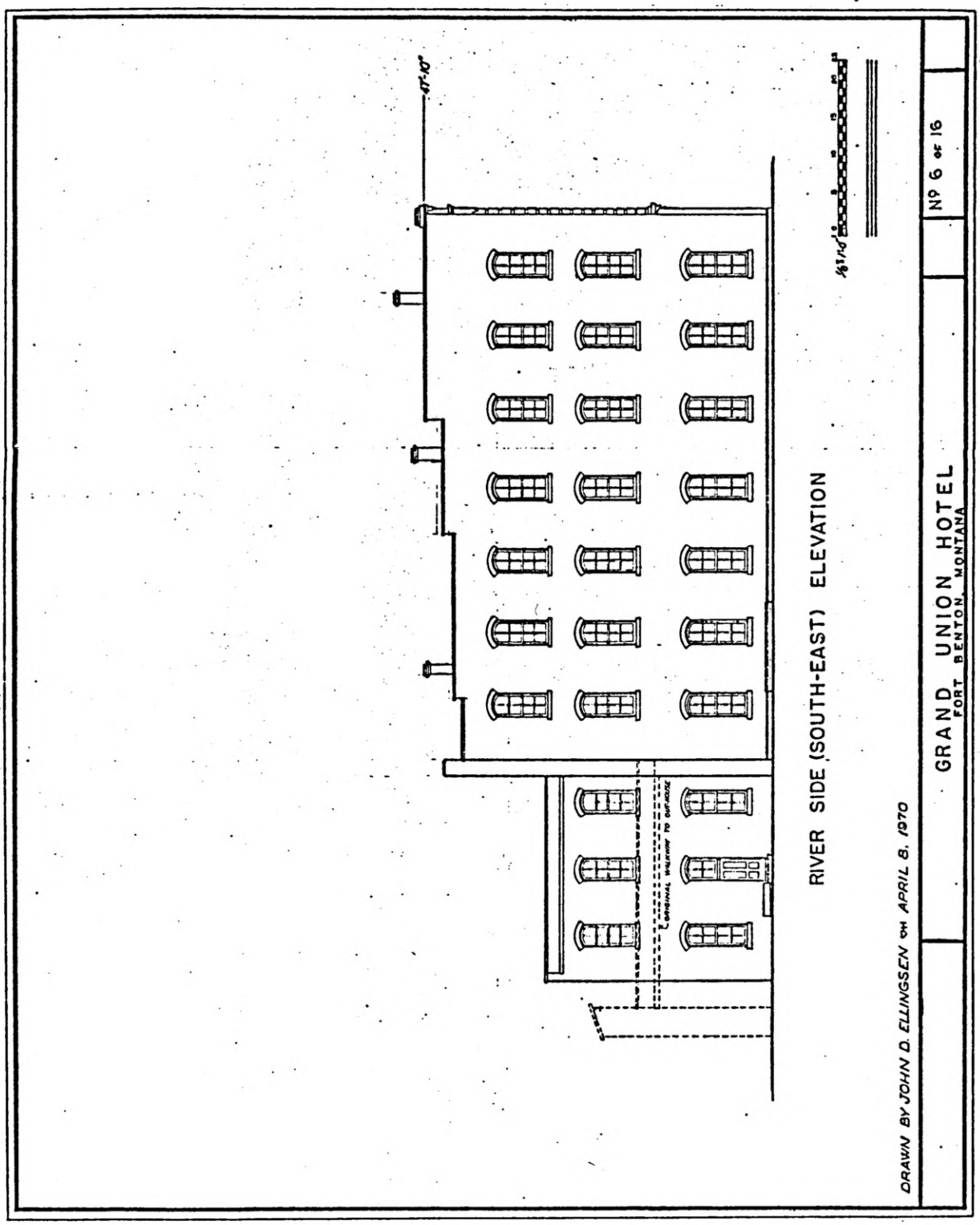
The huge sign bearing the name of the hotel is essential to the architecture of the Grand Union. The sign, painted directly on the brick, has a white background with black letters. The style of lettering can only be called "Grand Union." It is one of few remaining examples dating from before the age of neon and plastic "visual pollution." Just as its simple elegance is symbolic of the elegant building it advertises, Harold Thomas's repainting of the sign exactly to original lines in 1968 typifies the care he has taken to keep the historic edifice authentic.

Plate VI. River Side Elevation

It seems surprising that the riverside front of the hotel did not receive a facade as fancy as those on Front and Bond Streets. The builders planned for most of the customers to arrive by boat. However, it is quite plain and typifies the backs of 1880's buildings. The stepped lowering of the brick walls as the roof sloped to the back

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[1]The I. G. Baker Co., built in 1876, has many features similar to the Grand Union Hotel. The original cornice details and window caps are almost identical. The Record building is now the Fort Benton Masonic Temple, the mansard roof having been removed and the wall details covered with stucco. In the 1880's boom, many wooden stores lined Main Street, but these have mostly been replaced by houses of the 1900 era.


RIVER SIDE (SOUTH-EAST) ELEVATION
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN ON APRIL 8, 1970
Nº 6 of 16

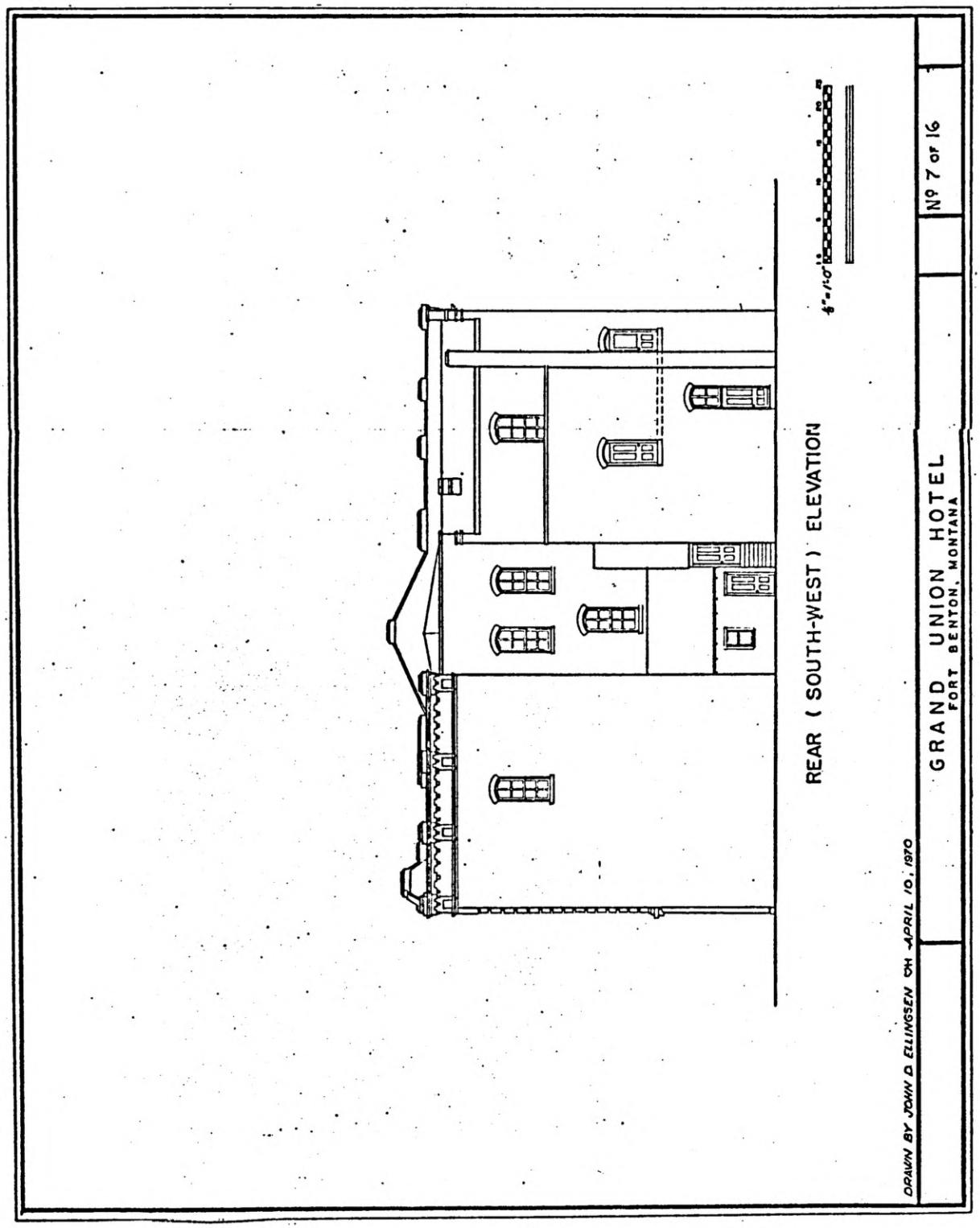
is a feature found on almost all older buildings.

Note that the windows on this side and the rear have four panes of glass in each sash, while sashes in the front have a single large glass pane. Shipping large sheets of glass was very difficult in the steamboat era (see also Plate IX, page 76).

The location of the dining room overlooking the river symbolizes the importance of that great transportation artery. No more romantic location could be found for a restaurant. The newspapers constantly bragged about the fine view of the river. While partaking of the exceptional cuisine, diners could look out to see the steamboats unloading or passing through the draw bridge.

Plate VII. Rear Elevation

The builders of the Grand Union Hotel planned this side of the hotel to be viewed only in part. They finished the top of the Front Street wing with ornaments to match the front, while leaving the lower portion plain. The optimists who designed the hotel fully expected another brick building to be built against the lower portion of the wall. Such a building would, of course, be at least two stories high. They could easily see the time when Front Street, Main Street, and all the other streets clear back to the


REAR (SOUTH-WEST) ELEVATION
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
Nº 7 of 16
DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN 'DH -APRIL 10, 1970

bluffs would be crowded with Eastern style buildings.[1]

The railroads killed Fort Benton's ambitions, and Benton's "building boom" of 1882 moved to Helena and Butte. Today the back of the hotel presents a far different view from what the promoters planned. Before the recent construction of a small dental office, a sort of park occupied the space behind the hotel. The artificial ice plant and cupuloed ice house nestled in the dense green of the lawn and cottonwood trees.

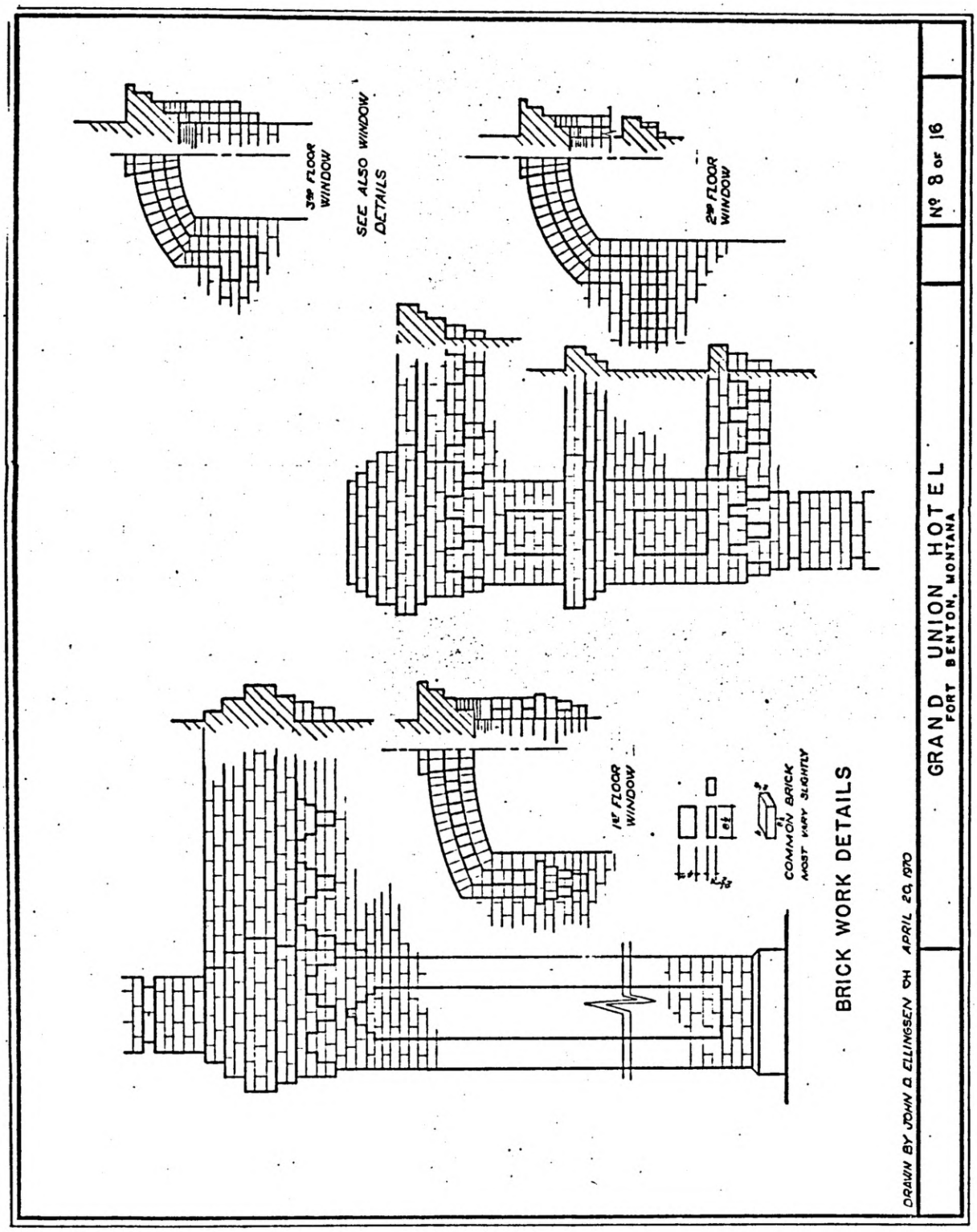
The two second floor doors to the outhouses appear on the right hand or kitchen wing. The shallow court allows all rooms to have a view of at least the trees, if not the river.

Plate VIII. Brickwork Details

The unique character of the Grand Union lies mainly in its brickwork, executed in red and yellow common brick. DeWolf and Wilton, successors to Storer and Storer, made the bricks from clay found near the present depot, using a brick-making machine which arrived on the Butte in early

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[1]The River Press and Benton Record rarely missed an opportunity to tell readers that Fort Benton would soon rival St. Paul or St. Louis in size. Their holiday editions are full of such claims. See especially the 1887 River Press Holiday Edition.


3RD FLOOR WINDOW
SEE ALSO WINDOW DETAILS
2ND FLOOR WINDOW
1ST FLOOR WINDOW
COMMON BRICK MAY VARY SLIGHTLY
BRICK WORK DETAILS
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
DRAWN BY JOHN A ELLINGSEN '04 APRIL 29, 1910
Nº 8 of 16

July, 1881.[1] The hotel contains about a half million bricks, each carefully set to produce the desired effects of strength and endurance.

While buildings erected later in the 1880's, especially in Helena, relied on pressed brick mouldings which appeared to have been hand carved, the Grand Union was built before such luxuries were available in remote Montana. Its mouldings consist of carefully fitted and imaginatively designed combinations of whole bricks. Yellow bricks generally form the features which should stand out, such as the window caps, string courses, and panel frames. The pillisters, also of yellow brick, outline the building. Though they look simple from a distance, one must actually see the decorations to comprehend fully and appreciate their rugged yet elegant appearance.

The walls are laid in American bond, with a bond or tie course every tenth row. While the walls appear perfect even at close range, examination reveals that the bricks are far from uniform in size. The masons not only had to keep their work vertical and level, but had to choose small bricks to use next to large ones.

The builders of the hotel laid out the entire building, not to abstract dimensions, but to the module of

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[1]River Press, July 14, 1881, p. 8.

the common brick (8½"x4"x2½"). (See Plate I, pages 45 and 47) While the carpenters and masons (or millwrights as they were called at the time) were not graduate architects, they knew their trade well. The structures they built are generally stronger than modern ones because economic factors prevent today's construction companies from "over-building." Costs now hinder the use of skilled labor as it was employed seventy-five years ago, and the fine materials--knot-free floor joists and beams of large dimension, clear pine, walnut, and oak woodwork, even fine building stones--are simply no longer available, the supply having been exhausted.[1]

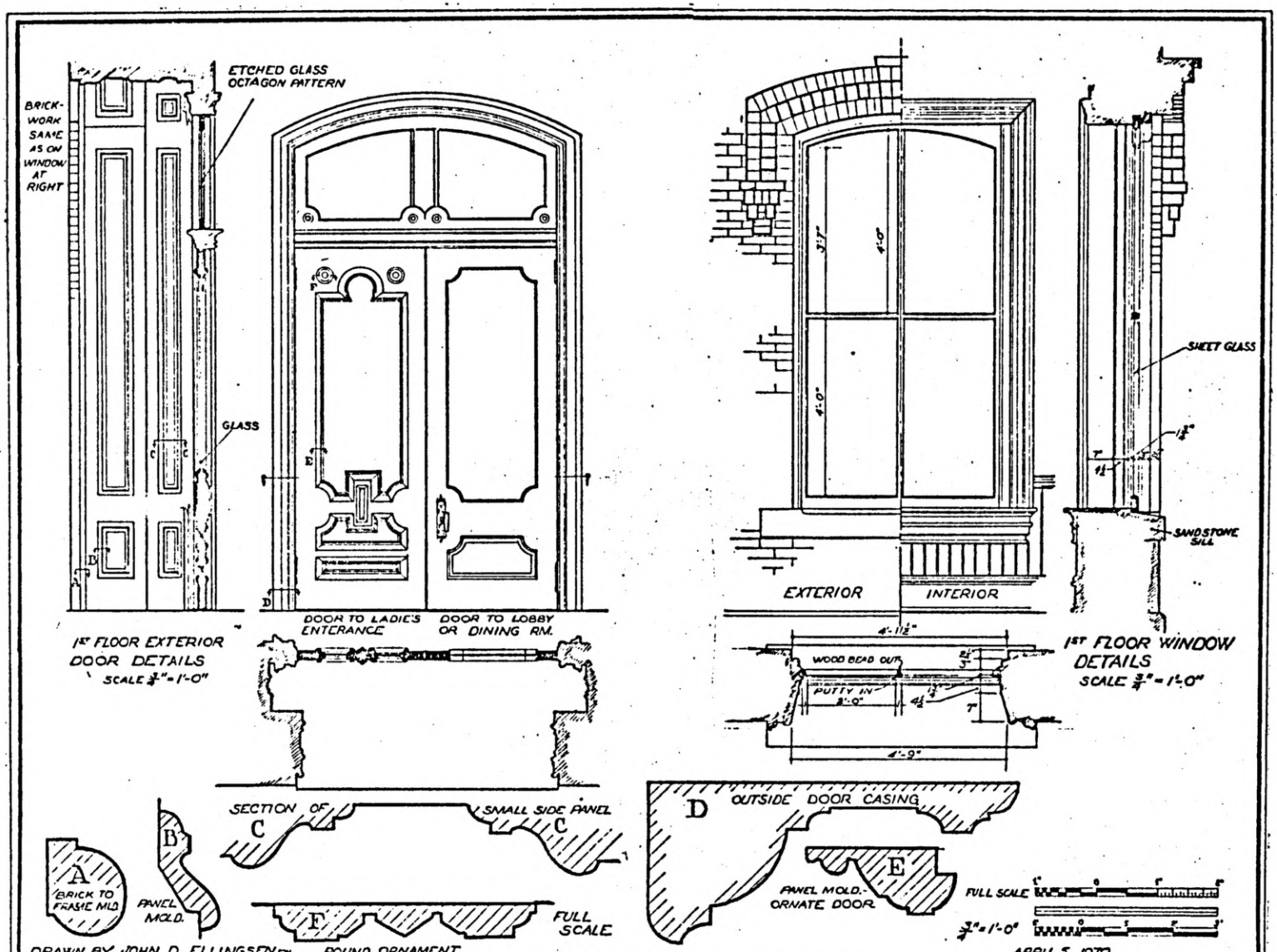
Atop the paneled cornice decoration, tall spires and pinnacles originally stood. While decorative, they functioned as the tops of the individual chimneys connected to the wood stoves in the rooms below. Weathering led to their removal about 1952.

Plate IX. First Floor Exterior Doors and Windows

Leaving openings "so many bricks wide" made the work of the masons easy, but this module sizing of openings required custom-made door and window frames. Window sashes

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[1]This is not only the opinion of the author, but also of numerous other authorities such as Don Melgren, Bureau of Land Management, Missoula, Montana, and John N. DeHaas, Architecture Department, Montana State University, Bozeman.


BRICK-WORK SAME AS ON WINDOW AT RIGHT
ETCHED GLASS OCTAGON PATTERN
GLASS
DOOR TO LADIE'S ENTERANCE
DOOR TO LOBBY OR DINING RM.
1st FLOOR EXTERIOR DOOR DETAILS
SCALE 3/4"=1'-0"
EXTERIOR
INTERIOR
SHEET GLASS
SANDSTONE SILL
WOOD BEAD OUT
PUTTY IN
1st FLOOR WINDOW DETAILS
SCALE 3/4"=1'-0"
SECTION OF
SMALL SIDE PANEL
A
BRICK TO FRAME MLD.
B
PANEL MOLD.
C
D
OUTSIDE DOOR CASING
E
PANEL MOLD.- ORNATE DOOR
F
ROUND ORNAMENT
FULL SCALE
FULL SCALE
3/4"=1'-0"
DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN
APRIL 5, 1970
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 9 of 16

used in the upstairs of the hotel came up the river by steamboat.[1] Fitting them to odd sized openings required skillful use of mouldings to cover any wide cracks.[2] The non-standard size rough windows made little difference on the first floor, however, since all doors and windows were hand made.

Women using the ladies' stairs passed through some of the fanciest doors in Montana. At one of Fort Benton's centennials, replicas of these doors alone placed the setting in the Grand Union Hotel. Other doors are more plain. Remodeling may have removed their gingerbread, but it is also possible that the ladies, who better appreciated fine details, just naturally deserved fancier doors. Transoms above hold etched glass in the popular octagon design.

The first floor windows have a special historical significance, predating the railroad era. Rather than being made of plate glass supported by thin cast iron columns of a semi-standard type, like almost all Helena buildings have, the Grand Union's first floor windows contain four panes of wavy, old fashioned sheet window glass in a wooden frame. Plate glass, impossible to ship by steamboat, arrived with

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[1] "Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 53.

[2] Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970.

the railroads, but not before.[1] The Grand Union is one of the last remaining examples of the pre-plate glass age.

Moulding details, full scale sections, and decorations occupy over half the space in a typical set of Historic American Buildings Survey drawings, while floor plans take up only about twenty percent of the sheets. The small details, such as the mouldings and panels which surround the Grand Union's doors, gave Victorian buildings their charm and character, but accounted for only a tiny fraction of the total cost. This "gingerbread" is usually so small that it can easily be carried away in a private car--this in fact, has stripped most of Montana's ghost towns of their original colorful ornamentation. The mouldings used throughout the Grand Union Hotel have a special significance because they were made by hand using moulding planes. More about this "lost art" will be found in the next few pages.

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[1]The Bach-Cory Building, also known as the Gookind Block and at present the State Nursery Flower Shop, on the southeast corner of Sixth and Main (139 North Main) in Helena was the first building in Montana to use large plate glass windows in a narrow, nearly invisible cast iron frame. The huge display windows seemed to greatly surprise people at the time, and the Helena Independent wrote in defense that the plate glass was "a beauty and no mistake." (December 18, 1884) The building was built right after the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad which stole much of Fort Benton's freight traffic and ruined its "future prosperity."

Plate X. First Floor Interior Woodwork

From Colonial times until about 1919, builders considered interior woodwork as important to a well designed building as the exterior facade.[1,2,3] The style of woodwork found in the Grand Union, using mitered joints and deep mouldings, passed its height of popularity in the East shortly after the Civil War. Most 1880's structures employ the "round corner block" style, a type where blocks decorated with circles form the corners of door and window frames. If Tweedy seems a bit old fashioned in his choice, recall that the Grand Union rose only sixteen years after the end of the Civil War, during a period when other Montana cities built with logs and occasionally with rough stone. It is one of the oldest, well preserved brick buildings in the State.[4]

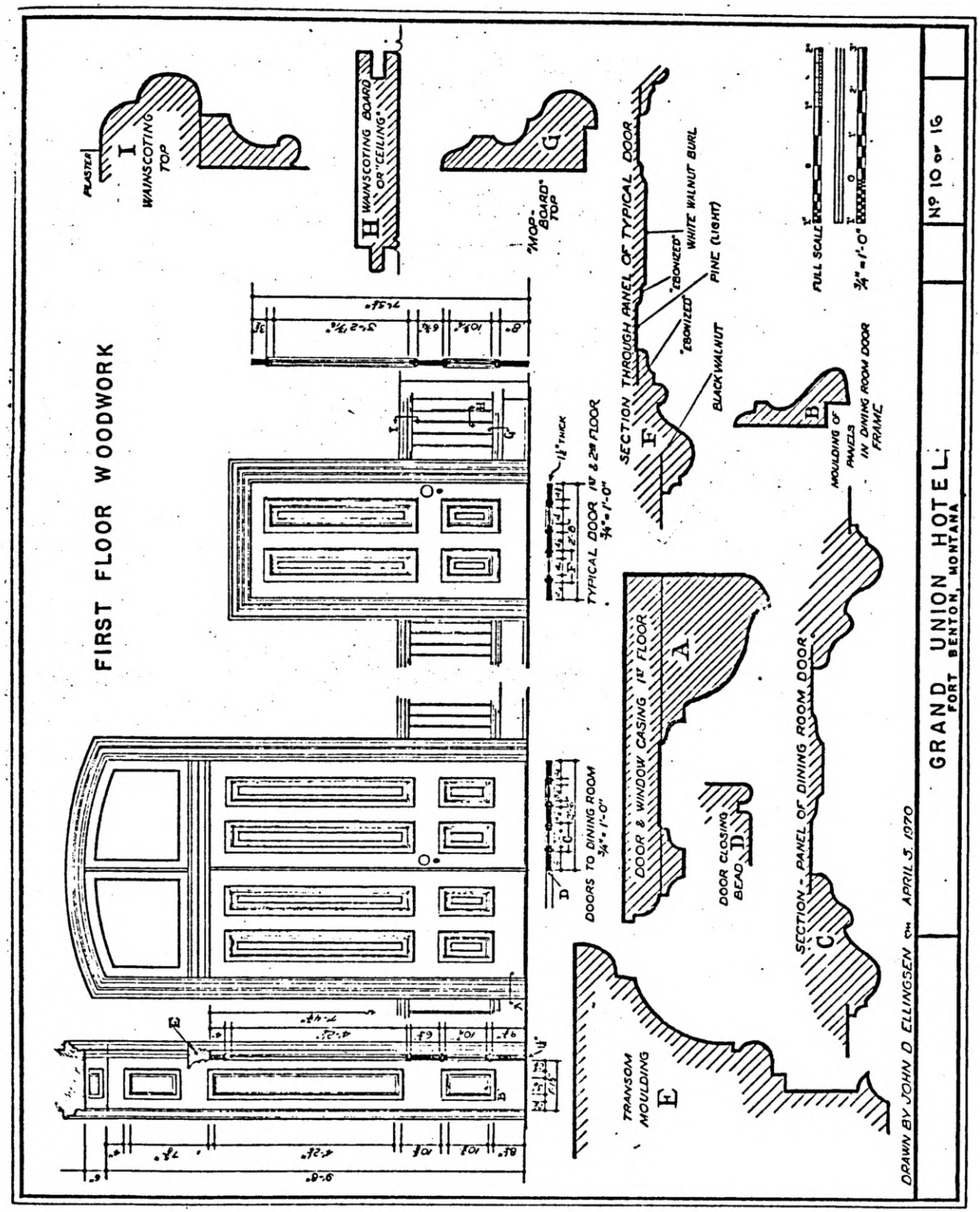
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[1]Kidder

[2]1866 Curtis General Millwork Catalogue, 1914 (Oklahoma City: Curtis Millwork Co., 1914).

[3]"House Building or How to Obtain a Home," The Home Educator (Circa 1870). This is an excellent book on Victorian house planning as it related to social aspects, and also includes articles on almost every other subject from penmanship to "what every man should know about ancient Greece."

[4]A few of the brick buildings which are older than the Grand Union include the Madison County Court House, Rank's Drug Store, the Masonic Temple, and Content's Corner in Viriginia City, the courthouse in Bannack, and several structures in Fort Benton. Almost all of Helena's large buildings date from 1884 to 1892, especially 1888 and 1889.


FIRST FLOOR WOODWORK
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 10 or 16
DRAWN BY JOHN D ELLINGSEN APRIL 3, 1970
I
WAINSCOTING TOP
PLASTER
H
WAINSCOTING BOARD OR "CEILING"
G
"MOP-BOARD" TOP
SECTION THROUGH PANEL OF TYPICAL DOOR
F
"ZEBONEED" WHITE WALNUT BURL
"ZEBONEED" PINE (LIGHT)
BLACK WALNUT
B
MOULDING OF PANELS IN DINING ROOM DOOR FRAME
FULL SCALE
¾" = 1'-0"
TYPICAL DOOR 1ST & 2ND FLOOR
¾" = 1'-0"
1¾" THICK
DOORS TO DINING ROOM
¾" = 1'-0"
A
DOOR & WINDOW CASING 1ST FLOOR
DOOR CLOSING BEAD D
SECTION - PANEL OF DINING ROOM DOOR
C
TRANSOM MOULDING
E

A few of the mouldings in the hotel came up the river from Minnesota,[1] but production of most took place in Fort Benton. Only the most expert of joiners engaged in the creation of mouldings, a true art requifying not only imagination and talent with the large set of wooden moulding planes but an almost unbelievable amount of patience and endurance, doing the same thing time and again. Each moulding plane contained a special blade to produce a particular shape. By skillfully combining the shapes, any contour became possible. Measurement with a contour gauge reveals that few of the mouldings are exactly alike, proving their hand-made origin.

Interior woodwork not only symbolizes many hours of tedious work with hand planes, it is also an emblem of the "era of elegance." Craftsmen carefully selected grain patterns for woodwork, and polished them with a natural finish. Wainscotings and doors were as important to well-furnished rooms as the furniture itself.

The first floor doors were indeed showpieces. The clear pine frames held panels veneered with white walnut burl. Black walnut mouldings surrounded the panels. Wainscoting protected the lower walls in the first floor rooms, and wide base boards or "mop boards" connected the rich

---

[1]"Up-River Freight Book," 1882, p. 64.

color of the wainscoting to the floor.

Unfortunately, the 1899-1900 remodeling included imitation oak graining which covered the natural finishes with opaque colors. Only a couple of the doors remain original. Enamel found its way onto the upstairs woodwork about the same time, and even the black walnut bar received a coat of paint!

Plate XI. Second Floor Woodwork and Windows

Coming up the grand staircase from the lobby, one enters a large light hall with doors of the design shown here. However, only the ladies' parlors have the ultra-fancy doors. Other second floor rooms have doors with rectangular panels, just like the small doors found on the first floor (Plate X). Second floor door frame mouldings differ from those on the first floor. The base board cap, one of the few mouldings in the hotel made by machinery, came up the river on the steamboats.[1] The servants' quarters over the kitchen have a very plain type of woodwork, the same as that shown on Plate XII. While the servants lacked the luxury of fancy door frames, they enjoyed the convenience of being close to the "bathrooms."

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[1] Ibid.

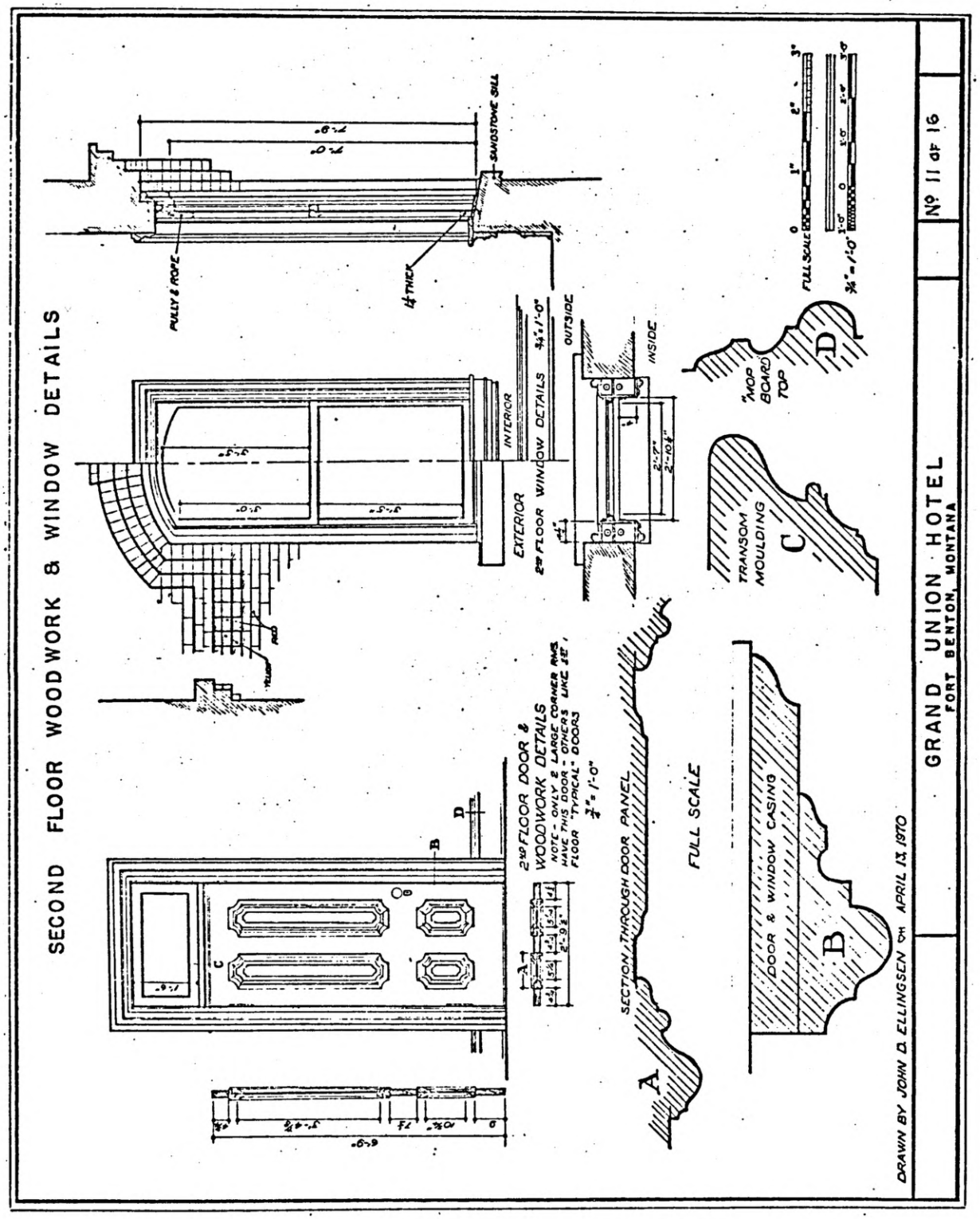

SECOND FLOOR WOODWORK & WINDOW DETAILS
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 11 of 16
DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN ON APRIL 15, 1970
PULLY & ROPE
SANDSTONE SILL
4" THICK
EXTERIOR
INTERIOR
2nd FLOOR WINDOW DETAILS
OUTSIDE
INSIDE
2nd FLOOR DOOR & WOODWORK DETAILS
NOTE - ONLY 2 LARGE CORNER RMS. HAVE THIS DOOR - OTHERS LIKE 1st FLOOR "TYPICAL" DOORS
SECTION THROUGH DOOR PANEL
FULL SCALE
TRANSOM MOULDING
"MOP BOARD" TOP
DOOR & WINDOW CASING
FULL SCALE
A
B
C
D

Plate XII. Third Floor Woodwork, Windows, and Rear Windows

The builders of the Grand Union designed the third floor to be rented to the less affluent: prospectors, cowboys, miners, and assorted laborers, none of whom, they assumed, could really appreciate or afford fine details. The plain type of woodwork found on this floor shows that the class system seemed well developed in the minds of Mr. Todd and Mr. Tweedy.

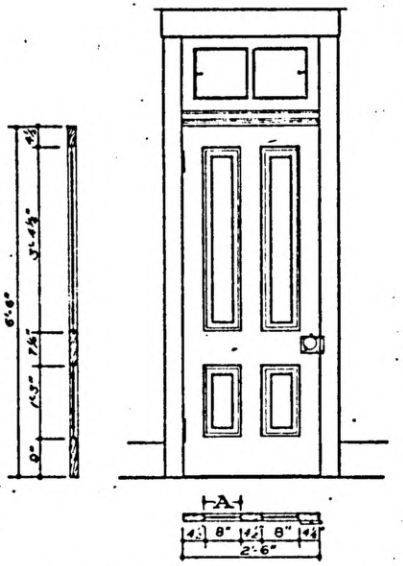
A "rope slide" mechanism counterbalances all the double hung windows in the hotel. An interesting feature (found in all good window frames of this type) is the little removable door, which allows the window weight to be retrieved in case the rope should break.

Though thin wooden mullions obstruct the vistas from the rear window, the tops of these windows are nonethe-less rounded to fit into the true segmental arches. Segmental arches are very common in brick buildings until the time of steel supports, but most filled the resulting "typanum" with wood centering. Running the glass up into this area is a unique feature of the Grand Union.

Plates XIII and XIV. Staircase Details

The grand staircase from the main lobby to the second floor is one of the most interesting and beautiful

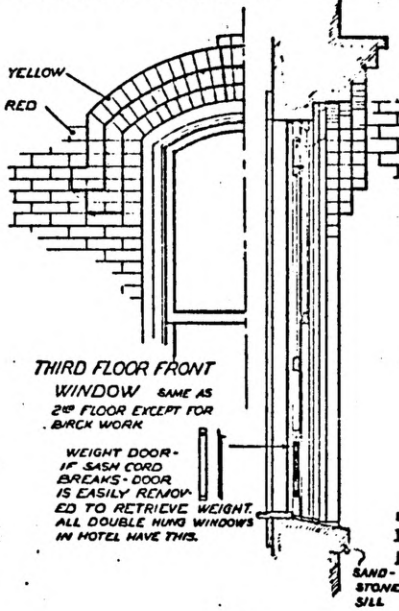
THIRD FLOOR WOODWORK & WINDOW DETAILS



THIRD FLOOR DOOR & WOODWORK
NOTE - THIS SIMPLE TYPE WOODWORK IS ALSO USED ON 2ND FLOOR OVER THE KITCHEN ONLY. RIM LOCKS ON INSIDE OF DOORS. TRANSOMS HUNG ON WINDOW "STOPS" 3/4" = 1'-0"

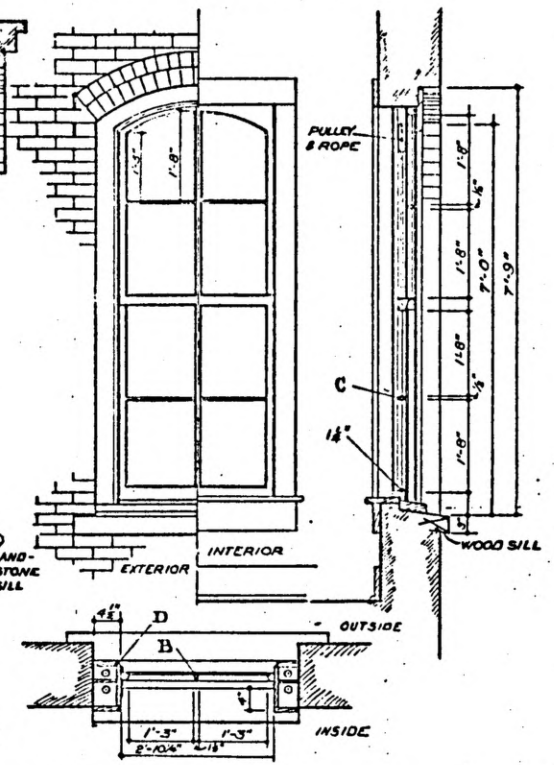


REAR WINDOW DETAILS



THIRD FLOOR FRONT WINDOW SAME AS 2ND FLOOR EXCEPT FOR BRICK WORK

WEIGHT DOOR - IF SASH CORD BREAKS - DOOR IS EASILY REMOVED TO RETRIEVE WEIGHT. ALL DOUBLE HUNG WINDOWS IN HOTEL HAVE THIS.



DETAILS OF WINDOWS ON BACK, COURT, & RIVER SIDE, 2ND & 3RD FLOOR
ALL WINDOWS DIFFER SLIGHTLY 3/4" = 1'-0"

FULL SCALE

VERTICAL MULLION

HORIZONTAL MULLION

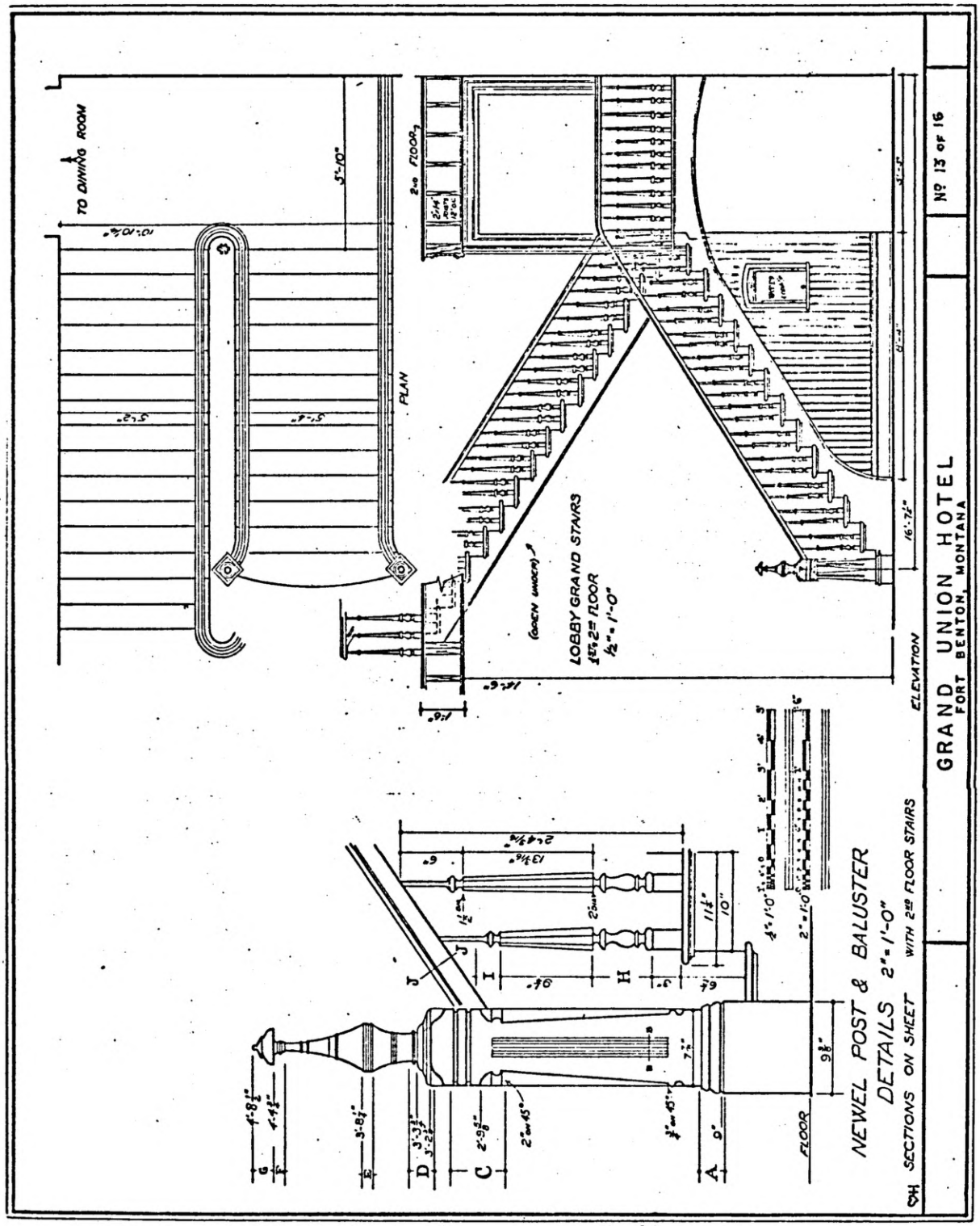


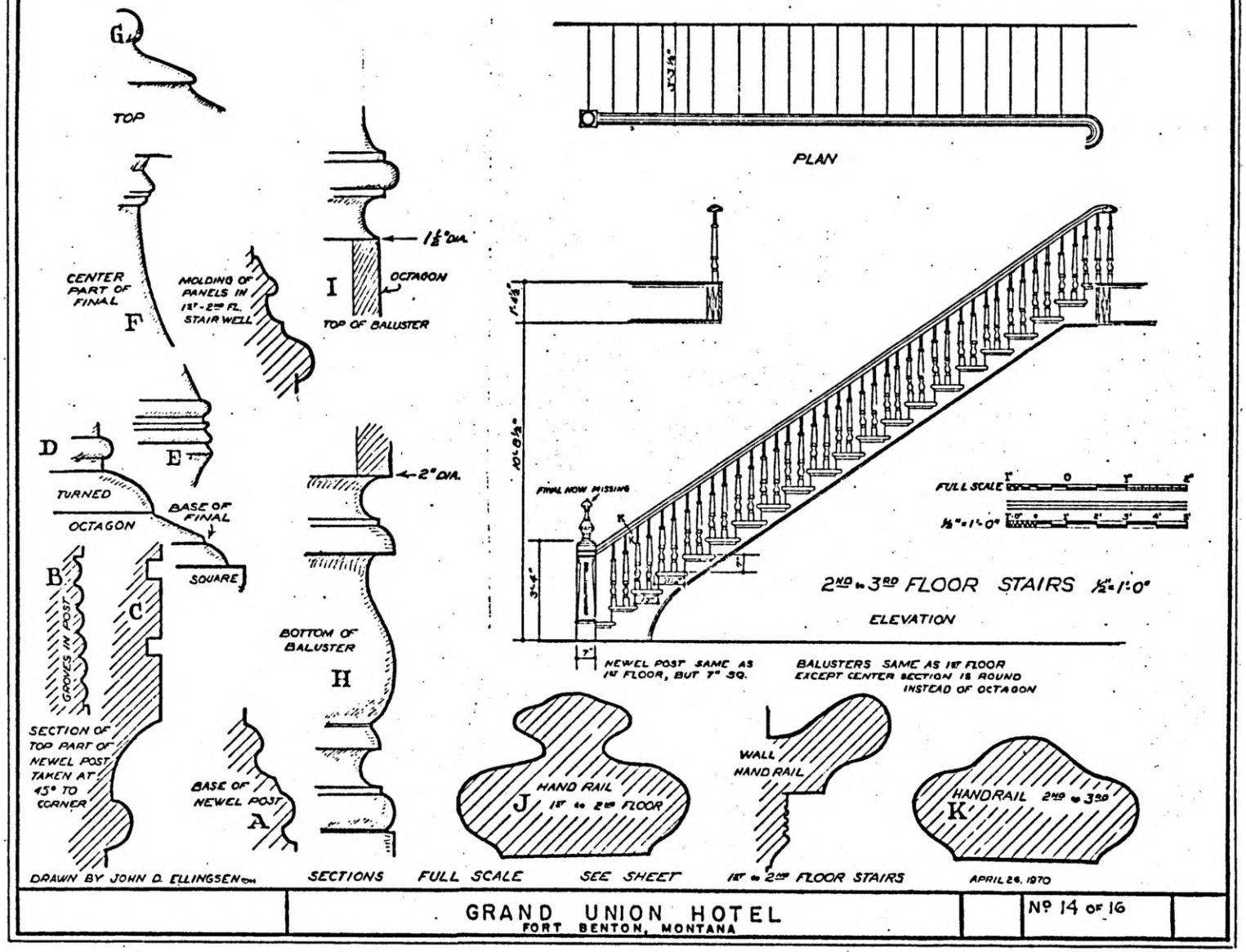


DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN ON APRIL 28, 1970

GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA

No 12 of 16


GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 13 of 16
LOBBY GRAND STAIRS
1ST & 2ND FLOOR
½"=1'-0"
PLAN
ELEVATION
NEWEL POST & BALUSTER
DETAILS 2"=1'-0"
SEE SECTIONS ON SHEET WITH 2ND FLOOR STAIRS
TO DINING ROOM
2nd FLOOR
(OPEN UNDER)
FLOOR


G
TOP
CENTER PART OF FINAL
F
MOLDING OF PANELS IN 1ST - 2ND FL. STAIR WELL
1 1/8" DIA.
I
OCTAGON
TOP OF BALUSTER
D
E
TURNED
OCTAGON
BASE OF FINAL
SQUARE
B
GROVES IN POST
C
SECTION OF TOP PART OF NEWEL POST TAKEN AT 45° TO CORNER
2" DIA.
BOTTOM OF BALUSTER
H
BASE OF NEWEL POST
A
PLAN
FINIAL NOW MISSING
FULL SCALE
1/2" = 1'-0"
2ND to 3RD FLOOR STAIRS 1/2" = 1'-0"
ELEVATION
NEWEL POST SAME AS 1ST FLOOR, BUT 7" SQ.
BALUSTERS SAME AS 1ST FLOOR EXCEPT CENTER SECTION IS ROUND INSTEAD OF OCTAGON
HAND RAIL
J
1ST to 2ND FLOOR
WALL HAND RAIL
1ST to 2ND FLOOR STAIRS
HANDRAIL 2ND to 3RD
K
DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN
SECTIONS FULL SCALE SEE SHEET
APRIL 24, 1970
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
No 14 OF 16

parts of the Grand Union Hotel. The Helena brought the solid black walnut parts up the Missouri from St. Paul, Minnesota.[1] The balustrade posts represent a tremendous amount of tiresome work by some unidentified worker in a St. Paul millwork factory. The popularity of this post design reached its height during and right after the Civil War. Later balustrade posts usually have square tops and bottoms reproducing older Colonial designs.

The stairs in the Grand Union felt the tread of not only fashionable ladies and gentlemen, but also the heavy boots of miners and stage drivers, cowboys and cattle kings. One cowboy made a bet that he could ride his horse up the stairs and retreated only after a frantic night clerk persuaded him with fourteen bullets. Homesteader's children thought the water cooler under the stairs contained the best free drinks obtainable, especially after a long hot ride to town.

In keeping with the lower status of the third floor, the stairway leading to it is narrower and simpler than the grand stairs. The ladies' stairs (now removed) were a straight, narrow version of the lobby staircase. Wainscoting enclosed the dining room stairs, which descended

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[1] Ibid.

from the landing of the grand staircase.[1]

Plate XV. Desk

This piece de resistance, the lobby desk, was one of the last things made before the opening of the hotel on November 2, 1882. Lifted into position after the safe was installed on October 25, it has never been moved since.[2]

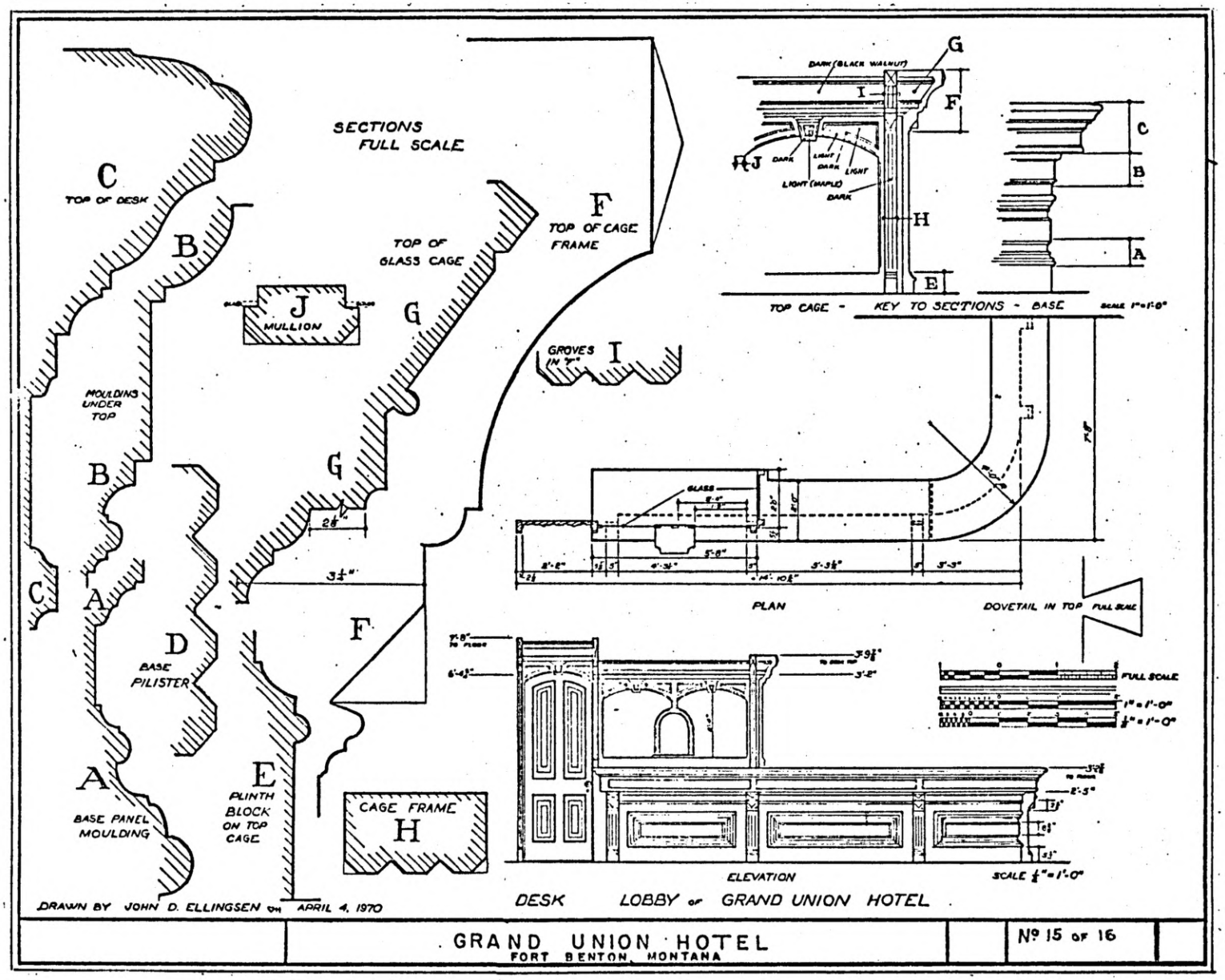
Fort Benton cabinet makers Jones and Merrill made the desk more elaborate than any other in Montana, including even that of the Broadwater Hotel or the Montana Hotel of Anaconda (both of which were built after the Grand Union).[3] Made entirely with hand tools, it contains almost as many mouldings as the rest of the hotel put together. On a project of this type, where the joiner did not have to make several hundred feet of the same contour, he could go "hog-wild" producing elaborate designs to suit his fancy.

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[1]Photograph of the Grand Union Dining Room in the Fort Benton Picture File, Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.

[2]River Press, November 1, 1882, p. 7.

[3]Benton Record, November 9, 1882, p. 1. It is, of course, the author's opinion that the Grand Union's desk is fancier. The desks in both the Broadwater Hotel and Marcus Daily's Montana Hotel were very elaborate, and of quarter sawed oak, a much more expensive wood than the Grand Union used. But both these desks are rather square and have panels of the type often used in doors and wainscoting. The Grand Union's desk stands unique.


SECTIONS
FULL SCALE
C
TOP OF DESK
B
MOULDING UNDER TOP
B
A
C
A
BASE PANEL MOULDING
D
BASE PILISTER
E
PLINTH BLOCK ON TOP CAGE
J
MULLION
TOP OF GLASS CAGE
G
G
2¼"
3½"
F
TOP OF CAGE FRAME
GROVES (¼" I
F
CAGE FRAME
H
DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN ON APRIL 4, 1970
DARK (BLACK WALNUT)
G
I
F
J
DARK
LIGHT DARK
LIGHT
LIGHT (MAPLE)
DARK
H
E
C
B
A
TOP CAGE - KEY TO SECTIONS - BASE
SCALE 1"=1'-0"
GLASS
PLAN
DOVETAIL IN TOP FULL SCALE
FULL SCALE
1" = 1'-0"
¼" = 1'-0"
ELEVATION
SCALE ¼"=1'-0"
DESK LOBBY OF GRAND UNION HOTEL
GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA
Nº 15 OF 16

The top of the desk consists of two huge boards held together by a row of perfectly fitting dovetails. Above it stands the cashier's cage, the most fantastic bit of cabinet architecture in the building. It has an arched window, wide cornices, pilaster strips, and a generous amount of polychrome wood. The cage is made of black walnut and what appears to be maple in contrasting bands; and, according to the Benton Record's description at the grand opening, contained stained glass windows (replaced with plain glass, probably in 1900). The door to the desk, another custom job, is complete with a knob that would fit no where better than beside this ultra-fancy desk. The solid brass knob pictures a bird cast in deep relief.

The desk includes a most unique feature for its time, a shallow drawer with holders for cards bearing the names of the occupants of the various rooms, their addresses, et cetera. While this system seems revolutionary for the days of leather bound register books, allowed the clerk to tell at a glance which rooms were vacant and even forecast the system used in the most modern motels today, it left no record of who stayed at the hotel. The cards were thrown away after the guests checked out and the names lost forever. Mark Twain may have slept in the Grand Union, and C. M. Russell no doubt frequented the third floor before

becoming famous, but without the register there is no absolute proof.

Above the desk hangs an 1876 Seth Thomas clock which tells the day and the month as well as the hour. Its hands have been checked by steamboat captains, stage drivers, passengers, miners, cowboys, cattle kings, merchant princes like T. C. Power and I. G. Baker, by homesteaders and ranchers. Today bus drivers set their watches by it, for, like the Grand Union Hotel, it ticks on, an enduring artifact of Northwest history.[1]

Plate XVI. Hardware

Victorian architects never overlooked the subject of hardware; they furnished the eye with an abundance of detail for even the closest inspection. Scroll work decorated hinges and conical "roofs" topped the hinge pins. Gothic tracery made the large exterior door plates of cast iron into a minature architecture in themselves. The rooms still retain their white china knobs with brass fittings. White plates bear the blue enameled room numbers. The large brass key tags and corresponding brass saddle tags are also shown. The saddle tags held a leather strap in the same manner as a watch fob for attachment to the saddles.

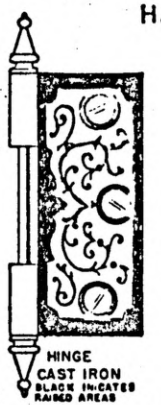
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[1]Jerry Madden, "Fort Benton Hotel Retains Flavor of the Frontier," Montana Parade, Great Falls Tribune, October 31, 1965, p. 2.

HARDWARE DETAILS



EXTERIOR DOOR LOCK
CAST IRON BLACK AREAS LOWERED



HINGE
CAST IRON
BLACK INDICATES RAISED AREAS



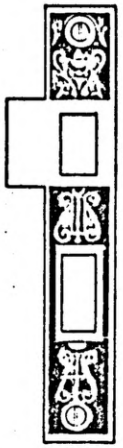
KEY TAG
SOLID BRASS 1/16" THICK



SADDLE TAG
BRASS- 1/32" THICK



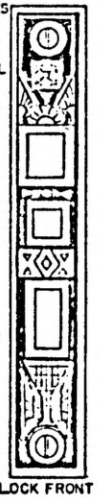
LOCK FRONT



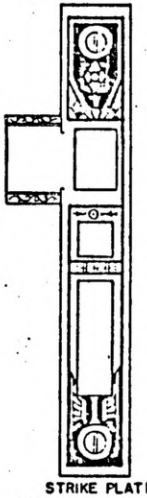
STRIKE PLATE

ORDINARY INTERIOR DOOR LOCK

NOTE: LOCK PLATES ARE SOLID BRASS. BLACK AREAS ARE LOWER & FILLED WITH BLACK ENAMEL



LOCK FRONT



STRIKE PLATE

HOTEL ROOM DOOR LOCK

DRAWN BY JOHN D. ELLINGSEN OH MAY 23, 1971

GRAND UNION HOTEL
FORT BENTON, MONTANA

Nº 16 of 16

Furniture

While the Benton Record quotations describe the interior decorations of the hotel fairly thoroughly, the furnishings deserve additional note. Fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money in 1882. That amount was spent building the Grand Union Hotel. The builders allocated three times that amount, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, on furniture and interior decoration.[1]

Guests of the Grand Union before 1900 found their rooms furnished with black walnut beds, marble topped walnut dressers and commodes, all with burl inlay. Since all the furniture was hand made,[2] it differed from room to room, the most expensive pieces being in the largest rooms, of course. All dressers had large French plate glass mirrors. Bedrooms also included marble topped tables, kerosene lamps, upholstered straight chairs, English china wash stand sets, and colored lithograph prints in gold leaf frames. The whole hotel was papered with imported, cloth-backed wallpaper decorated with real gold leaf. Gold leaf picture rail surrounded all the rooms in the building. Even at today's prices, the fifty hotel rooms accounts for only

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[1] River Press, October 22, 1969, p. 8.

[2] The handmade dovetail joints in the Grand Union's dressers, as well as their various designs, show that they were made individually, not by machine.

one third of the $150,000.00

The ladies' parlors and lobby contained the most elegant furnishings in the hotel. The square grand piano of hand carved rosewood remains the most important of the lobby furnishings. While folklore and legend have it that the piano came up the river on the first steamboat (along with a few dozen other pianos scattered throughout the state), this story seems highly unlikely. Actually, so far as can be traced, the piano, made by "Dura Howard" of St. Paul, arrived on the steamer Helena on May 15, 1882.[1] This piano and the lobby and dining room of the Grand Union Hotel have, since 1882, been the centers of countless grand balls, weddings, dances, and community functions of all types.

Other lobby furnishings included oil paintings, writing tables, numerous plush chairs, velvet draperies, and potted plants. Floral ingrain carpets, laid wall to wall, covered floors throughout the building, except in the dining room and saloon. The dining room with its heavy Roger's Brothers silver servcies, the well equipped kitchen, and the saloon with its exceptional stock of the finest liquors obtainable depleted the remainder of the $150,000.

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[1]"Up-River Freight Book," 1882, pp. 15-17.

CHAPTER IV

THE STEAMBOAT ERA

The Grand Union's guest list on the first two nights after its opening resembles a roster of the most prominent men in Montana history. Alex Staveley Hill, British capitalist and a member of Parliament, was the first guest,[1] followed by his brother H. Staveley Hill, the Conrad family, T. E. Collins, H. J. Wackerlin, W. S. Wetzel, Chas. E. Duer, G. W. Payne, Henry Kleinschmidt, Jos. Hirshberg, W. S. Baker, T. J. Todd, G. L. Overfeldt, William Rowe, W. G. Jones, Jno. H. Green, W. S. Stockings, J. W. Kousley of San Francisco, Jas Stewart of Ottawa, Canada, A. Haney of Pittsburgh, W. P. Wren of Louisville, Kentucky, Peter Conoley of New York City, Miss Nellie T. Kelley of St. Louis, J. F. Churchill, A. Nathan, Mr. and Mrs. Paris Gibson, W. O. Dexter, C. M. Thompson, John R. Craig of Oxley, North West Territories, and sixty one others.[2]

The Grand Union continued to fascinate the people of the entire Territory throughout the winter which followed.

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[1]Paul F. Sharp, Whoop-Up Country (Helena: Historical Society of Montana, 1960), p. 172.

[2]Benton Record, November 16, 1882, p. 5.

Another Grand Ball was held on December 7, the day the first Grand Union ad appeared in the River Press. Enough with the free publicity--now the hotel could help pay for the paper:

GRAND UNION HOTEL,
FORT BENTON, MONTANA,
The leading hotel of Montana Territory,
First Class in all of its Appointments,
STEPHEN SPITZLEY & CO., Proprietors.

o

THE FINEST AND LARGEST
hotel building in the West. Opened to the public November 2, 1882.
First Class Accommodations for the Traveling Public.
Sample Rooms for Commercial Travelers
This house is centrally located and all coaches arrive and depart from the door. First-class Bar and Billiard Room in the house.
CHARGES REASONABLE[1]

Only a few weeks after the opening of the Grand Union, the owners mortgaged the building to pay part of the $200,000 in debts which had been contracted during its construction. On December 22, 1882, Lot One, Block One, now worth slightly more than the $10.00 W. H. Todd had paid for it more than six years before, was mortgaged to:

Chas. E. Duer	$17,000.00	
Murphy Neel & Co. . .	4,000.00	[Hardware and general]
W. S. Wetzel.	4,000.00	[Wholesale liquors]
R. H. Kleinschmidt .	1,000.00	[Clothing, dry goods]
Dwer & Co	4,500.00	
Hishberg & Nathan . .	1,250.00	[Clothiers]
Gans & Klein.	2,250.00	[Clothiers] [2]

[1] Ibid., December 7, 1882, p. 5.

[2] Records of Choteau County, Montana Territory, Book A, "Mortgages," p. 695. Handwritten original in Clerk and Recorder's Office, Choteau County Court House, Fort Benton.

As the great year, 1882, drew to a close, Fort Benton began to see its future prosperity threatened. The most optimistic probably remained blind to the threat, but the danger lurked, just the same. The narrow gauge Utah and Northern Railroad had entered Montana in 1879 and reached Dillon on September 16, 1880. The next year, 1881, it reached Butte.[1] But Fort Benton evidently worried very little about the Utah and Northern stealing its freight.

On August 15, 1881, the date of the ground breaking for the Grand Union Hotel, the Northern Pacific Railroad was laying track somewhere a little west of Glendive. By the time the December snows frosted the Grand Union's vacant brick window caps, the Northern Pacific had reached Miles City.[2] The Benton Record of August 31, 1882, noted in great detail the new brick business blocks to be built on Benton's Front Street and the advantages of the town's new reinforced concrete house, ending with the statement: "Benton is bound to be the metropolis of the Great Northwest and its history for the next ten years we predict will be a repetition of the surprising gorwth and improvement that has marked that of St. Paul and Minneapolis."[3] But the

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[1]Merrill G. Burlingame, The Montana Frontier (Helena: State Publishing Co., 1942), p. 147.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Benton Record, August 31, 1882, p. 4.

Record failed to note that the Northern Pacific Railroad had by that time passed the little town of Coulson and the townsite of what would later become Billings.[1]

It was now December, 1882. The residents of Benton began to notice that their great future prosperity was being threatened. To comfort the fears, the editor of the Record, under a headline of "WHAT WILL BECOME OF BENTON," proclaimed:

> Benton is undoubtedly the most advantageously located town in Montana. Aside from the fact it is the head of navigation on the Missouri River, . . . it has a large tributary country of greater resources than any other town in the Northwest, not excepting even St. Paul or Minneapolis. Compare its erection with that of Helena, Butte, Bozeman, Deer Lodge or Missoula, and it will appear at once the [sic] while the latter were located with as little regard to permanancy as the camp of a weary traveler pitched to obtain a single nights rest, the Benton site was selected because it possessed greater advantages than any other spot in all northern Montana. . . the river in time will make it the railroad centre of the Territory.[2]

The Benton Record celebrated the new year by issuing a paper-bound Holiday Edition. Its numerous editorials, short stories, and speeches in print by leading officials centered around a single theme: "Benton is the leading city of the Northwest and always will be."[3] The Holiday Edition proceeded with a large number of "beautiful engravings which

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[1]Ibid., [2]Ibid., December 21, 1882, p. 1.

[3]Ibid., January 1, 1883, "Holiday Edition," passim.

are by long odds fair and accurate illustrations of our fine buildings." Every business building and large residence in the town must have been pictured and described in glowing terms, but the rhetoric leads one to believe there were too many mansions to go into detail about all of them. The paper editorialized that Benton should be built entirely of brick, like Eastern cities, and Judge Tattan rambled through page after page on the advantages of Choteau County.

The hotels of Fort Benton, of course, were well described. Speaking about the Choteau House, oldest hotel in town, they said: "Although it is not so pretentious as some of the others established at a later date, it controls a large amount of patronage, and is considered a first-class house in every respect."[1] (In his ad, Jere. Sullivan, owner of the Choteau House, mimicked the Grand Union's ad almost word for word. He claimed to be "the Leading Hotel" with the Best Accommodations," and that he had a "Bar and Billiard Room Attached!")[2] About the Overland Hotel's new building, the Record said:

> The lodging accomodations . . . may not be as extensive as at some other houses, but the board is equally as good, and the desire to please could not be made more evident in the Fifth Avenue of New York or the Palmer House of Chicago. . . (W)hen the proprietor grows rich enough to build a three story brick it will doubtless overshadow all competitors.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 47. [2] Ibid., p. 24. [3] Ibid., p. 23.

But about the Grand Union, the Record needed make no apology. It devoted a full page to its new hotel, which it stated "is without a doubt the finest in the territory."

> Next season the traveling public will have no occasion to complain of a lack of hotel accommodations, as Benton is now better provided in that respect than any other town in the Territory. Even Butte City, which claims to be the largest town in the Territory, has no hotel that will compare favorably with the poorest public house in Benton. The reason of this lack of hotel accommodations in other parts of Montana is probably due to the fact that the shrewdest capitalists and business men have no faith in the permancy [sic] of towns that depend almost soley [sic] upon the success of a few gold or silver mines. Benton as has been stated in other parts of this pamphlet, has many permanent resources, any one of which is sufficient to give her a decided prominence above all other towns that do not possess similar advantages, and the wonder is not that her people should invest so largely in hotels, but that she has so long been without a first-class public house, where at the most reasonable prices, permanent boarders or transient guests could find all the comforts, conveniences and skillful attendance, which are rarely found or even expected outside of the largest cities of the Union.[1]

Fort Benton in the winter was a society held captive. Once the ice locked the Missouri, it was cut off (except fromstage coach transportation which was most difficult and uncomfortable, and the telegraph which was very limited) from the rest of the world. But in this captive society lived a large number of personalities who had known well the pleasures of city life, not only in the East but even in Europe. The Grand Union was built almost

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[1] Ibid., p. 33.

as much to cater to their entertainment requirements as it was to provide lodging to the steamboat passengers or to seal Benton's future prosperity.

Through the winter months, a continual series of balls, square dances, dinners, parties, and other social events centered around the Grand Union's dining room and lobby. The rosewood grand piano rang out to dance music accompanied by banjos and fiddles, accordians, brass instruments, or the more refined violins and "violoncellos." The dancing lasted into the wee hours of many a long, cold winter night. Not only travelers, but also affluent Benton residents who felt the urge to dine out, attended the Grand Union's gracious dinners. Though few had yet made their first million dollars, the "millionaires" who moved to Helena in the later Eighties lived in Fort Benton in 1883. The Grand Union was the "millionaire's club" of the day.[1]

X. Beidler brought three Indian prisoners in to stay at the Grand Union on January 17, 1883. Evidently Mr. Todd objected to Mr. Beidler's choice of guests, but "X." replied that it was a "big thing" for his hotel to shelter such famous fugitives.[2] In his declining years, X. Beidler

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970.

[2]River Press, January 17, 1883, p. 6.

spent much of his time hanging around the Grand Union lobby and saloon, spinning yarns and begging drinks.[1]

The first River Press Grand Union ad to feature a picture appeared on February 14. The lettering simply said "Grand Union Hotel, Fort Benton, M.T. Stephen Spitzley & Co., Propr's."[2] The engraving conveyed the rest of the message about "the best, the finest, et cetera." A Mr. Travers joined Todd and Spitzley in operating the Grand Union a week later.[3] The wintertime balls and dances continued to occupy the dining room each week.

With the arrival of the Rosebud on May 12, 1883, the Grand Union began to fulfill the function for which it had been built. Weary travelers, and this included not only the rich who had gone first class, but also miners, river boat captains and crewmen, Mounties, Army officers, mule-skinners, freighters, stage drivers, cattle buyers, homeseekers, salesmen, businessmen, and frontier preachers, all checked in at the Grand Union's elaborate desk. Having deposited gold dust and other valuables in the sturdy safe, they climbed the grand staircase to their rooms. After exploring the winding and somewhat

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[1]Great Falls Tribune, July 22, 1934.

[2]River Press, February 14, 1882, p. 8.

[3]Ibid., February 21, 1882, p. 6.

confusing curved hallways, they eventually found their rooms. There, secure in their privacy, they could wash off the deep layers of grime accumulated on a two-month boyage by steamboat or a days' ride in a dusty stage coach. After a refreshing rest on their black walnut bed, and change into fresh clothes, they descended the black walnut staircase to the white linen and polished silver of the dining room. The food waiting for them was expertly prepared by both American and Chinese cooks. After a leisurely meal the men could talk over their plans with other male travelers in the well stocked bar, "Excepting, of course, the 'sky piolets' (circuit rider preachers) who retired to their rooms to meditate on more spiritual matters."[1,2]

After darnkess covered the little river town, after the stores closed and the fifteen other saloons were the only businesses open, the tired traveler again climbed the grand stairway, slowly admiring the pattern of the polished spindles and the wide view of the lobby as he rested a bit on the landing. On up the last sixteen steps to the second floor (or if he was unfortunate enough to have gotten a third floor room, up an additional twenty steps), the weary

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970.

[2]Jerry Madden, "Fort Benton Hotel Retains Flavor of the Frontier," Montana Parade, Great Falls Tribune, October 31, 1965, p. 2.

wayfarer found his room quite easily this time. Behind the varnished paneled door with its white china knob and secure bolt activated by a little brass handle, the traveler and new resident of the Territory of Montana could spend his first night on good solid dry land in quite some time. In the comfort of a high walnut bed equipped with a "hair and moss mattress," surrounded with clean, starched sheets and pillowcases, and warm blankets, he was quickly lulled to sleep by the gentle flow of the Missouri lapping not at paddle wheels but at rocks along the shore a hundred feet distant.

If it was cold in the morning, the guest of the Grand Union might well have been tempted to remain in his bed when the morning light flashed through the lace curtains of his windows. The air out in the big rooms was frosty on winter mornings. Quickly the guest would be awakened as he hopped from imported carpet to imported carpet to approach the ornate but cold stove. Kindling and fire wood as well as coal was found close by, and the hotel guest of 1883 certainly knew how to have a good warm fire roaring in a few minutes. The pinnacles that bristled from the pediments of the Grand Union revealed their functional purpose on a cold winter morning when the spouted forth the aroma of coal and wood smoke into the frosty atmosphere. Now if our

guest felt a need to use the outhouse in the morning, he had to leave the warmth of his room, trot down the curving halls and down the twenty steps of the third floor stairs, if his room happened to be up there, go out onto the suspended runway, and at last reach the little unheated room where he could be alone behind a door held fast with an unfailing hook and eye. If it was cold, he didn't tie up the facility for long, but hurried back to his own warm abode of black walnut and white china.

Downstairs the dining room would be filled with enthusiastic travelers just like himself. Recognizing some of his old friends from the saloon, our guest would soon be partaking of not only the delicious family style breakfast at one of the long extension tables but also in much discussion of the gold camps, the booming Barker district, the road to Helena, the cattle in the Sun River Valley, and the future of Montana as represented by the fine Grand Union Hotel.[1]

And so passed the first few years of the Grand Union Hotel's life. 1883 was another boom year on the river, and "Bentonites" seemed scarcely to notice that on June 12 the

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[1]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

Northern Pacific Railroad arrived in Helena.[1] "Benton," they told themselves, was so much more permanent than Helena that they need not worry. Too many exciting things were happening right at home, anyway. A thousand head of cattle enroute from El Paso, Texas, to Pincher Creek, Canada, swam the Missouri and trailed through the streets of Fort Benton past the fancy doors of the elegant Grand Union. Paris Gibson was operating his well established ranch eight miles from town.[2] In July the Grand Union purchased thirty tons of coal for the winter. They were fortunate. The winter was cold and fuel was scarce. Many logs were floated over the Great Falls in November to help relieve the wood shortage.[3] Back in October, Huntsburger and Travers had taken over the operation of the Grand Union Hotel,[4] and in November, Mr. Todd announced that he would sell several pieces of black walnut furniture from his home. He was "going to the states" for an extended visit.[5]

1884 saw the building of the Choteau County Courthouse and the improvement of the upper Missouri by the Army

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[1]William C. Campbell, From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch, I (Helena: Montana Record Publishing Co., 1951), p. 120.

[2]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

[3]Ibid. [4]Ibid., October 6, 1883, p. 6.

[5]Ibid., November 24, 1883, p. 5.

Corps of Engineers.[1] That spring Paris Gibson, financed by Jim Hill, founded Great Falls; in November Murphy McClay's of Fort Benton established a store in the new city. Paris Gibson claimed the location of his new town was perfect because of the tremendous water power available, and the proximity to the great ranches of the Sun River and the mines in the Little Belt Mountains. Great Falls also possessed railroad access from all directions. But not even the thriving "metropolis" of Sun River worried about losing business to Great Falls, and Fort Benton scarcely lifted an eyebrow.[2]

The Benton Record, longtime rival of the River Press, went out of business in February, 1885. The First National Bank took over its four story mansard roofed building, and a sheriff's sale disposed of its steam printing plant, which the Record had long claimed to be the finest in the territory, for $1,400.00.[3] In April the Higgins House in White Sulphur Springs (later the Sherman Hotel) held its grand opening. The engraving it ran in its ads looked a good deal like the Grand Union, with plate glass windows on the first floor.[4] Possibly the Grand Union

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[1] Ibid., August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

[2] Great Falls Tribune, September 6, 1959, passim.

[3] River Press, February 25, 1885, p. 7.

[4] Ibid., April 8, 1865, p. 5.

could no longer truthfully claim to be the "best."

Fort Benton could no longer honestly claim to be the hub of the West either by April, 1885, though editorials still expressed this opinion. The name of Billings appeared in Benton for the first time that month.[1] The steamboats still found plenty to carry, but it was now possible for the T. C. Power Company to list the complete manifest of its [P] Line for several years in a single leatherbound volume. Formerly a volume had been required every year.[2] The Northern Pacific Railroad now ran directly into Helena, Butte, and most of the other places that had depended upon Fort Benton for supplies only a few years before. Benton blamed its plight on the ox teams and was sure that if it too had a railroad, cheap water transportation would win.

The Odd Fellows Building which housed the Roosevelt Furniture Store and the River Press, burned to the ground in July. The newspaper saved only the volumes of back issues (from which this report was researched), a small job press, and a little type. Had the wind been from the other direction, the letter-sized edition of the River Press commented, the whole town would have been wiped out.[3]

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[1] Ibid. [2] "Up-River Freight Book," 1883-1885.

[3] River Press, July 15 (?), 1885, p. 1.

On February 10, 1886, Sam Kohlberg, formerly of Gans and Klein, leased the Grand Union Hotel. Two weeks later he tried a new plan of advertising. A loose, full page supplement to the River Press proclaimed in large, fancy type:

> GRAND UNION HOTEL.
> New Management.
> The Grand Union Hotel, having been leased to the undersigned for a term of years, is now being throughly repaired and renovated, and will open under new management on Monday
> MARCH 1st, 1886
> I shall endeavor to keep the best Hotel in Northern Montana, and will cater to the wants of my friends & patrons. Call
>
> SAM KOHLBERG
> Proprietor
>
> Fort Benton, M.T.
> February 23, 1886[1]

The same issue brought the news that the Great Falls Murphy McClay Hardware Company was beginning work on the foundation of its new brick building (which still stands at 204 Central Street), one of the first permanent buildings in that city.[2] Citizens remembered the tenth anniversary of the Custer Battle on June 30. The Benton-Billings stage now departed from the Grand Union for the new city near the battle ground.[3]

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[1] Ibid., February 24, 1886, Grand Union advertising supplement.

[2] Ibid., February 24, 1886, p. 5.

[3] Ibid., June 30, 1886, p. 4.

On November 17, 1886, the Merchant's Hotel of Helena advertised in the River Press, and a month later Albricht and Knight of Great Falls ran an ad.[1,2] Fort Benton no longer had a monopoly on fine stores. Already snows had covered the ground in the Judith Basin where the open range cattle industry had made such gains the summer before. At last, early in January, the long awaited chinook finally came. But as water ran in the coulees, a cold front hit, freezing it and glazing the ground with a thick coat of ice. On the second of February, it was forty-two below at Fort Assiniboine, and a high east wind blew. Old timers said that it was worse than any storm they could remember. The Benton fuel supply shortage was becoming serious.[3]

Out on the range, cattle pawed the frozen ground in vain and cut their noses to shreads on the ice, finally to die of starvation. Their frozen, rotting carcasses were piled high in the coulees when the chinook finally came on March 9, 1887.[4] Eastern and European capital took the heaviest losses and got out of the cattle business after that. Home owned ranches took over, using barbed wire to

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[1] Ibid., November 17, 1886, p. 4.

[2] Ibid., December 15, 1886, p. 3.

[3] Ibid., February 2, 1887, p. 1.

[4] Ibid., March 9, 1887, p. 5.

fence the herds and the Homestead Acts to build up large land holdings.[1,2]

The early spring that brought the stench of rotting cattle and ruined profits to cattle kings and cowboys also brought the earliest steamboat ever to arrive in Fort Benton, the Rosebud, April 27, 1887. Thirty-three boats, including the new T. C. Power steamers Judith and Eclipse, purchased the year before, had come before the longest navigational season on record which closed on September 28. But the captains and crews could see that the steamboat days were numbered.[3] On the twenty-ninth day of September, the day after the last boat of 1887 pulled out, the Railroad came to town.

For weeks, Benton had anticipated the arrival of the railroad. Jim Hill's "St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba" made great strides through the summer of 1887. Even in 1886, crews graded the roadbed, and steamboats brought supplies and equipment. The railroad company assembled great quanitites of material at Minot, Dakota Territory, during the winter of 1886-87. Track laying started as early as

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[1]Burlingame, Montana Frontier, pp. 184-185.

[2]Carl F. Kraenzel, The Great Plains in Transition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 115.

[3]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

possible in the spring, and by June 13 the railroad entered Montana. During August the crews laid 166 miles, 3,140 feet of track, an average of three miles and 4,019 feet per day, breaking all previous records for speed of construction.[1,2]

As the rails neared Fort Benton, excitement reached a fever peak. Railroad ads appeared in the columns of the River Press. Companies told about the new goods they would receive. Gans and Klein invented the most fantastic ad of all, which showed the "St.P.M.&M.R.R." being pulled into a cheering crowd by two snorting steam bulls, smoke issuing from stacks on their backs. The first car of the train was marked as Gans and Klein's, brining "a full and complete line of Fall and Winter Goods."[3] With the rails only fifty miles away, T. C. Power and Brother announced that the front of their store was being torn out to receive a new, modern plate glass front which would arrive on one of the first trains.[4] As the River Press said, the coming of the railroad would certainly produce many changes in Fort Benton.

Even though the last steamboat of the year shoved off on September 28, the old river town was still connected

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[1]Burlingame, Montana Frontier, pp. 148-149.

[2]Harold M Sims, History of the Great Northern Railway Company, p. 12. Original manuscript in Great Northern clipping file, Montana State University Archives, Bozeman.

[3]River Press, September 14, 1887, p. 5.

[4]Ibid., September 28, 1887, p. 5.

to the East becuase the railroad had arrived!

> Fort Benton turned out, as it always does, resplendant. [sic] The band was playing, flags were flying and bunting bedecked the carriages, phaetons, and wagons. The ladies of the town wore their best gowns and the men wore their derbies and shined boots . . .
>
> And then we heard the train whistle. Looking up I saw the big engine puffing up the tracks. The whistle blew; the bell rang; the band played; everyone cheered. We saw Mr[s] . Hill drive the silver spike . . .[1]

All the town orators gave speeches lauding the river city as a great railroad center. At the close of the ceremonies, the procession marched to the Grand Union Hotel, of course, to hold a Grand Ball. Railroad whistles and the clatter of wheels were new sounds to keep the river town awake that night as the "front yard" moved forward to push onward to Great Falls.[2]

> Fort Benton turned out for its funeral with ceremony and pomp that day of September 29, 1887 . . . True, some of the more optimistic thought what with the river and railroad, Fort Benton would retain its importance as a great trading center, but realistic individuals understood that the old town had just become another cattle town.
>
> For the future was in industry, and not trade, anyway. And Great Falls had become the industrial center for this section of Montana. It had water power, and now it had transportation.[3]

Jim Hill's tracks bypassed Fort Benton in their rush toward Great Falls. There, the tracks ran through the center of Gibson Park to the depot at the place of honor at the

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[1] Ibid., August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 4.

[2] Ibid. [3] Ibid.

head of Central Avenue. (There, also, Jim Hill's name appeared with Paris Gibson's on every real estate abstract.) Not until 1900 did the Great Northern move its roadbed closer to town. Even then, when the present hillside depot came into use, the railroad avoided Fort Benton.[1]

Fort Benton's future as a commercial center had dimmed when the other railroads reached the cities it once supplied. The arrival of the Great Northern would finally drive the facts home. The Grand Union rang that night with one of the most ironic celebrations ever held in the bizarre West, Fort Benton rejoiced in its own eclipse.

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[1] Ibid.

CHAPTER V

CATTLEMEN AND HOMESTEADERS TAKE OVER

Even though Mrs. James J. Hill had driven the last silver spike into Fort Benton's coffin when she struck those hammer blows that fateful day, Benton continued to enjoy a trickle of river traffic for the next few years. Only four boats came up the river in 1888. Typically, the Government decided it was time to improve the upper Missouri, and betterments which had been so badly wanted thirty years before were now begun.[1]

Helena now styled herself "Queen City of the Rockies." Names of old Fort Benton firms now decorated the pediments of Helena buildings. Plate glass, cast iron, oak, walnut, marble, steel, fancy hardware, and even carved and cut stone imported from far and distant parts of the country came into the Territorial Capital by the trainload. T. C. Power's great Richardsonian Romanesque block at the corner of Sixth and Main made the crossroads corner of Front and Bond with its comparatively small Grand Union Hotel seem

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[1] River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 5.

almost a relic of a different era.[1]

The construction of the Fort Benton Bridge captured the attention of Northern Montana throughout the summer of 1888. The steel bridge, complete with a draw span for passage of steamboats, opened in November, and connected Fort Benton with a new trading area, the Judith Basin.[2] From that date, Benton became increasingly dependent on stockmen for its existance. Even though the open range had begun to decline with the great blizzards of 1886-87, plenty of cattle still grazed in the rolling hills a hundred miles southward from Fort Benton.

A few wolfers may have gained access to the cheaper rooms on the back of the third floor in the Grand Union that year as marauding packs of wolves plagued the cattlemen and bounty-seeking hunters brought in dogs to kill the pests. But most of the guests in the splendid Hotel were now cowboys. The saddle room found good use as the boys brought in their precious gear to be stored in safe keeping, just as earlier travelers had deposited their money, gold, and valuables in the hotel safe.

When the fall roundup ended and the cattle were

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[1]Willard B. Robinson, "Helena's Fabulous Business Blocks," Montana, the Magazine of Western History, January, 1968, pp. 44-60.

[2]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B., p. 5.

loaded on the stock cars at the Great Northern chutes, a wild celebration took place. The big cattle bosses often rented the entire Grand Union Hotel on such occasions. While continuing all services, the hotel closed its doors and became the private resort of the cattle kings and their cowboys. The boss established a certain amount of credit at the bar and dining room, so that the boys could have free drinks and food for a while. The cowboys usually headed first for the barber shop, where they could take a badly needed bath and get "duded up" and sprinkled with bay rum. Next stop would be the Grand Union Saloon. There billiard tables were available, and so were the round tables designed for the more chancy games of poker, faro, and all their variations. In the dining room was the "food fit for a king."

The night of desk clerk's horrors occurred during one of these wild parties. Although it was late in the evening, the boys in the saloon cared little about the hour. The night clerk had probably closed the door between the saloon and the desk, but the singing, drunken din from the bar room continued. Poker games were going strong and bets were high. But a couple of drunken cowboys at the bar started betting on something else. Perhaps one boasted that he was such excellent horseman, and that his horse was so

fine itself, that they both should sleep together in one of the fancy bedrooms. Anyway, one cow hand bet several others that he could ride his steed up to his room.

The horse was saddled, and suddenly the drowsy night clerk awoke as thundering hooves galloped across the carpeted lobby floor. The cowboy headed for the walnut grand staircase. The night clerk grabbed his gun, and fourteen .44-caliber slugs later the cowboy lost the bet, retreating through the double front doors. It was evidently the first, last, and only time a beast attempted the tread where only the feet of ladies and gentlemen ought to go, but the tale is as much a heritage of the Grand Union as the walnut steps themselves.[1]

When the bosses credit ran out at the Grand Union and the hotel once again opened to the public, many of the cowboys stayed on. Others quit their outfits at the first sign of snow and headed for the former river capital. There,

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970. The story of the horse on the stairs has long been a part of the folklore of the Grand Union Hotel. It was supposed to have been written up in an Eastern magazine not long after it happened, and also later by Lucius Beebe (River Press, October 22, 1969, p. 8.) There are, of course, probably many versions of the story, including one the author's Mother told him as a small boy. This is Harold Thomas' version.

with a little money in their jeans, they would rent one of the small third floor or rear rooms, often with a roommate, deposit their saddle in the check room, and begin a winter's stay in the saloon, dining room, and in bed. As the money went down, the hotel extended credit on the saddle.

Above all other things to the cowboy, Fort Benton was "Christmas Town." The Grand Union's forty-five degree angle corner may have looked pretty simple to the resident of Helena who passed the Power Block's six story granite Romanesque bulge each day, but the Grand Union still looked like New York City or Denver to the cowboy. After a long year of riding over barren coulees and prairies and seeing only the low silhouettes of log cow camps, even the Utica General Mercantile seemed grandiose. Fort Benton really was the Big City.

Heading down the bluffs or across the steel bridge, the town lay nestled in winter white with bare winter cottonwoods reaching skyward between the little buildings. Dominating the scene, of course, stood the red brick Grand Union Hotel. It was now eager to rent rooms to almost anyone, as travelers were getting rather scarce and the millionaires now whooped it up at the Montana Club in Helena. Inside its fancy doors, however, one still found luxuries that well deserved a bath before entering. After a quick date at the Tonsorial Parlor, the cowboys headed for

the grandeur that they had so long awaited. Of course, the saloon was always the most popular spot for meeting one's old friends who had taken up residence for the winter in the "big" city beside the ice-choked Missouri. But other attractions beckoned as well. The Grand Union's dining room was one of the few places in that part of the country where a man could sit down to a table spread with snow-white linen and set with gleaming silver, waited on by a pretty girl in a starched white uniform. For a year these men lived on a diet of frying pan cookery--bacon, beans, venison, and sowbelly. But at the Grand Union, Chinese cooks busily prepared tasteful delights, and a man had his choice from the fancily-printed bill of fare.

For Christmas, the Grand Union featured two big meals. Each year, the hotel sponsored a Christmas Eve ball, the invitations to which read as follows:

> Mr._____
> Yourself and Ladies are respectfully invited to attend a GRAND BALL and Supper at the Grand Union Hotel, Fort Benton, Montana, on Monday Eve, December 25th, 1893.
>
> Chas. Rowe.
>
> Tickets, $2.00[1]

The Christmas Eve Grand Ball followed the general format of the Grand Opening, with the dinner spread under the soft glow

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[1]Invitation to attend a Christmas Eve at the Grand Union Hotel, in the Grand Union Hotel Collection, Fort Benton, Montana.

of kerosene lamps in the elegant dining room, served around midnight. A big tree dominated the sixteen-foot-high lobby, and for a short period on Christmas Eve its popcorn and tinfoil decorations reflected the wonderful glow of candles.

Christmas dinner, served the next day, was an even bigger feast. The following menu dates from 1917, but represents the stylish repast offered at the Grand Union:

Manhattan Cocktail
Canape of Russian Caviar Orange Oyster Cocktail
- - - - - -
Queen Olives Salted Almonds Crisp Young Celery
- - - - - -
Consomme White House Cream of Tomato Soup
- - - - - -
Fried Fillet of Sole Maitre D Hotel
Pomme Parisienne
Mushrooms A La Franciaise En Case
Lobster A La Newberg
- - - - - -
Stuffed Young Montana Turkey Cranberry Jelly
- - - - - -
Roast Prime Ribs of Beef Yorkshire Pudding
Roast Young Pig with Baked Apple
- - - - - -
Potatoes Natural Glazed Sweet Potatoes
Asparagus Au Beurre
- - - - - -
New Century Punch
- - - - - -
Tomato Salad En Mayonnaise
- - - - - -
Hot Mince Pie Pumpkin Pie
Fresh Apple Pie A La Mode
Steamed English Pudding with Hard or Brandy Sauce
- - - - - -
Christmas Ice Cream and Cake
- - - - - -
Young American Cheese
- - - - - -

Mixed Nuts After Dinner Mints

Cafe Noir[1]

> For months afterward in the gloom of a Montana Winter, the grandure of the old Grand Union furnished something to talk about in the line camps along the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers, a bit of warmth carried back to the range from this oasis of luxury at Fort Benton.[2]

1889, the year Montana became a State, saw attempts to improve the river and stimulate steamboating. The improvements materialized, but the river traffic did not. The last commercial cargo arrived in Fort Benton aboard the F. Y. Batchelor in 1891. Though the captain reported the river the best he had ever seen it, no other boats followed.[3] Even the distinguished old I. G. Baker Company gave up business in 1891, selling out to the new firm of Strain Brothers of Great Falls.[4] The 1890's saw many exciting incidents take place in the Fort Benton country, mostly relating to the booming large-scale cattle industry which replaced freighting as the town's main industry. The last big gold rush to the Klondike attracted little attention in the sleepy town. When 185 St. Bernard dogs passed through

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[1]Menu of Christmas Dinner, Christmas Day, 1917, Grand Union Hotel, in the Grand Union Hotel Collection, Fort Benton, Montana.

[2]John Willard, "Travel Montana," Montana Motorist, XXI (March, 1970), 2.

[3]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 5. [4]Ibid.

Chinook en route to Dawson where they were to pull a car load of bacon to hungry prospectors, Fort Benton residents recalled their own past when they had possessed a unique method of transportation.[1] Truly, the glorious era of Fort Benton had ended.

Charles Rowe and Thomas Todd, liquor dealer, took over the operation of the Grand Union Hotel in 1894 and ran it until 1899. In December of that year the building was closed for remodeling. The River Press reported that Cashier Duer of the Stockman's National Bank sold the Grand Union shortly before December 6, 1899 to J. H. Green and B. F. O'Neal: price, $10,000.00[2]

As the new century replaced the old, a completely changed, "new" Grand Union opened on March 27, 1900. Steam heat took the place of the old individual wood stoves; a boiler under the back end of the dining room supplied the radiators and the new steam ice plant as well. Guests found a men's and women's indoor toilet on every floor. Even electric lights took the place of gas. By 1900 tastes had shifted away from walnut furniture, marble tops, and burl inlay. Golden oak had become the stylish wood. A great many of the marble topped bedroom sets, brought at such trouble and expense up the Missouri, probably sold for

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[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid., December 6, 1899.

a song. Modern but cheaper factory produced, golden oak dressers and commodes and shining polished brass beds replaced them. To make the transition to the "new" Grand Union complete, the management gave the varnished woodwork and burl-veneered door panels a face lifting which only detracted from their original elegance. "Graining" was very popular at the time. With the help of some opaque colors, a rubber roller, and a few graining combs, a person with a little talent could make fake quarter sawed golden oak "all over the place," and exactly that happened in the Grand Union.

Green and O'Neal managed the hotel when it re-opened in March, 1900. About the remodeling job, the River Press commented:

> The new Grand Union Hotel opened its spacious dining room to the public this morning and is now prepared to take the best care of its guests in every part of the house. The band will serenade the proprietors and guests at 8 p.m. this evening and all sundry are invited to attend and look over the hotel. It is now the finest in Northern Montana--the most comfortable in arrangement and complete in equipment.[1]

Guests could, as Rodgers and Hammerstein put it in "Oklahoma," "turn the radiator on in case you want some heat," and even "walk to the privy in the rain and never wet your feet!" in the up-to-date Grand Union of 1900.

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[1]Ibid., March 27, 1900, p. 3.

For the next few years, management changes were frequent. John H. Green ran the hotel until 1904, then Embleton and McGraw managed it for a few months. William Rowe, Sr., became manager in 1905. The firm changed to Rowe and Nadeau for a few years, and finally Mr. Rowe operated it himself again for a period.[1]

Except for the moving of the Fort Benton depot to the present site in 1900, the big event of the early 1900's was the correction of the spelling of the name of Cho(u)teau County. County commissioners finally added the middle "u" at the request of descendents of Pierre Chouteau in 1903. The same year the Cho(u)teau house, now Benton's only other hotel, replaced its old wooden building with a two story brick structure of mundane design.[2]

George H. Stevens took over the management of the Grand Union Hotel in 1911. Operating the building which had once symbolized Fort Benton's "future prosperity" evidently inspired Stevens, and he became an enthusiastic Benton promotor, reminiscent of the great old days of William H. Todd. Stevens, who also dabbled in steam engineering, brought the steamboat O.K. to Fort Benton in 1907. The tiny, fifty-nine ton steamer passed through the draw span of the

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[1] River Press., October 22, 1969, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 6.

steel bridge on August 17, to be photographed in front of the Grand Union Hotel. Though the draw span had not been opened in years, its machinery operated perfectly. Under Captain Stevens, the O.K. made a short excursion trip in the fall and laid up for the winter. The next spring, while passing through the draw span again, the O.K. bumped the center pier, which old timers later claimed caused the span to fail.

On the fifteenth of April, 1908, the Hauser Lake dam near Helena went out, and thirty-six hours later the flood crest reached Fort Benton. The May and June rains soon followed. Rampaging Belt Creek precipitated the overflow of the Missouri in Fort Benton. The Grand Union Hotel marked the midpoint of the river when the flood reached its height on June 6.[1] That day the swirling waters swept away the draw span of the bridge and anything else that would float, including Benton's board sidewalks, fences, wagons, and a few outhouses. Basements and first floors filled with gumbo mud as the population fled to the bluffs. Some claimed the water reached twenty feet above normal, but no one knew for sure, since the water guage floated away toward the Gulf of Mexico. John O'Neal, the Grand Union

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[1] Ibid. Also a photograph in Archives, Montana State University Library, Bozeman, shows the Grand Union Hotel in the flood.

bar keeper, maintained the official water height rose just enough to fill the hollow that the feet of thousands of thirsty Bentonites had worn in the sandstone slab in front of the hotel saloon's door.[1]

The heroic little O.K., which somehow escaped the flood's wrath, burned at the lower levee on the night of June 30, 1908, and the Government snag boat Mandan was the only arrival that year. It proved to be the last big steamboat ever to come up the river. The little Baby Rose, built in 1909 to furnish transportation to the isolated ranches along the Missouri, had to wait for a government inspection before being launched. It lacked the power to pull barges, and during the next winter ice destroyed the little boat on the bank below the Block P store, where its bones lay visible for many years. Like the Baby Rose, steamboating had died and no one could revive it.[2]

In 1909 the U. S. Congress finally passed a sensible amendment to the Homestead Act. The Enlarged Homestead Act gave settlers 320 acres of the public domain. Though the size of the grant should have been at least three to ten times larger, the act renewed the hopes of thousands of eastern families who were renting land and fired the ambitions of thousands more who had hardly tasted farm life, even in

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[1]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 6. [2]Ibid.

humid regions. Those who could not save enough in a lifetime to purchase even forty acres in Iowa could have eight times that amount in Montana "absolutely" free.

On this great theme of free land, James J. Hill played. He built his Great Northern Railroad without government aid, either in the form of land grants, loans, or direct contributions. To exist and profit, it would have to depend, not upon land speculation, but "honest" business. The only way to induce such business from the vacant expanses of the Great Plains seemed to be by populate them. And so, in this great new age of the "ad man," the colored pamphlet, and the artistic poster, Jim Hill set out to do exactly that.

Whether the Empire Builder's end goal of prosperity for the Great Northern and northern Montana was ever reached or not, his advertising campaign became one of the most successful in history. To the homesteader, the Great Northern offered reduced rates on box cars and various other incentives. To grain elevators, it offered free spurs and sites along the right-of-way. The Great Northern operated one of the largest agricultural experiment stations in the world, and offered free advice to the homesteaders who would settle on free Government land. Attractively designed displays "proved" that the desert was a myth, and that wheat grew better on dry land, on land which was FREE!

Indeed, the picture looked like a true give-away, a real something-for-nothing deal. The call of free land beckoned, just as the call of free gold had half a century before. By the time the European War started in 1914, there were exactly four people per square mile, one on each quarter section. The frontier had come to an end.[1,2]

With the war, wheat prices soared. Little towns sprang up: Loma, which the Great Northern insisted on calling Chapel, Lippard, Tunis, Teton, Virgele, Verona, Rainbow, Goodale, Portage, Floweree, Carter, Kershaw, Liscum, Sayre, Cairo, Box Elder, Kenilworth, Inga, Eagle Butte, Hopp, Iliad, and Big Sandy all "boomed" only a short distance from Fort Benton.[3,4] Those prairie metropolises that grew along the Great Northern tracks (eighteen of the above did) made claims similar to those once voiced by Fort Benton. Each had its elevator, white clapboard Great Northern depot, wooden general mercantile, and official plat

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Joseph Kinsey Howard, Montana, High, Wide and Handsome (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 167-196.

[3] Rand McNally, Indexed Pocket Map of Montana (Chicago & New York: Rand McNally & Co., 1915).

[4] Great Northern Railway timetables.

of the city with the town lots numbered in neat blocks. Each looked a good deal like the others, but each proclaimed its peculiar advantages. And each entertained hopes of becoming a "Great Railroad Center."[1] Fort Benton reposed in quiet solitude, unthrilled by such hopes. It had had its great day, its era as a "Great Steamboat Center" almost before the railroad was perfected. Now it lay in a tree shaded oasis below the level of the flat prairie land.

To the homseick emigrants from the faraway lands of Iowa and Minnesota, from Kansas and Missouri, Fort Benton harbored a different sort of meaning. It almost seemed like a trip back home. Driving long, hot, dusty miles in a farm wagon over the dry prairies, where the sun broiled down from day break to sundown, the homesteader at last came to the edge of the bluff where Diamond R freighters had once passed on their westward trek toward Idaho. On the opposite side of the town stood the red grain elevators and white Great Northern Depot on a side hill of dry, yellowish-brown grass. But there below nestled a touch of the old hometown back East. There grew cottonwood trees, thick with the bright, dense leaves of summer green. There through the green poked the white steeple of a church and the 1884 dome

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[1]Robert G. Athearn, High Country Empire (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1960), p. 196.

of the brick courthouse. The steel, overhead-framed truss bridge spanned the river, and near it the tall chimneys and great flat copper roof of the Grand Union Hotel dominated the town.

Descending through a narrow stone underpass beneath the Great Northern tracks and into the town, it was like traveling into a different world. Here one passed a few big Victorian houses, their three-story towers obscured by branches, and an "irregular Mansard cottage," the likes of which the prairie towns had never seen. The wagon rolled past a hospital in a large grove of trees, and the big brick courthouse and jail. Neat little one-story homes nestled deep in lilac bushes that grew through fancy picket fences, built right to the board sidewalks. Green grass covered wide parkings, and giant cottonwoods arched overhead. One-story, Missouri-style apartment houses, stores decorated with cast iron stars high above their second floor windows, and wrought iron fences surrounding stone mansions were all reminders of a past youth spent far, far away.

Straight ahead, the lacy steel braces of the 1888 overhead truss bridge spanned the wide Missouri. The Old Fort Park, now a historic site, was visible on the left, and a little brass cannon guarded the towered fire station on the right. Trees lined one side of Front Street, a name

that recalled river towns "back east." Under the cottonwoods grew more green grass. The gentle rustle of the leaves filled the air with a soft, nostalgic sound. Opposite stood the stores--brick stores with porches over the sidewalks and show windows composed of round topped arches and fan lights over French doors. Cottonwoods and willows grew in unexpected places between the stores, and little parklike yards could be found sandwiched between buildings right downtown. And there ahead was the Grand Union, just like something out of the old state capital or county seat back home.

Even to the homesteader who had no particular business there, the Grand Union's yellow and red brick decoration was enticing, and the lobby behind its four-paned sheet-glass windows looked cool and dark after hours of blazing sun. Likely as not, the homesteader had someone to meet at the hotel, though, or else the hot ride made him ready to partake of a little of the evil sin of drinking a few beers in the saloon. The dining room still operated. And for those who could afford the luxury, long white linen cloths still covered the tables, and polished silver reflected the sparkle of the sun off the rippling water just outside.

Inside the lobby, cool and refershing with its high ceiling and thick masonry walls, one could relax for a few minutes in leather easy chairs and rockers. There the

farmers could talk over the high wheat prices resulting from the War, and discuss ways to remain in isolation from the petty affairs of Europe. The children, hot from the long ride into town, were especially happy to find that the Grand Union had a very interesting little item back under the stairs: a water cooler. From its nickle-plated spigot issued forth delicious ice water. "Dixie cups," a new invention, made the free refreshments completely sanitary, and the cups could be taken home as a momento of a visit to the "back east" city of Fort Benton.

If the homesteader had business in the county seat that kept him there overnight, he found the brass beds of the many upstairs rooms still fitted with starched sheets, and near each door was a round switch which activated a luxury found in almost none of the homestead towns--electric lights.[1]

In January, 1917, shortly before the boys of Chouteau County proudly boarded the Great Northern and rode off to make the world safe for democracy, Charles Lepley bought the Grand Union. The former rancher operated the

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[1]Interview with Edith May (Moore) Braun, Big Sandy, Montana, July 31, 1968. Mrs. Braun took many trips to Fort Benton when she was a small girl during the 1930's. This description is based on her impressions plus the author's own experiences in going to Fort Benton.

the hotel for the next quarter century.[1]

Automobiles had begun to make their appearance on Fort Benton's streets shortly after 1900, and following the advent of the Model T Ford in 1908 they became fairly common. But not until 1919 did an "aeroplane" land in the old steamboat town.[2] The boys began to come home from the war that year. To the memory of those who never returned, a bronze statue of a soldier going "over the top," his feet moving through a tangle of real barbed wire, was erected in the center of the intersection in front of the Grand Union.

1919 brought prohibition and the driest year on record in more ways than one. Only 8,85 inches of rain fell that season, 4.85 inches below the usually scant normal amount.[3] The enforcement of prohibition quickly closed the Grand Union's saloon, and the dining room soon followed. The finances of the hotel swooped downward.[4]

Farm prices and the bushel per acre yield also fell steadily. The average yield had been at least twenty-five bushels per acre throughout the last few years; now it was only 2.4.[5] In 1922 the banks began to fail, and the trend

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[1]River Press, October 22, 1969, p. 8.

[2]Ibid., August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 7. [3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., October 22, 1969, p. 8. [5]Howard, p. 197.

continued throughout the 1920's. In the now slightly shabby lobby of the Grand Union, farmers met and talked about their troubles, but they could do nothing. Neighbors gave up, abandoned their hard-won homesteads, and left the Montana prairie. Foreclosed mortgages haulted farm work, and dust blew across deserted fields and drifted around uninhabited homestead shacks. The depression struck a decade early in Montana.

The Thirties marked the low point in the history of Northern Montana and the Grand Union Hotel. Starting in 1932, strip farming began to appear in the region, and the "alphabet soup" agencies of NRA, CCC, and AAA became active in 1933, but the depression continued. Also in 1933, the last of the T. C. Power interests in Fort Benton were sold. The new Block P store, built in 1916 after a January fire destroyed the 1881 structure, became the Pioneer Mercantile. The new firm continued to use the historic [P] symbol. Mormon crickets and grasshoppers ate the crops of Chouteau County in 1935.[1]

Amidst the gloom of the depression, Fort Benton held a big celebration in 1937 in honor of the last boat race from St. Louis to the head of navigation. This time only small speed boats, not steamers, competed. Three days of

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[1] River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B, p. 7.

parades and festivities, with Indians and pioneers marching, preceded the arrival of the boats on June 19, 1937. A few days later the Government closed Fort Peck Dam. From that moment on, the Missouri ceased to be a free and open stretch of navigable water to the ocean and to all the ports of the world. Though nearly fifty years had passed since steamboats used the river, it still seemed as if an iron door had closed upon the town. The War Department received anxious queries and gave a prompt answer. Yes, they still considered Fort Benton the official head of navigation on the Missouri.[1]

During the 1930's and '40's, the Grand Union ran steadily down hill. The bedrooms, once considered "the best in the West," gained a reputation for having a permanent insect population exceeded only by the Chouteau House. A favorite yarn goes something like this:

> I had just climbed into one of the Grand Union's creaking brass beds and beginning to get drowsy when I heard some weak voices singing. I couldn't make out the words at first, but by holding my breath they came more clear. It seemed to be two men. I listened carefully in the silence:
>
> "Pull for the shore, boys, pull for the shore."
>
> Was it a ghost? A group of drowned cremen from one of the steamboats? Again it came:
>
> "Pull for the shore, boys, pull for the shore."
>
> Though the voices were weak, they seemed to come from right under the bed. Getting my flashlight, I

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[1] Ibid.

looked under. There in the pot were two bedbugs on a matchstick singing:

"Pull for the shore, boys, pull for the shore."[1]

From 1939 to 1942, Fort Benton regained nationwide fame when the faithful dog "Shep" met every train, searching in vain for his sheepherder master who had been shipped away in the "baggage coach" to some green cemetary in the East. Shep caught the imagination of the country was World War II engulfed every aspect of American life.[2]

The depression quickly ended as rains again fell and prices rose. A new generation took up some of the abandoned homesteads and the scrap drives quickly cleared away the old, unadapted machinery, rusting reminders of past failure. Down in Great Falls, the County donated the two G.A.R. Memorial Civil War Cannons that decorated the Courthouse lawn to the scrap drive. Fort Benton, more choice with its history, carefully avoided mentioning that it had several cannons in the town.[3] But as in World War I, it gave more than its share of its sons.

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[1]Rose Deem Moore, Big Sandy, Montana is one who told the bed bug story. Like the story of the cowboy who rode his horse up the stairs, there are many versions and the tall tale is a part of the folklore of the Grand Union Hotel. Another variation tells about the cockroach dancing troope which performed nightly during the Grand Union's less-grand days.

[2]Ed Shields, Shep, The Dog That Was Forever Faithful (Fort Benton: River Press Publishing Co.).

[3]The dispute over the Cascade County Courthouse cannons raged for years in the letters to the Editor columns of the Great Falls Tribune, until finally the county commissioners purchased a pair of reproduced cannons. Fort Benton avoided such a dispute, and kept history as well.

V-E Day, May 8, 1945, and V-J Day, September 2, were days of great jubilation in Benton as elsewhere, but it was a long time before the boys came home to their quiet town by the river. In 1946 Fort Benton celebrated its Centenial with a huge anniversary. The rest of Montana would have to wait eighteen years before it could do likewise.[1]

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[1]River Press, August 21, 1946, Part B., p. 8.

CHAPTER VI

THE RESTORATION OF THE GRAND UNION

Mr. Lepley died in 1941 and his wife took over the operation of the Grand Union Hotel, continuing the business until September, 1951. Mrs. Lepley had wished to sell the building for some time, but asked an outrageous price, nearly the amount that the dilapitated building had cost to build. Mr. and Mrs. Harold Thomas, very interested in history, at last persuaded Mrs. Lepley to offer a reasonable figure and purchased the hotel without hesitation.[1]

The "grand" had pretty well worn off by the time the Thomases acquired the property:

> The lobby, dining room, and saloon were ghosts of a once elegant era. Rooms were threadbare with straw mattresses still sprawling on sagging springs. Two public bathrooms on each of the three floors were the only personal sanitary facilities . . .
>
> One day shortly after we moved in . . . a friend of mine asked me how in the hell I ever got into this mess. The only answer I've been able to find is that the building offered a challenge to a restless soul and a stubborn nature.[2]

Had anyone less dedicated than Mr. Thomas and his

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, December 30, 1970.

[2]Jerry Madden, "Fort Benton Hotel Retains Flavor of the Frontier," Montana Parade, Great Falls Tribune, October 31, 1965, p. 3.

wife acquired the property, the result might have been very different. Had the hotel been located anywhere but Fort Benton, it would have probably "made way for progress" years before, without any thought whatsoever as to its historical connotations. The short quote above only hints at the problems the Thomases faced in bringing the "ancient" structure back to its former grandeur and restoring its appeal. For instance, the drain on the kitchen sinks had ceased to operate many years before, and the water ran into the root cellar producing a terrible stinking mess. The dampness rotted out the heavy floor joists, and the kitchen with its huge range was about to fall through.

A ladies' store occupied the saloon after prohibition closed it down, and following the Second World War an army surplus store had used it for a short time. The trash of all three remained. The 1900 remodeling installed the steam boiler dangerously close to the beams under the dining room, and heat had warped these downward until the steam pipes supported them. Upstairs, things were just as bad. Pieces of the picturesque chimneys sometimes fell to the sidewalk due to weathering. Bats nested in cavities in the cornice. Only tin stovepipe stoppers plugged the chimney holes, while many stood open. Soot from the chimneys sifted down the walls and birds flew in and out at will.

The window frames, so loose in their masonry that a person could stick his hand through the cracks, let in wind and dust and wasted about $100.00 worth of heat a month. In an attempt to fit the standard sized sashes into odd sized masonry, the builders used mouldings to close the gaps. Unpainted for fifty hears, the sun had warped the mouldings badly. Settlement of the building made the upper floors sag.

Less damaging but more noticeable, the worn 1900 leather easy chairs in the lobby sprouted springs, and the 1918 "inlaid" linoleum lobby floor, composed of thousands of tiny, tile-like pieces glued on a burlap backing, had become torn. Many of the little tiles were missing, and patches of ordinary printed linoleum covered big holes. And true to the stories, plenty of insects resided in the walls, floors, and furniture.[1]

But the remarks of Mr. Thomas' friends did not scare him off the project. He set up floor jacks in the boiler room, and every night he twisted the screws up part of a revolution, a tiny fraction of an inch, giving the partition walls a chance to resettle between movements. He cleaned the root cellar for the first time since 1882. When the second floor threatened to collapse, the interior of the

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970.

saddle room had to be torn out so that a concrete post could be put in place. The falling chimneys were removed, the cornice fixed, the window frames painted, and the stove pipe holes sealed. At great expense and trouble, plumbers fitted the entire building with the most modern of bathrooms. And the various bugs whose reputation had become so famous, met their end through the fumigator's gas.

The lobby floor, now recovered in gleaming white, displays a cork "1882" in front of the black walnut staircase. The grained woodwork received a glistening new coat of varnish. Mr. Thomas had the entire building rewired but retained the sparkling 1900-style electric fixtures, despite the craze of installing fluorescent lights then in vogue. They would have ruined the effect, as would any but the original "Grand Union" sign which Thomas had painted in an authentic manner, exactly reproducing the faded one underneath.

Building codes and health regulations for hotels have changed a great deal since the Grand Union first advertised itself as the "finest hotel building in the West," but along with the very slow restoration process, Mr. Thomas has also kept pace with the legal restrictions. Recently the fire marshall required the hotel to install an expensive electronic smoke detection device. Mr. Thomas drew the line, however, when the fire marshall began wanting the

grand staircase enclosed in concrete block. At that, Thomas threatened to close the hotel to the public and live in it as a private residence. Past a certain point, the essential spirit would be completely lost. Though the Grand Union no longer claims to be the finest hotel even in Montana, it compares favorably with the best of them in the mind of the health inspector. The official rating is "A-1" and it is not likely to drop while Harold Thomas is proprietor.[1]

Today one can stay in the Grand Union just as he could in 1882, when the river boats plied the waters outside the southwest windows. He can spend the night in a room twenty feet square, furnished with authentic Grand Union marble topped walnut dresser, commode, and burl inlay bed. The housekeeper, Mrs. Aagot Stashi, still makes the beds in 1880's fashion, with the pillows standing against the headboard. Or the visitor may rent one of the little rooms over the kitchen and sleep in a narrow brass bed where Charlie Russell may have slept. If one plans to live in Fort Benton, he may be able to rent one of the several large apartments on the third floor. All have modern kitchens with the latest appliances and huge private baths, as well as picturesque outside views of the river and town. (The apartments are usually rented, however, as are the

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, March 15, 1971.

hotel rooms.)[1] In the words of Harold Thomas:

> The hotel will progress . . . All the money which was spent to revitalize the hotel first came across the desk, and we forsee improvements in the trade . . .
>
> My wife and I have developed a deep feeling for what the pioneers experienced and represented. They were individuals, and the hotel is a monument to their rugged individuality. . . Their heritage is preserved within these walls where frontiersmen slept, dined, and associated. The hotel belongs to the people, and I'm just taking care of it for them.[2]

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[1]Interview with Harold Thomas, March 18, 1970, December 30, 1970.

[2]Madden, p. 3.

EPILOGUE

The deep moan of an air horn echoes off the sandstone walls of the narrow underpass below the "Burlington Northern" tracks, and a huge diesel bus of the Burlington Northern or the Intermountain Transportation Company swings down the steep hill where the Diamond R wagon trains once headed out to Idaho and Helena. The bus goes down into the green cottonwoods of Fort Benton. Branches scrape against its windows. It passes the 1884 Courthouse, now looking brand new after a sandblasting job on its brick. The bus goes by the towered houses and the "irregular mansard cottage of E. R. Wilton," and the Murphy Neel Store. Then, just as the Benton-Helena stage did in 1882, it swings onto Front Street. The air brakes hiss. "Fort Benton," the driver calls out, "We'll have a five minute rest stop here." You look out the window and up at the building on the right. There above is the sign, "GRAND UNION."

As it was in the beginning, so it is tonight. The driver tonight went into the lobby of the Grand Union and, just like hundreds of steamboat captains and stage drivers before him, he glanced up at the 1876 Seth Thomas clock and noted that he was still on schedule. Today is Tuesday, March 27, the clock says. It assumes you know the year is

1971. The clock ticks on, and thanks to Mr. Thomas, the Grand Union Hotel is still alive and operating tonight. It is not just another museum, but an active part of the community of Fort Benton, just as it was more than four score and seven years ago when it opened.[1]

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[1]If you would like to prove this for yourself, take a trip to Fort Benton some day and visit the Grand Union Hotel, as well as the rest of the town. You will find there is enough history there to occupy several lifetimes. You will also find the people friendly and anxious to help, and the community interested in its past more than most. It is not only a trip back in time in terms of architectural styles, but in terms of old fashioned friendliness as well.

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