

Tues., July 25: Mining and Its Miseries

Before the trip, I had included on the itinerary a must-do attraction: the World Museum of Mining. I didn't know why. I just knew I had to go there. This is why I was in Butte, its identity inextricably intertwined with mining. The massive hill up which the town crawls was full of various minerals used in manufacturing, like lead and zinc.



As usual, the start was men with pans looking for gold in Silver Bow Creek. They weren't supposed to be working it, because it belonged to Native Americans; they were part of the rush that led to Red Cloud's War. But it quickly became an industrial operation. By the late 1800s wooden towers had risen all over the hill. Those were replaced with steel early in the next century. Before the museum opened, I headed for the topmost of the remaining 12, having driven by last night.

The Mountain Consolidated Mine—the “Con”—produced more copper than any other on the planet from 1886 to 1974. Along with the financial costs, 172 men paid with their lives for the material that is likely carrying electricity and possibly water to your home. The tallest tower in the pic below is the “headframe,” though given my previous sentence, they were also called “gallows.” This one is from 1928. Thick steel cables attached to lift motors in the “hoist house” at the right ran over pulleys at the top and down through the tower to move lifts with people, equipment, supplies and ore. You'll see examples in a bit.



Given its location on the hill, the Con had another distinction. The building at left is painted “MILE HIGH” in tall red letters on the top section, and “MILE DEEP” on the lower section. The elevation is around a mile above sea level, and the shaft runs 5,300 feet into the ground. I parked at the level of the base and walked up to the hoist house, feeling the lava cone in my ankles. There was no equipment inside.

Signs nearby talked about this part of town, once the separate Centerville, as having been the “Most Irish Area in America.” One suspects Boston might differ, but there was a Hibernia Hall here by 1889. Miners’ housing lines narrow, rising and falling streets to this day, some dating as far back as that period.



View east from the Con, toward reclaimed mine land

Heading back to the car I took a side trail to the foundation of the mine supervisor's house. I imagined him dragging himself up the stone walk after a long day. Given that the mine ran 24 hours a day and the house was maybe 100 yards away from the headway, it didn't seem like much of a break.

One impressive feature of Butte isn't visible in town: the best online history tour I've come across anywhere in my many travels. The "Story of Butte" website¹ from a preservation group and the local public archives gave me a plethora of tour choices providing satisfying details. I drove down to Uptown, pulled it up, and followed one recounting, "The Murder of Frank Little."

Labor unions are having a resurgence as I write this, despite a large bag of dirty tricks companies use to fend them off (rather than doing so by treating workers like full-fledged adults as deserving as CEOs of respect, money, and perks). I am wary of unions, in part because I wouldn't like being forced to join anything to have a job, but mostly because they are capable of the same excesses as any other large hierarchy. But I also know the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States is directly correlated with the loss of unions. And many of the problems people associate with unions come from

¹ <https://storyofbutte.org/>

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managers treating them like the enemy. Plenty of companies treat the unions as partners and avoid the strife and strikes.

American unions fought their way into existence in the early decades of the 20th Century, literally. Companies sent armed thugs to quash protests and strikes, often ignored or aided by police. The mining industry was a key battleground. The first union formed locally about 10 years after the town was, and by the 1890s every mine, and seemingly every profession in town was unionized. Despite the mining companies doing just fine, the owners wanted more money and more power. They found various ways to undermine the unions, helped by internecine strife between ethnic groups and competing unions. By World War I the unions were largely broken, just in time for wartime demands to push the mines into over-production. An underground explosion in June 1917 killed 168 men, and pushed the rest into a town-wide strike.

The next month, Frank Little limped uptown from the train station on a broken ankle. He was a Wobbly, but not because of the ankle. That was the nickname for members of the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW was both a union and an anti-capitalist political movement, hence the most hated union among capitalists. The fact it was gaining a significant following for such a radical organization turned that hatred into fear.

Little began giving speeches and talking strategy, so the fear and hatred of the mine owners devolved on him. The first stop on the tour was where the fat cats gathered, the Silver Bow Club, an upscale brick building. I looked at the large second-floor windows and imagined cigar smoke filling the interior. The second stop reflected the internecine



warfare I mentioned. Three years before Little's arrival, demonstrations against the leadership of the weakening Butte Miners Union by unhappy members erupted one day in riots and two men getting shot. That night, the BMU building blew up, as one might expect given the number of angry people who knew how to use dynamite. A

small section remains as a memorial, including part of a collapsed wall with a beam embedded in it.

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Bounce forward to 1917. Troops had been called out to put down major miner demonstrations. Little gave a speech to 6,000 miners at a baseball stadium that made the national news, in which he called those troops “thugs”—perhaps not the best choice of words during World War I, which he also opposed as a capitalist adventure.

Thirteen days after he arrived in town, at 3 a.m., a black Cadillac pulled up in front of the boarding house where Little was staying. Six men awoke the owner, forced her to point out his room at gunpoint, broke in, and dragged him out in his underwear. After the sun came up, a man walking to work southwest of town spotted a body hanging from a train trestle, near where I-115 now ends. It was Little. He’d been beaten, dragged behind the car, and hung. Unlike proper hangings that tried to snap the neck, his amateur murderers let him suffocate to death.

Thousands came to his funeral. His tombstone was engraved with, “Slain by Capitalist Interests for Organizing and Inspiring His Fellow Men.” Par for the course, no one was ever arrested, aided by the convenient disappearance of key evidence.

The trestle is gone. The site of the boarding house is now a parking lot behind the saddest Motel 6 I’ve ever seen. I had considered booking it. “I would not have been happy pulling in there,” I told the Sage as we drove past.

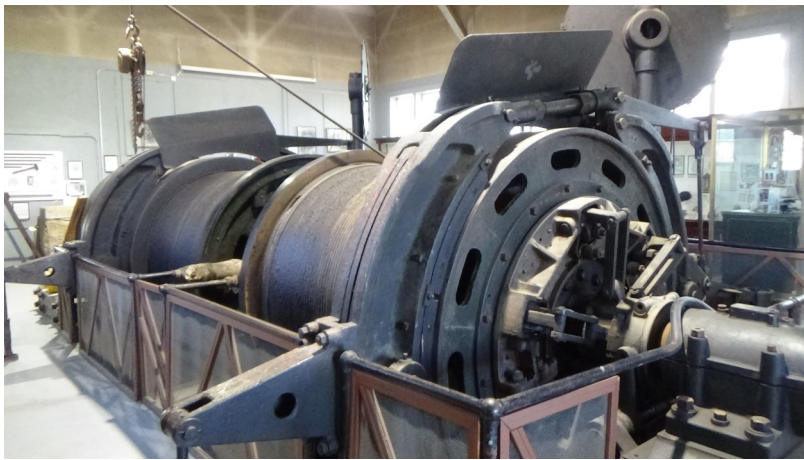
After a couple more stops it was time to head across town. The route took me through the campus of Montana Technological University, whose small football stadium proclaimed itself, “Home of the Orediggers.” Now *that’s* a great sports mascot.

I arrived just as the World Museum of Mining opened. At the low-slung building in front, behind a cutout of a cartoon miner, I checked in, having purchased the first tour of the day online. While waiting I made a quick pass by that building’s exhibit panels, since I knew the general history of



mining in the area. I peeked behind the curtain in the mineral exhibit and enjoyed the colorful blacklit luminescence of shelves of rocks.

Still having time to kill before the 10:30 tour, I drifted through their schlocky fake mining town, noting with appreciation their willingness to include a brothel with a single red-painted light bulb² above the front door. In the dentist office was a chair used by a Kansas dentist in the 1880s that looked like a medieval torture device (or BDSM sex device). The Chinese laundry captured my interest, as its equipment was original, including a wooden, hand-turned washing barrel. These were viewed through the reflective front windows, hence no pics.



The main reason I was here was the Orphan Girl Mine, atop which the museum is built. Opened in 1875, and bought in the 1920s by the Con's owner, it produced lead, silver, and zinc until 1956. The name came from it being by itself on the outskirts of the hill; later an Orphan Boy was added nearby. Orphan Girl looked like a smaller

version of the Con. I was geekily thrilled to go into the hoist house this time. The museum was opened within 10 years of the mine's closing, so the working parts are still in place. The drum around which the hoist cable wrapped as the lifts were raised is as tall as I am at six-feet, yet only 1/6 the size of some on the hill. On its far side was the operator's stand, with handles for the motor and a sign demanding in red letters, "Do not SPEAK to ENGINEER while ENGINE is in MOTION." A large mechanical dial with numbers at varying distances pointed to the stops. The operator used vertical handles to move and stop the lift at the needed level.



2 "Red light district," for the part of town where brothels collected, was used as early as 1869 in a newspaper article. Apparently many brothels in the West adopted the red light as an advertisement. I found no evidence on the Web to prove or disprove the legend it started with railroad workers hanging their red lantern by the front doors so they could easily be found during a train emergency. One source points out that would have been true of any saloons or barbers the men visited as well!

A line of drills on one wall showed the device's evolution from hand tools to the most modern. An early jackhammer created large amounts of silica dust, and thus silicosis or "miner's lung." This horrid, eventually fatal condition results from the sharp-edged particles cutting up the insides of the lungs. The inventor quickly added a water jet to clump the by-products, which did not fully fix the situation.

Underneath the headway, I stepped into one of the "chippies," the cage elevators into which as many as 10 men would cram for a fast trip underground (on the right in the picture). The museum did not explain the slang, which my Internet searches suggest was limited to Butte. A photo of one on Wikimedia Commons proposes, "The function of the chippy hoist—to 'service' the men—may have given it its name; chippy is slang for a loose woman, or prostitute. A slightly different theory holds that the hoist was so-named because the cage it powered 'ran around,' making many more trips than the main cages."³ It was poignant to imagine being one of the men getting ready to descend into eight or 10 or 12 hours underground. As you can see in the middle chippy, which holds a small wheeled box, it could also be used for supplies or ore. The off-limits, slower chippy on the left was only used for men, when the others were in use for other purposes.⁴



As 10:30 approached, I had to go back and ask where the tour started, not having spotted the gazebo I was directed to initially. As it turned out, the bearded man in his 30s who interrupted his conversation with a co-worker to answer me was our guide. I followed his instructions and arrived a few minutes before he did. He introduced himself as Ken and made a crack about the "Barbie" movie that had opened that weekend. Glancing at each ticket, which displayed the buyer's phone number, he used the area codes to comment about, or ask, where people were from. A family with two girls, maybe 6 and 11, was from Pullman; I told them I'd worked for WSU. When Ken got to me and saw 919, he said, "I have nothing," not recognizing it. I did my routine of saying North Carolina "and I drove," which he declared "hardcore."

³ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orphan_Girl_Mine_headframe_\(Butte,_Montana,_USA\)_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orphan_Girl_Mine_headframe_(Butte,_Montana,_USA)_2.jpg)

⁴ The page in the prior footnote claims only this was a "chippy," but I recall the sign at the museum using the term for all three.

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I was disappointed to have him lead us back toward the hoist house, but it let me seem prescient by knowing what the Dry Room was for. Miners often came up from a day's work wet to the skin, from the natural wetness of the mines and/or those drill jets. Add in all the dirt, and possible grease from working on the machines, and many would walk into the showers fully clothed to wash both themselves and their outfits. The clothes were hung from or placed in baskets connected to each man's locker, and the room was kept warm enough to dry them before the next shift.



Eventually he led us down the hill behind the headway and through a fence to a massive corrugated pipe angling out of the ground. There he showed us how to turn on the LED lights on the front of the heavy yellow hardhats he'd handed out at the gazebo, the only light source in the tunnels now. The first version used candles, he told us. He pushed open one of the huge metal doors with some effort, and we stepped through amongst dust particles dancing in the sunlight. Once inside, our heads illuminating, the door closed and that disappeared. He had us aim our headlamps at a diagram on the wall. This explained why we would only be going 100 feet down: The other 3,100 feet is filled with water. When the mine was operating, water pumps operated around the clock to keep the place dry. The diagram, and wooden models

like the one to the left, used in lawsuits and now in the hoist house, showed how extensive these mines were, with a spider web of “drifts” (tunnels) stretching out in all directions.

In the ceiling were rods driven in to hold chain-link fencing across its width, meant to stop rock falls. Ken pointed out there were far more than needed, because this area was used for training mining students from Montana Tech. See the one sticking well out on the right side of the shot? Ken pointed to it and joked, “Someone got an ‘F.’”



The rails were still in place along the floor, and examples of different carts were scattered along the way. The one he is touching at left is an ore cart. Behind it is a “muck-out” cart, basically a mini-front-loader used to scoop the rocks into the ore cart. Another had an auger on it for drilling. By a cart that once carried dynamite, Ken pointed out a sign warning workers not to smoke around it. You would think they would know better, he said, yet they had to be warned constantly. He also showed us a water cart, with a handle on its lid. He explained that when the miners needed to let the water out, so to speak, they just aimed at the walls.

Here by the ore cart, Ken turned to the wall and lifted off a hook a candle holder and small candle, maybe a half-inch in diameter. He said this was what first rode on the miners’ hard hats. He lit it, and had us turn off our lights. The candle provided more light than expected, but I would not have

wanted to depend on it. To make that point, he asked permission to snuff the candle. No one objected, so he asked the youngest girl from Pullman if she wanted to blow it out. She bravely did. He called it “absolute darkness,” which I have experienced before. But I tried the hand-before-eyes trope, and would swear that I saw the vaguest outline. I have

excellent night vision, so maybe there was enough light sneaking down the shaft or around the corners that I picked it up. Maybe I was just imagining it. After a moment he had us turn on our lights, and congratulated the girl on her courage. “Usually I’m scared of the dark,” she said, sounding rightly proud of herself.

A sad footnote came in Ken’s story about the mules used to haul the carts around in earlier times. They never came out of the mines, and eventually went blind.

Farther down, mud had become more and more prevalent just from the natural water, so I’m glad no miners were adding their own liquid. Early on he had warned, “you’re going to get mud on your sneakers.” I wished I’d known to wear my boots. At one curve he suggested two routes to avoid the worst of it.

Recall that I blew out my right Chuck Taylor⁵, or realized it was blown out, on Day 1 at the Cumberland Gap. Replacing it was a bit of a problem: I’d always bought them in N.C. at a Tanger Outlet Center a half hour from my house, didn’t know where else to get them, and couldn’t very well order a new pair online when I wasn’t sure where I would be on any given day. Given how many Tanger Centers there are, I’d resolved simply to stop at the next one I passed. Except, every Tanger Center I’ve seen was on an interstate. They don’t tend to put them, or major shopping centers, on two-lane back roads. So two weeks later, I was still in my occasionally wide-open shoe. I took the route to the right, placing that shoe as high on the wall as feasible, and walked on my toe elsewhere, preferring not to walk in a muddy *sock* all day. That succeeded, but he was right, my All-Stars got muddy. I liked it.

We came to the chippy shafts, and Ken had us take turns shining our lights down them to see the current water level about ten feet below the floor. He was quite explicit about *not* taking your helmet off. Just hold it and the light in place, he said, pointing out the LEDs could fall off and were expensive. Predictably the first guy to look, somewhat older than me, took his helmet off and pointed it down. His embarrassed wife grabbed his shoulder and repeated Ken’s admonition. “He didn’t listen,” Ken let out, with a hint of a sigh. I don’t think the guy heard him, but he said something defensive and put it back on.

A complicated set of signals was used to tell the lift operator in the hoist house what type of cart was needed and at what stop. By the lift shaft were a horn and light, set off by

⁵ Slang for Converse All-Stars because 1920s basketball star Chuck Taylor endorsed them, reportedly the first time a sports star endorsed a product. His signature was on the shoes when I started wearing them in 1973, long before Nike bought out Converse. I am unduly proud to say I am two degrees of separation from Mr. Taylor. I knew the parents of one friend I’ve mentioned, Tom Herbert, who had dinner with Taylor. Tom’s father Dick was sports editor of the *Raleigh News & Observer* for many years, and as a result is in the N.C. Sports Hall of Fame.

pulling on a rope. He pointed to a chart on the wall translating the codes, which he demonstrated by pulling on the rope, something like two tugs, a pause, and three tugs. He'd heard a recording of the signals when the mine was open, and they were much faster, a series of indecipherable clicks. He asked if anyone wanted to try it, and the littlest girl stepped up, followed by her sister. I was the only adult to do so. It was loud and fun.

On the way back, at a higher level of the lifts, he offered to take pics of people on their phones. I declined, and while waiting, asked the Pullman man what he did at WSU, a safe bet given that the university is by far the biggest employer in town. He turned out to be a baker in Lewiston, Idaho, 45 minutes south, but his wife worked at a sorority house. She was vague about what she did, saying she was not a house mother, but a "step-mother" of sorts. The ex-journalist in me wanted to dig in, but, hey, these people were on vacation.

Ken asked if anyone had any last questions, and the little one did: "Do you know the name of your girlfriend?"

"Barbie?" he said. She looked confused. It turned out her little brain had come up with that wacky sentence construction to ask if he *had* a girlfriend. He apologized to her, saying he thought she was making a joke, and said no, he was unattached.

Once out, as we headed for the gazebo to turn in our hard hats, I again was able to tell someone I did tours and congratulate them. This tour turned out to be why I felt so compelled to come to this museum, providing a sense of what miners go through on a daily basis no amount of reading, photos, or coal-miner films had conveyed. I strongly recommend it—unless you're claustrophobic.

He asked what tours I did, of course, so I told him of the website and gave him a card. "Are there a lot of MJ fans where you are?" He meant Michael Jordan, the professional basketball legend who played college ball at the University of North Carolina. An N.C. native, he may be the second-most worshiped deity in the state.

"Oh—tons." It was not an articulate response, but he'd caught me off guard.

To the group, he recommended that people who were sticking around try "pasties." No, I am not referring to the tiny stickers exotic dancers use to cover their nipples where legally required. Pronounced "PAST-ees", he was referring to baked pockets of dough containing meat, potato, and onion, carried into the depths by miners for lunch. He listed a couple places to get them, and I asked if any had a vegetarian version. He said no, noting that would just be potato and onion, to which I said yes, with a kind smirk. No, he

said. Confirming what I'd learned the night before, he knew of only one vegetarian-friendly restaurant in town, not the one I found. When I mentioned the Staggered Ox, he said, "I didn't know that was still open."

"It didn't look open," I quipped, getting a chuckle.

Below the headway were "Underground Exhibits," mostly great old photos and a diorama describing the entire mining process. At the end of that was the answer to an unasked question Ken had provided anyway, shown to the right. It looked like a water cart with two compartments. You'll recall my telling you how the miners got rid of their excess water. I did not mention how they got rid of those pasties after what was left went through their systems. Ken told us about another cart called a "honeypot": officially a "Toilet Car," the exhibit said, which would be placed at the end of a drift.



I left the museum well satisfied. It does an excellent job of explaining the history, culture, and process of mining. However, unless I missed it buried in one of the dense gift shop exhibit panels I only skimmed, there was no mention of Thomas Little.

The heat had arisen, so I pulled into the empty lower parking lot to switch into shorts, eyeing the cars up top to make sure no one got a surprise eyeful of a skinny middle-ager's tighty whities. I did not notice a couple walking behind me until they had passed, aiming for a trail at the end of the lot. Good thing I hadn't backed in.

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After a frustrating attempt to find a brothel museum I have to assume no longer exists, given it wasn't at its listed address where a town visitor map also said it would be, I made one last stop southeast of town. As the shaft mines across the hill played out, the company that

owned the Con, Anaconda Copper, started blasting a hole in the ground starting in 1955. Closed in 1983, the Berkeley Pit has since filled with gorgeous, deadly poisonous turquoise water. The water has the acidity of vinegar. Now it's a tourist attraction. I paid \$3 to the most humorless museum worker I've ever met, and walked through a tunnel to a viewing platform and hard-to-comprehend view.

A history panel explained the oblong pit was "the largest truck-operated open pit copper mine in the United States," more than a mile in diameter and six football fields deep. Five communities were wiped out for the mine, but the sign claimed the residents didn't mind because of the jobs. I rather doubt that was a unanimous sentiment.

I had noticed a dot crawling across the lake, and some other visitors began speculating on what it was. A man decided it must be a duck; I'll grant him the benefit of the doubt by assuming he had not read the panel about what is in the water. It was hard to catch with the Handycam zoomed in, but I could tell it was mechanical, probably a robot boat either monitoring the water or keeping the surface moving to prevent scum.

Halfway back through the tunnel I encountered the beginnings of a group of elderly visitors, some of them looking uncertainly in my direction from the end, others pounding right ahead. When I got through, I found the VC blocked by a woman with a cane very slowly working her way up the steps, having decided it was a tunnel too far. The man helping her, who I first thought to be a relative but turned out to be working for the city tours that left from here, turned back and apologized. "Take your time," I responded. Mr. Friendly Cashier did not seem eager to ensure she got to the tour trolley out front, when his coworker tried to hand her off and get back to his other charges.

I loved Butte enough to look at real estate prices after I got back to Durham. For now, though, time to move on, rejoining I-15 North. It goes past the east side of town and up through rocky hills an hour to Helena, the state capital. A wide one-way Prospect Boulevard leads into



town, and good signage took me to the state capitol building. I parked the Sage in a shaded spot on the road in front. Past a flower bed shaped like the state, I made my way to the front steps, which were chained off. A sign directed me underneath. Expecting security, I was surprised I could walk right in. I grabbed a brochure on the strictly functional first level and wandered. On the second I came out of a stairwell by the reception area of the Office of the Governor. I thought it would be cool if he happened out and engaged me in a conversation.

The rotunda was pretty—open and bright, thanks largely to a sunlight above the grand staircase leading to the third floor. Between the third-floor arches were four round paintings representing archetypes from the state’s history: a cowboy, Native American, prospector, and trapper. Up the staircase, a pair of statues of the prominent 20th Century Senator Mike Mansfield and his wife were realistic enough to tempt a conversation. They were also a bit creepy, with Maureen gazing up at him adoringly (of course).

I realize I am giving short shrift to the capitols I visit. The primary reason is to retain the focus on history and thus keep this book slightly shorter. History happens at capitols, but mostly of a routine sort, the important but fairly typical business of running a state. As with the motels, I’m thus choosing to report only the unusual stuff.

For example, an exhibit on the four constitutions of Montana said the first one disappeared. Here we meet Thomas Francis Meagher, an Irishman who helped lead a rebellion against England in 1848.⁶ Convicted of treason, he was first sentenced to death, which was transmuted to getting shipped off to Australia. From the EA standpoint—brushing aside the Indigenous people, as did the EAs—that country started as a big British prison. But Meagher escaped from there to the U.S. Famous among Irish immigrants, he became a popular speaker, a lawyer, and editor of a newspaper focused on Ireland. When the Civil War broke out, he formed a company of volunteers and served as its captain at the Battle of Bull Run (mentioned at the Wagon Box Fight). He then created and led one of the most famous U.S. Army units in the war, the Irish Brigade.⁷ He was rewarded afterward by appointment



Brig. Gen. Thomas Meagher

as the secretary of the two-year-old Montana Territory. But no governor was appointed, so Meagher served as the acting governor and guided creation of the first constitution in 1866. It was sent off to St. Louis by riverboat for printing, but never made it! If Meagher kept a backup copy, it was lost. I'll save the end of his story for later in the trip. More than 20 years passed before a lasting constitution was adopted, the third try after politics blocked acceptance of the second, and Montana became a state. The current, fourth version is from 1972.

Most unusual about the Montana capitol is the internal layout. Externally the majority of capitols have the same basic form of two wings with a central something, usually a dome, and the house and senate occupy the two ends. In Montana's, on the third floor, the House of Representatives is on one end, but the senate is embedded closer to the rotunda on the same end. The explanation lies in the similar chamber on the other side of the rotunda. That was the Senate chamber when the building opened in 1902, and today's Senate chamber was the House. Wing extensions were added 10 years later, and the

6 This is a literal footnote to history: A group Meagher and two others formed, which fomented the rebellion, went to France to research the French Revolution that toppled the monarchy there in the 1790s. French supporters of Irish freedom gave them a version of the red, white, and blue French flag in green and orange, which is now the flag of the Republic of Ireland.

7 A *company* theoretically had 100 men, led by a captain. A few companies formed a *regiment*; two or more regiments a *brigade*; two or three brigades a *corps*; and two or more corps an *army*. What is sometimes called *the* U.S. Army is actually made up of multiple armies, now as then.

House was moved to the bigger space. Why the Senate felt compelled to move to an identically sized room across the way was not explained.⁸ The old senate chamber became the Supreme Court, which has since moved elsewhere.

As I exited from under the front steps, there was a teen girl on a bench just outside, engrossed in her phone. Curving toward the large statue of Meagher out front, I saw why. Her father was taking pictures, while her mother waited impatiently in the shade of a tree. I could almost see my mother waiting for Daddy as he read yet another historical sign at a battlefield, while my bored sisters tried to entertain themselves in the car long before the Internet. This cross-generational scene is also cross-cultural, given the parents were Indian (I know the accent well).

The state history museum was next on the itinerary, which a check during a water break back at the Sage proved to be a short walk past the east end of the capitol. Construction equipment and fences blocked the main entrance, with no signs telling how to get in. I passed the expectant ticket seller for the history trolley loading up nearby with a noncommittal smile and turned toward a side entrance, where a small sign admitted the whole museum was closed for renovation.

Deflated, I fell back on an optional itinerary item, the Old Executive Mansion. I'm not a house-tour fan, unless it's connected to a significant historical figure. I've been in so many of those, I rarely see something new, so for me there's no point going to an old house just because it's an old house. But I had the time, so why not?

An online check told me I had 10 minutes to get a number of blocks west to make the final tour at 3. I pulled the Sage onto a residential street past the Victorian house with tourists on the front porch. Wary from the house museum I thought was the history museum in Deadwood, I circled the home looking for a ticket office before joining the crowd. A sign there indicated the tour was free and first come, first served.

⁸ A Web search turned up no immediate answer, and curious as I am, I'm not willing to invest time tracking it down!

I took my place leaning against a porch column by the front steps. A man on the far side of the group nodded when I caught him looking, which I returned. A few minutes after 3, a literary cliché opened the door that usually does not apply to tour guides: “a distinguished-looking gentleman in a fashionable suit.” He apologized, saying the prior tour was running long, and invited us to join it for what usually is the final part, after which we would do the house. He sent us around back. After I staked out a position in the limited shade in front of the carriage house, the nodding gentleman joined me and asked if I was from North Carolina. He had recognized my Carolina Panthers cap. He and his wife had, to my mild irritation, driven slightly farther than I had, from Myrtle Beach in South Carolina. She came up wearing a University of Richmond shirt. I told her I had a good UR story for her later.



A surly looking man was wearing a tee from Duck, N.C. I pointed him out to the S.C. couple, joking that the Carolinians were taking over. But I decided not to engage him, despite his bubbly wife. He barely spoke to her and never smiled the whole tour.

Like Butte, Helena started out as Native American land by treaty but invaded by gold panners with Army help. Here they did so in Last Chance Gulch. William Chessman showed up in 1865 at age 19. He was one of the smart ones, though. While buying up mining rights, he also bought land and *water* rights, eventually forming a water company. As the population grew, so did his wealth. Eventually married, he had this house built in 1888. But debts and company problems pushed him into bankruptcy. The Chessmans sold off the house and most of their stuff, and moved across the street into an apartment in the building they owned. They were forced to see their former home every day.

It passed through two other rich families, then the state bought it in 1913 as the Executive Mansion. It served that role for 46 years.

But it did so without air conditioning. Carriage house done with nothing singular to report, as our group of a dozen people stepped into the home, the guide apologized for the temperature. He handed out paper hand fans people could keep, emblazoned with, “History is Cool.” The guide (whose name I failed to get) said the first floor was used mostly for public functions during its mansion days. Bathed in orange-tinged polished wood, it was definitely a McMansion of its day. I was taken by an interior design feature

I'd never seen. Instead of wallpaper, fabric was attached to the walls in some rooms, using a hidden frame. I asked how they were attached, and he didn't know. As you'll see in many homes of the period, pictures were hung using wires hooked to a rail along the ceiling.

I impressed him when he was describing the process used to reproduce this silk-and-fabric "wallpaper" from old swatches. I knew the name of the company that did the work before he said it, and nodded my head in recognition when he said Scalamandre.

"You know Scalamandre?" he asked.

"I lived down the street from them."

"In New York?"

"Long Island City!"

I knew that was the biggest manufacturer of reproduction fabrics in the country, because I'd read it on the sign outside the building. I wasn't quite narcissistic enough to explain that I practiced the board-breaking portion of my first black belt test outside their plant, as that portion of 14th Street, on which I lived, was commercial and therefore quiet late at night. The illegal chop shop⁹ the next block up was active sometimes, but we didn't bother each other.

In the kitchen the guide asked if anyone knew what a cup with a bridge of porcelain across one part of the opening was. I gave others a chance before raising my hand. "A mustache cup," I said. The idea is that your mustache would be protected from foam or wet by resting it on the bridge.

Rising through the house, we faced rising temperatures as well. In one of the upstairs bedrooms, a young teen girl there with her family fell slowly to her knees. As I tend to hang in the back of tour groups, both as a security measure (able to see everyone) and to get pictures unhindered by humans when possible, only I and her mother saw it. I looked away, knowing how embarrassed her teenage brain would be, but stood by to assist if needed. The mother helped her up and out to a chair in the hall, and then took her downstairs where it was cooler-ish.

Another bedroom held a hair memorial. In the 1800s and into the next century, it was common for people to collect hair—often from a dead loved one—and weave it into a wreath or flower shapes or such. Most of the group seemed grossed out, but I'd seen

⁹ Where stolen vehicles are taken apart for their parts, which collectively earn a lot more money than selling the car as a whole in most cases.

many. In fact, on the stairs to the top floor I told the guide of viewing a version made as a thank you to a teacher, with small samples of hair from each of her students, at the Museum of Idaho.

One of the coolest artifacts of the trip awaited me in the finished attic decorated as a play room. The technology for recording music before vinyl records was wax cylinders. The cylinder lay sideways, and the needle and sound horn tracked along its length on a metal bar. I'd seen the cylinders and the devices, but this was the time I saw one *played*, as I told the guide before leaning in for a close view. That was a great history geek moment.

Tour completed, this guide, too, got a version of my, "I'm one and ya' dun good" line.

Out front I found the S.C. couple to deliver the promised University of Richmond story. A cousin graduated from there in the 1970s. There is a lake in the middle of campus, a reservoir fed by a creek crossed by a bridge. One day after heavy rains the creek flooded, but she tried to drive through it. She owned a Volkswagen Beetle. In those days Beetles were sealed on the bottom of the body, meaning they could float—which she did, right down into the lake. Her fellow alum agreed it was a good UR story.

I had a problem. I hadn't pee'd since a rest area on the interstate, not bothering at the capitol because I (thought I) could do so at the museum. The mansion had no facilities, so I was getting desperate. I figured the public library had to be close and looked it up. 'Twas. I drove down into and across Last Chance Gulch, hung a left, and soon was relieved. Only then could I take in the unusual and fetching design of the library interior, with a two-story open area in the middle below exposed wood beams.

As it was still only 5 p.m., I briefly debated making the four-hour drive to my next destination. My friends there weren't expecting me yet, and if I only made part of the drive, I'd arrive early the next morning. Booking.com turned up a fantastic alternative: I could stay in a Victorian McMansion.

The first floor of the Pope House was built in the 1870s by pharmacist Francis Pope and wife Hannah. They did well, with Francis also serving in public roles such as county commissioner. The next decade they hired the same architect who did the Chessman House to fluff up theirs, including adding more floors. In an unusual move for the times, Francis then deeded the house to Hannah. They went on to raise seven children and some boar hounds in the house, whose howling bothered the neighbors. The boar hounds' howling. And who knows, maybe the childrens'.

Northwest Passage



Now a National Historic Landmark, the owners apparently live in most of the downstairs while renting out three tricked-out suites upstairs. Probably because it had not been rented by 5 o'clock, one was available seemingly within my price range, with high ratings. Booking said the room was both larger than the others and rarely available on the site. I booked it. We drove a few minutes back

toward the Executive Mansion and northwest to the house, in what still is a nice-looking residential neighborhood.

Getting in proved a bit of an adventure. I assume this is how AirBnB and VRBO rentals work, but I've never done those. So I was taken aback to find the front door locked and a mechanical keypad. I went into Booking and found no details on how to get in. I went around back to find a screen door swinging in the wind, which I took at the time to be the entrance to one or more longer-term apartments given the mailbox by the door. Not knowing what else to do, I felt compelled to ring the bell and was unsurprised to get no answer. Back on Booking, I clicked the link to contact the property. The number was disconnected. Frustrated, I considered aloud, "Did I get scammed?"

But I noticed a discrepancy between the text in the link and the number that was dialed when I clicked it. I dialed the written number, and the presumed owner picked up. Sounding a bit confused at first, he recovered himself and explained that I was supposed to have gotten a text from Booking telling me how to get in. He did so instead, giving me the code to the front door, and tolerating pleasantly my statement that I'd keep him until I got to the third-floor Green Room suite. There my phone number got me in. While climbing the steps, the Booking text had finally arrived. Apparently the system doesn't anticipate people getting to a place 10 minutes after reserving it.

Northwest Passage

The garret suite was the best room of my trip, with a tub-for-two in a corner of the white-with-black tile bathroom, under a triangular window offering a view of a distant twin-spired cathedral. The deep gable windows presented a bit of a coverings problem for the owners, which they solved cleverly if incompletely with curtains that couldn't fully block the sunlight. A remote-controlled standalone



HVAC unit served its purpose admirably, though the original heat vents were prettier. Each room had a theme, and this one was film, based on the fact early cinema stars



Myrna Loy and Gary Cooper were from Helena. A picture of him had his actual autograph. The former stage techie in me appreciated the old film splicer in one of the windows. I used something similar while editing reel-to-reel tape in my college Sound Design class. My only complaint with the joint is a \$30 “cleaning fee” not reflected in the search results rate on Booking. This is why I said the room was

“seemingly” within my range. I noticed the total looked wrong before confirming, and it took some looking to spot the fee on the Booking page, which drove the cost above my usual limit. I consider this a bait-and switch. Every travel lodging has to be cleaned; most simply build that into their rates. The owners should do the same and be upfront about the cost. I chose to book anyway because the place was so appealing, but resolved not to accept such again if at all avoidable.

The stream in Last Chance Gulch is now covered by a pedestrian walkway lined with shops, services, and restaurants. I drove back, found a free spot on an uphill road, and made my way to an exterior stairway down to the Gulch. I walked its length, appreciating that it followed the watercourse. I did not appreciate the look a vagrant gave me, as I looked up from enjoying the scene of a little girl drawing on the brick with chalk. My interpretation could be wrong, but the sense I got was he was accusing me, appreciatively, of thinking something about her I most definitely was not. I flashed him my black belt stare and moved past, fantasizing about catching him looking at her the wrong way and dropping him for it while warning her parents.

Northwest Passage

None of the handful of restaurants I passed felt right, so I circled around to some up the far slope, along the street I'd taken to the library. Deciding I'd been careful enough with my spending to warrant a better meal, I chose the Mediterranean Grille based on its Tuesday night busy-ness and a name guaranteed to be veggie-friendly. When the hustling host finally got to me, he asked whether I preferred indoors or outdoors. "Whichever is easiest for you," I said, knowing part of a host's job is to ensure tables are evenly distributed among servers.

He seemed to relax just a bit, and his voice softened as he said, "Outside would be easier for me."

"Then outside it is." He led me to a table by the rail on the semicircular porch, covered by an open wood-beam roof with a web of fabric. Hungry and tired, I failed to record my meal, but reading the menu online I think I had the Gnocchi Di Ricotta e Spinaci, "Our homemade spinach and ricotta dumplings served with caramelized red onions, mushrooms, roasted red bell peppers, sun dried tomatoes, scallions, garlic and white wine, topped with Parmigiana cheese." I know for sure I enjoyed it, and the glass of Riesling, and the atmosphere. Having cleaned my plate, when the reserved but efficient 40ish server asked if I wanted dessert, I told her I thought I had earned tiramisu. She was kind enough to agree. It was good as well, but still not like the dish in Italy.