

YesterYear Radersburg – Capital of Montana?

When I was growing up here in Townsend, it was widely known that Radersburg had once been the Capital of the Montana Territory. Being teenagers, none of us actually cared enough learn more about the history of Radersburg and its role as the Capital.

In 2013, “Taste of Townsend” hosted a dinner that had been a donation for a silent auction. We wanted to do a history trivia quiz between courses. One of the topics was Radersburg being the Capital of Montana. At the age of 61, I was much more interested in learning about history of Radersburg. So I spent a couple of hours on the internet searching for any information about Radersburg as the Capital of Montana.

I was somewhat surprised that I could find no mention of that. How could there be NO information about something that we all knew to be true. So, I turned to a couple of books I have on the history of Montana. Again they skipped over Radersburg being the Capital. By then I was determined to find out and I turned to the definitive source – the Broadwater Bygones. The bygones even listed members of the area town’s baseball teams in the early days. They certainly would have the information I was looking for.

I found NO mention of Radersburg being the Capital of Montana.

Keith Kirscher is a classmate of mine and a close friend for 60 years – and a member of “Taste of Townsend”. I asked him about it and he confirmed that Radersburg had been the Capital. Then I asked him where we learned that. He said he wasn’t sure – that we must have learned it during Montana History in school. I told him I didn’t think so.

Keith and I asked several other classmates about the topic. They ALL knew Radersburg had been the Capital. When asked where they learned that fact no one could remember where.

I have a friend that worked for the Montana Historical Society at one time. She told us that she had come across paperwork that explained the puzzle:

The Territorial Capital of Montana moved from Bannack to Virginia City to Helena. As the population of Virginia City waned and the population and political power of Helena grew, the Territorial Legislature considered moving the capital. In 1867 there was an “election” of the Territorial Capital and Virginia City won – keeping the capital in Virginia City. In 1869 amid widespread election fraud, Helena won a second vote on the topic; but, somehow an “accidental fire” destroyed all of the ballots and Virginia City remained the Territorial Capital.

In 1874, the Legislature again held an election giving the residents of the Territory the vote (previously it had been just the Legislature voting). This time Helena won – again against wide spread claims of election “irregularities”: the Gallatin County vote was throw out; the Meagher County votes were certified as fraudulent. The United States Supreme Court refused to take up the issue; so the Montana Supreme Court finally declared that Helena was the new Capital of the Montana Territory.

According to the paperwork my freind said she came across, the Territory started moving the government from Virginia City to Helena. At that time, the road from Virginia City to Helena went through Radersburg. About the time they reached Radersburg, a judge had ordered an injunction on the move until the legal situation could be resolved.

Since the Territorial government still had to function it ran out of Radersburg until the Montana Supreme Court ruled that Helena had won the election. At that point the move to Helena continued.

This scenario is certainly plausible – while Radersburg was never the official Territorial Capital it functioned as the Capital for some amount of time.

Unfortunately, I could still find no corroborating mention of that happening. Ellen Baumler, an historian at the Montana Historical Society searched for the paperwork but she could not find any mention of the injunction.

Roger Dundas, another classmate of mine that grew up in the Radersburg area an attended school at the Radersburg School, gave me an alternative explanation that is distinctly Montanan and somehow feels right:

Again, during the move of the Territorial government to Helena, the move went through Radersburg. After several days of long, hard traveling those performing the move decided to relax and enjoy Radersburg and, of course, the Radersburg residents were a friendly, welcoming group.

After a day (or maybe more) of “partying” someone in the group moving the Territorial government declared Radersburg to be a fine town and that Radersburg should be the Capital of the Montana Territory. A vote was taken and Radersburg declared the Capital of Montana.

Then, of course, everyone finally sobered up and the move to Helena continued!

Most of the information for this article came from talking to a variety of people. The information about the voting fraud in the 1867, 1869 and 1874 elections came from

“Montana, A History of Two Centuries” by Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang. For more information about Radersburg, visit the Broadwater County Museum, the Broadwater County Museum website at <https://broadwatercountymuseum.com> or the Radersburg Historical Preservation website on <https://preservebroadwaterhistory.org/RHPIMain>