

“What Happened Today in History”

September 7, 1933

“Townsend Is 50 Years of Age”

“Northern Pacific Drove Golden Spike September 8, 1883 Near Missoula”

From September 8, 1883 to September 8, 1933, is a half century, fifty years, and in most cases a lifetime for men who have lived in the old west in the early days. Tomorrow, September 8, 1933, has no particular significance to most of us, other than it is Friday, or perhaps a day when you are looking for word from some week-end visitors. However, fifty years ago, tomorrow, September 8, 1883, was a different day.

To the early day residents of Townsend and Northern Pacific officials, it was a gala day – it marked the completion of that great transcontinental railroad which has so faithfully served Montana and the west for the past five decades. September 8, 1883 means more to the west than the Battle of Gettysburg, or the sinking of the Maine, or any other crucial event of the past in the United States – it marks the driving of the Golden Spike and the completion of a link between the east and the west and the dawn of a new era in history.

To the average mind, in Montana, Idaho and Washington, along this railroad, it marks the beginning of time. Their histories date there. They refer to it as the transformation – of a vast and wild country into a livable empire where homes might be sought and found. It was after this time that people in the east, where opportunities were not plentiful, turned their eyes toward this country and the influx of settlers came to the northwest.

People who watch the magnificent Northern Pacific trains whistle into the station today have little idea of the romance, struggle and labor which transpired a half century ago to make it possible that they now enjoy the comforts afforded by this railroad. They take it for granted. They care even less of the significance and content themselves that they live in the present day, and not in the dim and distant past when the road was in the making. For those people, reminiscence will call to light many facts that would amaze them.

In 1883, when George Myers and Teddy began their lasting friendship, when there were but a scattered few people living west of Bismarck, North Dakota, and these few riding the range, saw the finish of a vast piece of engineering that opened up one of the greatest empires of the entire nation – that of the northwest. In 1883, or up until the time the railroad completed its tracks to that point, there were no such towns as Livingston, Missoula, Billings – and those others which were in existence were only hamlets, if they could be called that. Spokane, Washington, at that time, was about the size of Toston, where a little sawmill and a grist mill supplied the few people who inhabited that section what is now called the Inland Empire. Today, as a result of the pioneering of these strong hearted men who built the Northern Pacific, we are now living in a Garden of Eden. If something is not grown or produced here, we have it just the same as if we had access to all lines of industry – because the Northern Pacific will unload it in our town.

These strong-hearted men faced every conceivable obstacle during those years when the survey and construction took up all their time. Savage Indians, pestilence, bitter winters, together with the work of getting supplies into the country as they progressed offered untold

hardships for them. Despite all these obstacles the work went on, and completion came when the golden spike was driven near Gold Creek in Hellgate Canyon between Missoula and Helena.

Equipment has been changed many times with progress and the roadbed is such today that it requires less than three days to make the journey from Chicago to the west coast, where it once required about two weeks. The last fifty years have seen many advances and achievements in the west, partly due to the Northern Pacific. It will be a real dream to try to visualize the future fifty years, by using the past as a guide to make predictions. Townsend, while she is observing her fiftieth anniversary, is cognizant of the role the Northern Pacific has played in her development and pledges its support to the benefactor of mankind.

“Beginning of Town Was Simultaneous to Coming of N.P. Railway in 1883”

Fifty years ago tomorrow Townsend was well on its way to a promising little town, a few nails having been driven to erect the first dwellings and business structures when it was first learned the railroad would stop at a place about thirty-five miles east of Helena and some ninety miles northwest of Bozeman, both of these points having been already established - one as a mining metropolis and the other an agricultural center. The stop spoken of was to be called Townsend, named for an official of the Northern Pacific railroad. Toston was named for a land-owner, Thomas Toston, in the vicinity, and was also made a station at this time, and a stop was made also at Bedford, an already organized center where the Bedford Flour Mills were the main industry. Winston was named for Winston Brothers (Northern Pacific contractors) and who are still doing business under the same name today.

Pioneers recall that it was a conjecture which would be the most important station – Bedford or Townsend and several hesitated in which place to make their residence or start their business. However, a small town, known as Centerville, about one mile from the Townsend station and not in a position to connect up with the railroad in close proximity, soon began to move its buildings and in a short time Centerville was transplanted in Townsend. A small N.P. station at the end of Main Street, a rooming and boarding house near the depot, the Townsend Mercantile Company’s store, Townsend Hotel, the W.S. Thompson building and the McCormick livery stables were some of the first buildings erected. The late Dr. J.L. Belcher, Townsend’s first physician, moved his residence from Centerville to Townsend. A restaurant, now used for the same purpose, called the Bon Ton, was one of the first eating houses. And almost over-night, buildings sprang up and before the year was out, Townsend took its place as one of the leading little towns along the route.

There was a reason. It was located in the center of the upper Missouri Valley with the rolling bench land and rich bottom land on the east and on the west hills where, at that time, rich ores were being extracted while to the northeast the old Diamond City was a lively mining town of some 4500 people, while Hassel, to the west, was springing into being with a population of 2000 miners, and Radersburg was a boom mining town at that time.

At the time the N.P. made Townsend a town, there were many well established farms through the valley, inhabited by early day homesteaders and those who had abandoned mining to take up and develop fine farms, and so when the town became a reality, a market place was well needed. One of the first stores, that of John W. Lowell, erected on the corner

opposite of Lasby Drug today, was a hardware store and the owners set themselves up in the grain-buying business, while the Townsend Mercantile Company served the public then and now with general merchandise. Jewelers, milliners, dressmakers, in fact every line of business was soon established. The Methodist Church, still in use, was erected soon and about two years later found a newspaper, "The Transcient", giving the people of the community weekly news. The church also served as Townsend's first school and none other than Ex-Senator E.H. Goodman acted as first teacher.

Looking back upon that eventful day, September 8, 1883, we find the people of the community gathered to witness the coming of the first locomotive. The golden spike, that set the wheels in motion, to connect the west with the east by rail, was driven by the President of the United States, U.S. Grant. When his train arrived in Townsend, the people were anxious to hear him make a short address and turned with eagerness to the prominent new and young attorney of the town, Milton H. Parker, to approach the president, requesting his presence on the platform and to introduce him. This was graciously done by Attorney (now Judge) Parker, father of Broadwater County's representative. W.K. Parker.

Early carpenters of the town were the late T.N. Averill, the late Lee Robinson and George Jarvis.

The hall over the Townsend Mercantile was used as the amusement hall of the infant town. Here dancers came from many miles, road shows performed and on Sunday the place was turned into a house of worship. Here it was on the first Christmas that a community tree was decorated and those present recall the look of surprise when Mrs. W.D. McCormick, pioneer matron of the town, was presented with a Steinway Grand piano. Mrs. Belcher, wife of the town's doctor, was the recipient of a huge over-stuffed parlor set. Others receive diamond rings and gold watches. The hall was packed and no one was forgotten by the pioneer Santa.

There are main events, particularly connected with the founding of Townsend, which time and space prohibit its review. Those who lived here at the time the first N.P. train passed through will recall many names unmentioned and some incidents as important as the ones recalled, but a complete history could never be found. There are many passed beyond who could lend important data – and many who cease to remember little incidents to make the early day history of Townsend complete, but the facts remain true to the beginning – that it is a small western town, located in the Rocky Mountains, in the cream of the Missouri Valley and with the grandest of scenery on all sides – a climate healthful and pleasant, summers that can't be exceeded in coolness and pleasantness and moderate winters. The people are the best on earth – many kin to those first pioneer invaders who crossed the plains to open a new country, known for their daring, kindness, generosity and honesty. A new town with fifty years of service, Townsend will continue, as in the past, to progress and be a benefactor for the rural people who need a market place and business center to transact their industrial affairs.