

## From the Society

by MARTHA KOHL

### *And the Bride Wore . . . Montana Weddings, 1900–1960*

#### *An Exhibit from the Montana Historical Society*

In autumn 1905, the *Kalispell Bee* advertised a wedding contest, a chance for one lucky couple to marry on the grandstand of the Flathead County Fair. The brave pair would receive over two hundred dollars' worth of prizes donated by Kalispell merchants, including "everything from the county license to the wedding dinner . . . a picture hat for the bride, furniture and bric-a-brac, groceries, dream robes, even medical attendance one year after marriage."<sup>1</sup>

Three couples submitted their names, and the paper kept the winners secret, promising only that they were "well-known, longtime Flathead County residents . . . young and good looking, both of them, and their appearance under the wedding bells will be a grand surprise on Friday afternoon." In this reality show of yesteryear, four thousand people turned out to witness the marriage between Maggie Pierson, "attired in a pink silk gown and . . . a large white picture hat," and farmer Harry E. Crossley and to offer their congratulations in the fair's floral hall.<sup>2</sup>

Few Montana weddings were as public, as quirky, or as much of a spectacle as the Crossleys' fairground ceremony. More typically, Montana brides and grooms married at home or in church sanctuaries, parsonage parlors, or judges' chambers. But whether a couple married in front of two witnesses or their family and friends, weddings are worth remembering. And wedding stories are worth telling because even the simplest story opens a window into the past.

This is the premise of *I Do: A Cultural History of Montana Weddings*, a book published by the Montana

Historical Society Press in 2011, as well as of the Montana Historical Society Museum's traveling exhibit of the same name and the Society's new in-house exhibit, *And the Bride Wore . . . Montana Weddings, 1900–1960*. Both the exhibits and the book provide insight into the past while asking viewers to reflect on what changes in wedding traditions can tell them about larger cultural changes.

Imagine, for example, living in 1872, in Bozeman, Montana Territory (population approximately 575).



Courtesy Norma Jean and Keith Kelly

John Edmond Walsh and Katherine Agnes Calnan married in Anaconda, Montana, on May 30, 1916, at St. Paul's Catholic Church.



By the 1950s, the newly-weds' car had become the focus of the chivari, or postnuptial prank. This unidentified "just wed" couple was celebrating their honeymoon in Yellowstone National Park in 1951.

Now, imagine marrying, as did Miss Leonard and Mr. Langford on a Thursday evening at 7:00 P.M., October 24. Your wedding guests will throw a large, formal ball for you the following Wednesday, so after your church ceremony, you invite a few select friends to call at your new house for a pleasant informal gathering. Toward the end of the evening, however, "a crowd assembles with trumpets, bells, kettles—anything in fact that will make a noise. They take position around the house . . . [and] make the most horrible noise you can imagine. . . . It is kept up, until the bridegroom appears, takes the crowd to the nearest barroom and treats." This custom, called a chivari and understood to be a community's way of welcoming young people to the institution of marriage, remained common in Montana into the 1930s. For their part, Mr. and Mrs. Langford dreaded but expected it. According to one account, "Langhorn had been threatening to shoot; but he took it more sensibly. The bride showed herself for a moment, and Mr. Langhorn treated according to custom, when the crowd quietly dispersed."<sup>3</sup>

The rise and fall of chivaris reveals just one way weddings have changed from earlier times. The Friday, June 7, 1935, wedding of Butte miner Tom McHugh and store clerk Jule Harrington suggests another. The couple originally planned to marry a day earlier, on June 6, but then someone told Jule that Father Nolan, her parish priest, "was graduating the eighth grade at our Mass." When she called the priest, he confirmed the rumor. "So," she remembered,

I asked him if we could have another Mass, and he said there was only one. I asked for another day and he said okay. We couldn't have Wednesday because Ceil and Vince Petrino had that, so we had to take Friday. . . . We ended up at Gamers for poached eggs for our breakfast—no meat on Fridays then. [At that time, Catholics abstained from eating meat on Fridays.] Prohibition was getting over, so our reception was cheese, tuna fish, and moonshine. We had the reception up home, and it was a beautiful day.<sup>4</sup>

No priest today would ever suggest combining a graduation and a wedding, which makes the story of the McHughs' wedding both illuminating and thought provoking. How much else has changed over the last seventy-five years?

There is no one single historic set of Montana traditions, but very few Montana brides experienced the large formal celebrations most people imagine when they think of a traditional wedding. Lutheran pastor S. J. Fretheim lived in Plentywood in northeastern Montana at the height of the homesteading boom, and between 1910 and 1919 he officiated at over 300 weddings, 250 of which were held in the parsonage parlor. Often couples traveled alone to obtain his services, perhaps catching a ride to town on the milk train before walking to his house and knocking, unannounced, at his door.<sup>5</sup>

For some couples, the wedding itself, perhaps



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 74-104.148n

**Helena photographer Edward Reinig captured a typical wedding feast in this undated photograph. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most middle-class Protestant couples married at the home of the bride's parents. In preparation, the bride's mother and sisters would decorate the house with flowers, set the table with their best china and linens, and cook the celebratory meal.**

followed by a restaurant meal, was the extent of the ceremony. Many, however, returned home to a wedding feast, lovingly prepared by their mothers and sisters. Fretheim remembered, "Wedding receptions in early days were among the main social events of the community. . . . They were so numerous for a while that the bachelors (those who were still at liberty) could eat enough lutefisk and lefse at one wedding to last them till the next couple was ready to give another reception."<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, both wedding and reception were held at home. Camilla Anderson, whose family homesteaded in eastern Montana,

remembered her sisters' double wedding, held June 1, 1910:

Everyone was invited to the wedding, and about that many came. They came on horseback, in buggies, and in wagons. . . . Two huge tables were set up, seating possibly thirty to thirty-five people

**Immigrant weddings incorporated customs from the "Old Country." Russian-German weddings could last up to three days, and, as at the wedding reception of John and Christina Krenzler, schnapps and beer flowed liberally. The couple married on February 22, 1912, on the Montana homestead where they are pictured at right.**



Evelyn Cameron, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 90-87 G065-002



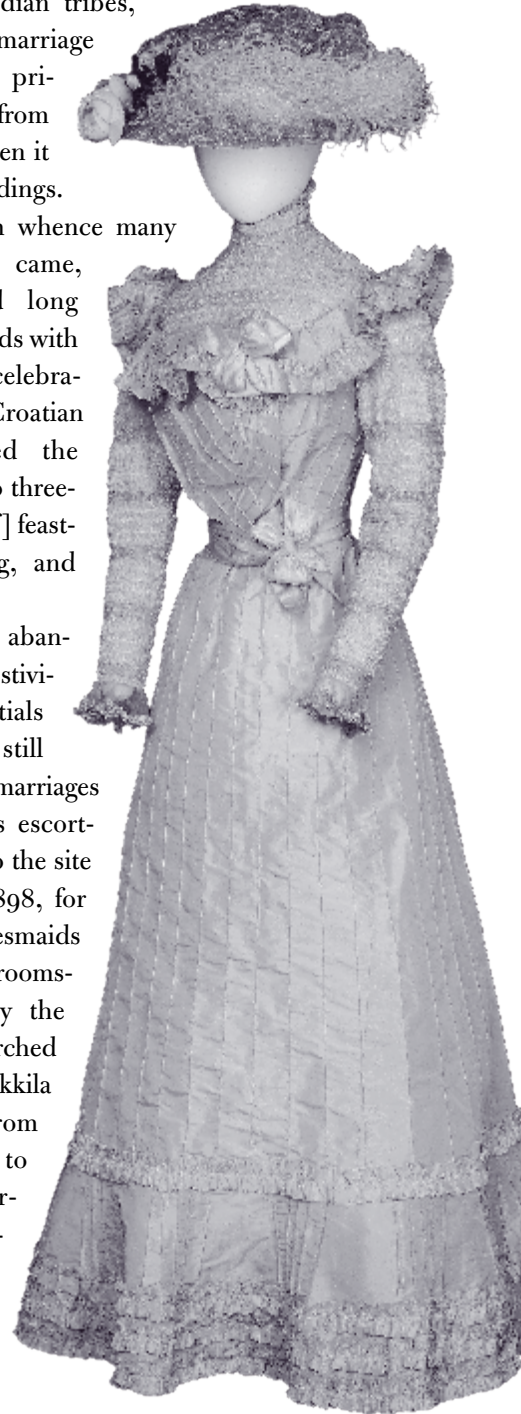
**On August 15, 1880, Millie Priest, the daughter of Valentine Priest, who built and maintained the toll road over Priest Pass in the mountains west of Helena, married Clarence Goodell, the son of a Helena-area homesteader. Her headdress marks her as a bride, but she likely intended to wear the dress again. The practice of recycling wedding dresses was so common that *Ladies Home Journal* advised brides sewing wedding dresses to use plenty of fabric so “you will always be able to make it over into another style.” Only the wealthy could afford a fancy “white wedding.”**

at a time. Dinner was served for several hours—from noon to nightfall, to new groups continuously. Everyone wore his Sunday-go-to meeting best, and in our family Dalma had sewed them all. . . . I can still see the wedding cake, a round, three-tiered fruitcake baked right at home, which was about twenty-six to twenty-eight inches in diameter and weighed maybe thirty to thirty-five pounds.<sup>7</sup>

The Andersons came from Denmark, while Reverend Fretheim’s lutefisk-eating parishioners had ties to Norway. In fact, in 1920 two-thirds of Montanans

were immigrants or the children of immigrants. And as a state comprised of immigrants—except for members of Montana’s Indian tribes, who had their own marriage customs—Montanans primarily took their cues from the “Old Country” when it came to planning weddings. In rural Europe, from whence many Montana immigrants came, workers interspersed long grueling days in the fields with raucous community celebrations. In Anaconda, Croatian immigrants continued the tradition, with “two- to three-day celebrations . . . [of] feasting, drinking, singing, and dancing.”<sup>8</sup>

Red Lodge Finns abandoned the three-day festivities that marked nuptials in rural Finland but still sometimes celebrated marriages with large processions escorting bride and groom to the site of the wedding. In 1898, for example, “fifteen bridesmaids and a like number of grooms-in-attendance,” led by the Miners’ City Band, marched with coal miner Gust Sikkila and Alena Bloom “from the home of the bride to the [Finnish Temperance] hall, where Reverend Alek Sandstrom married the couple.”<sup>9</sup>



**Twenty-one-year-old Emma Jama wore this oyster-colored silk and taffeta wedding gown and matching wide-brimmed hat at her wedding to thirty-nine-year-old Czech immigrant Frank Mares. A justice of the peace married the couple on April 21, 1901, in Helena’s Central Park. Like many early wedding gowns, this one was designed for double duty. The gown’s multipiece design converted easily from a demure, long-sleeved wedding dress to a more fashionable, sleeveless ballgown. Mademoiselle Georgette, II Ruse-Scribe, Place de l’Opera, Paris, France, made Emma’s hat trimmed with silk rosettes and ostrich feathers.**

Whether accompanied by a procession or celebrated with lefse and lutefisk—or tuna fish and moonshine—weddings of old rarely matched our current cultural ideal of a “white wedding.” Such weddings existed, but they were reserved for the wealthy. Margaret Carter, sister of attorney (and later Montana senator) Thomas Carter, wore a cream-colored silk dress trimmed with Spanish lace, a court train, and a long tulle veil when she walked down the aisle of the Helena cathedral to marry millionaire mine owner Thomas Cruse in 1886. However, brides like Mary Sheehan Ronan were more typical. Ronan wore a home-sewn pearl gray dress for her 1873 wedding to Helena newspaper editor and later Indian agent Peter Ronan. “I had dreams of a white dress with a train, a bridal veil, and a wreath of orange blossoms, but when the time actually came I considered conventional things inharmonious with the simplicity and unconventionality of our way of living,” she recalled.<sup>10</sup>

Fantasies of white weddings grew during the twentieth century, fueled by happily-ever-after Hollywood movies, society-page reports of celebrity nuptials, and a growing wedding industry (heralded in 1934 by the first magazine devoted entirely to wedding planning). However, the stark realities of the Great Depression and World War II meant that such weddings were out of most Montanans’ reach. As one Brockton, Montana, bride remembered about her choice of a salmon-colored, ankle-length satin dress for her 1932 wedding: “I could not in good conscience buy a fancy white dress that I would wear only once and then pack away in a trunk. The one I chose I could wear to dances later. I wore it a lot. Many women at that time wore only blouses and skirts when they were married.”<sup>11</sup>

It was not until after World War II that church weddings with white-gowned brides became common. In the 1950s, a booming economy and technological innovations—like the development of nylon (much more affordable than silk)—brought formal weddings formerly reserved for the upper class into reach for ordinary Americans.

What does it mean that wedding traditions evolved over time and continue to do so? Simply that weddings, while shaped by the desires of individual couples and families, also reflect larger cultural and historical circumstances. As such, they offer both good stories and new insights into the lives of



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 2008-75 A1 p19

**Paul and Marge Elfers (above) married on February 17, 1940, in Glasgow, Montana. While the bride’s dress is short and in the style of the day (rather than a wedding dress of fantasy), the chic, fabric-covered buttons mark the dress as one intended for special occasions. White-gowned brides would not become common until after World War II.**

our forebears. Wedding stories illuminate the lives of those who came before. And because weddings remain an important ritual today, a look at how they have been celebrated in the past also sheds reflective light on our own lives and choices.

Want to learn more? Read *I Do: A Cultural History of Montana Weddings*, view the exhibit *And the Bride Wore . . . Montana Weddings, 1900–1960* at the Montana Historical Society through December 2013, or catch the traveling exhibit at one of its upcoming venues.

A historical specialist in the Montana Historical Society Outreach and Interpretation Program, **Martha Kohl** is author of several articles; the project manager for the Montana Historical Society’s textbook, *Montana Stories of the Land*; and author of *I Do: A Cultural History of Montana Weddings* (Montana Historical Society Press, 2011).

## Notes

1. *Kalispell (Mont.) Bee*, Aug. 18, 1905.
2. *Ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1905.
3. Peter Koch to Laurentza M. Koch, Oct. 23, 1872, Christian D. Koch Family Papers, 1829–1912, Coll. 202, Special Collections, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La.
4. Jule McHugh, “The Gulch and I,” n.d., MS, “Neighborhoods: Dublin Gulch-St. Mary’s,” VF 1610, Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives, Butte, Mont.
5. S. J. Fretheim, *A Little Reminder of the Pioneer Days of the Lutheran Church, Plentywood Parish, Montana, 1910–1919* (Plentywood, Mont., c. 1919), n.p.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Camilla M. Anderson, *Camilla: Montana Prairie Pioneer, Volume 1: A Century of Transitions* (Joplin, Mo., 1996), 56.
8. Kimberly Kathleen Currie, “The Croatians of Anaconda, 1890–1945” (senior thesis, Watkins Scholar Program, University of Montana, 1993), 33.
9. Leona Lampi, *At the Foot of the Beartooth Mountains: A History of the Finnish Community of Red Lodge, Montana* (Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, 1998), 15.
10. *Helena (Mont.) Daily Herald*, Mar. 23, 1886; Ellen Baumler, ed., *Girl from the Gulches: The Story of Mary Ronan* (Helena, Mont., 2003), 117.
11. Belvina Bertino, *The Man I Knew, The Man I Still Love: A Biography of Frank Lewis Bertino* (Seattle, Wash., 1995), 14.