Thomas J. Dimsdale: Montana's first newspaper editor

Robert John Goligoski

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THOMAS J. DIMSDALE:
MONTANA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER EDITOR

by

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* Photographs one through eight from the Montana State Historical Society collection, Helena, Montana. Photograph nine courtesy of Dick Pace, Helena.
CHAPTER I

THOMAS DIMSDALE AND THE MONTANA POST

The frail, 'bewhiskered Englishman lay dying in Virginia City, Montana. His best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, stood next to his bed and started to move the sick man to a more comfortable position. When he clasped the man in his arms, Thomas Josiah Dimsdale took one last breath and died. It was Sept. 22, 1866 and Montana had lost its first newspaper editor.

Three years earlier he had entered Virginia City, Montana, and decided to call it home. During those three years, he became a central figure in one of the richest gold mining areas in the world—a 12-mile stretch of mineral wealth called Alder Gulch.

It was no place for the timid. In 1864 Virginia City, Montana, was the nation's richest boom town with more than $30 million in gold lifted from its soil in that year. It was a boisterous place with nearly every third cabin in the town of 10,000 a saloon. Gamblers fleeced miners and what the pick and shovel men had left the dancing girls took. Bartenders served vile whiskey for fifty cents in gold.

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2When Dimsdale became editor of the Montana Post Sept. 17, 1864, he succeeded John Buchanan. Buchanan was not an editor in the "permanent" sense because he held the position for only two or three issues. Dimsdale was Post editor for two years.
PHOTOGRAPH 1

Thomas Josiah Dimsdale, 1831-1866
dust and a night didn't pass without its share of fights, quarrels, wounds or murders. Men cussed and swaggered from saloon to saloon and random shots shattered store windows and could be heard above the merry notes of the violin.³

It was a fertile field for a frontier newspaper editor who usually drank nothing stronger than tea or punch, frowned on cussing and gambling and looked with displeasure on noisy dance halls and painted women. Dimsdale, Montana's first permanent newspaper editor, didn't change conditions much but his crusading pen could be felt from one end of Alder Gulch to the other. He filled the editor's "sanctum" of the Virginia City Montana Post, Montana's first newspaper,⁴ from Sept. 17, 1864 until the end of August, 1866. He was only 35 when he died of tuberculosis.

Details of the 32 years of his life before he came to Montana in July, 1863 are sketchy. Born in 1831 near Thirlsby in northern England, he was a member of a middle-class family wealthy enough to send its children to schools attended by the sons of nobility. Dimsdale received his early education at Rugby and latter attended Oxford.⁵

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⁵Martha Edgerton Plassman, "Thos. Dimsdale, Montana's First Historian," Rocky Mountain Husbandman, Aug. 5, 1927, insert. Oxford University Registry, in answer to my letters, writes it has no record of Dimsdale ever having attended Oxford University itself but indicates he could have attended one of the numerous Oxford colleges.
His family, which apparently was large, had been engaged in engineering and construction work and had a reputation for being among the leading iron masters in northern England. It decided that because of Dimsdale's frail physique and delicate constitution, he would not be strong enough for a life in the business world. Instead, he was sent to Oxford to be educated for the church, an aristocratic calling in those days. A young man didn't need a vocation to become a clergyman in the Church of England. That came later, "preferably in the form of a rich benefice, with its attendant temporal, if not spiritual advantage."^6

There is no indication Dimsdale had previous experience as a journalist or ever had studied to be one.

He was forced to leave Oxford in his sophomore year when financial disaster struck his family, which had gambled in a scheme to utilize London sewage to fertilize unproductive land in the suburbs. The plan failed and marked the end of Dimsdale's formal education.^7

For the first time he was forced to earn a living. He had no definite idea what he would do, but he had heard Canada was a land of opportunity. He left his native land and settled in Millbrook, Ontario, where he worked for about 10 years as a teacher. Soon after his arrival in Millbrook, he was appointed head master of a school in Durham County.^8

^6Ibid.

^7Baker, op. cit., p. 543.

^8Flasman, loc. cit.
One of his former students in Canada was impressed with Dimsdale's ability as a teacher:

The striking personality of the man recalls him still to memory. A large man, full blooded, florid, large mentally and physically; certainly an ideal instructor. He must have had considerable magnetic influence or a large fund of benevolence, for always at intermission a crowd of youngsters were at his heels following him everywhere, receiving instruction while being amused with some scientific plaything. I well remember one was a sundial, with hours cut on the level of a post... Another was a practical demonstration of a ship canal, made in a little passing rivulet, with locks and floodgates all complete, and chips for ships. The earliest entertainment I can remember was a magic lantern exhibition given by the genial professor.9

Dimsdale picked up the title of professor at Millbrook and it followed him to Virginia City where he taught a subscription school. It is interesting to note that the former student's physical description of Dimsdale is exactly opposite of how he was described in England and later in Montana. Pioneers who knew him in Virginia City most often described him as did Granville Stuart when he wrote that Dimsdale "was a man of extremely delicate constitution."10 Dimsdale himself said he was "the runt of the family" when he alluded to his physical infirmities.11

Either for his health or because he was attracted to the Montana gold fields, he traveled to the high mountain country of

9Anaconda Standard, July 9, 1893, p. 7.
southwestern Montana and settled in Virginia City. He soon discovered he did not have the strength or stamina to work in the mines or stand in freezing water all day panning gold. Virginia City had no school, so he returned to his former occupation and opened one in the winter of 1863-64. Montana, not a territory at that time, had no public schools.\(^{12}\)

Montana gained territorial status on May 26, 1864, and had its first newspaper three months later. On Aug. 27, 1864, John Buchanan and M. M. Manner published in Virginia City the first edition of a weekly newspaper called the Montana Post. After two issues, they sold their meager equipment and plant to Daniel W. Tilton for $3,000. Tilton, later joined in partnership by Ben R. Dittes, thrived as the news hungry miners eagerly plunked down 50 cents in gold dust for a copy of the Post.\(^{13}\) The first issue, 960 copies, was sold out at once.\(^{14}\)

The two men were staunch Unionists and strongly Republican in sentiment. The newspaper's motto was "My country, may she always be right, but my country, right or wrong." The Union flag waved in the columns of the Post, although self interest prompted another course.


\(^{13}\)St. Ignatius Post, Aug. 20, 1926, p. 1.

Most merchants in Alder Gulch were Democrats and sympathized with the southern cause in the Civil War being fought to the East.\(^{15}\)

Buchanan stayed on with the \textit{Post} for two or three months after he sold out and did some of the writing along with Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, who also contributed editorials.\(^{16}\) Dimsdale contributed articles to the newspaper from its first issue. When Tilton bought the \textit{Post}, he hired Dimsdale as manager of his newspaper. It soon became evident to Tilton that Dimsdale's abilities could be better used as editor than manager, and Dimsdale made the switch to the more comfortable position Sept. 17, 1864.\(^{17}\)

The editorial course Dimsdale was to follow was outlined for him the day his new employer took over the publishing of the \textit{Post}:

\begin{quote}
The \textit{Post} will be the unflinching advocate of whatever will be conducive to material prosperity or social order. Efforts to aid in the vast mineral wealth and to assist in making these valley teem with the rich reward of industry is our ambition and... to mold somewhat the public sentiment of this community so that valor and justice shall characterize all its actions. ... We shall avoid all extremes of opinion and strive to be governed by views that are just to all. But we comprehend fully the difference between extreme opinions and earnest convictions. ... That the \textit{Post} may be a faithful mirror in which shall appear the character of Montana, its facilities for the acquisition of wealth... By the \textit{Post} our new Territory will be judged abroad. ...
\end{quote}


\(^{16}\text{Semi-Weekly } (\text{Butte}) \text{ Miner, Aug. 22, 1865, p. 3.}\)

\(^{17}\text{Plassman, loc. cit.}\)
We do not care to repeat the story of all other mining countries. High foolish hopes permitted by those who ought not to lie followed by cruel disappointment. . . . If people will misread our facts and think here to amass wealth without patient labor; on their heads, not ours be the blame.  

Considering the turbulent circumstances of the two years when Dimsdale was editor, that lofty creed was followed closely.

If citizens elsewhere were judging the infant territory by what they read in Montana newspapers, they had no place to turn except to the Montana Post, at least until November, 1865. At that time the Montana Democrat began publishing in Virginia City. The only other Montana newspapers publishing on a regular basis during Dimsdale's tenure as editor (Sept. 17, 1864-Aug. 30, 1866) were the Montana Radiator and the Rocky Mountain Gazette, both in Helena.

Before Dimsdale left the editorial "sanctum" in 1866, he made his mark on Montana journalism as a man who ran a bold, spirited newspaper with definite editorial policies, many contrary to the independent nature of the sturdy citizens of Alder Gulch. He wrote the first book published in Montana, The Vigilantes of Montana, in 1866. Reprints of his history of Montana's organized bad men, the road agents, and their executioners, the vigilantes, have been selling for nearly a century and have found their way into the hands of readers in countries all over the world.

The transported Englishman brought a strong sense of civic pride to his adopted home and worked constantly to instill it in the migratory citizens of Virginia City. Most of the improvements he

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18 Montana Post, Sept. 10, 1864, p. 2.
PHOTOGRAPH 2

Montana Post office in the 1860s. (Virginia City)
PHOTOGRAPH 3

Reconstructed Montana Post building in the 1960s.

(Virginia City)
PHOTOGRAPH 4

Editorial office of the Montana Post. (Virginia City)
PHOTOGRAPH 5

Original printing equipment of the Montana Post.
advocated, such as better streets, street lights, a fire department, public schools, churches and literary clubs, meant little or nothing to the mass of miners who pulled up stakes as soon as the gold glittered more brightly in the next gulch. One of the few ideas he advocated that became reality was to get the horses in town to stand with their heads toward the sidewalk instead of their posteriors.

Dimsdale's lack of newspaper experience added to his weighty problems of getting out the six-column, four-page Post every Saturday. There was no telegraph line in the territory. The nearest railroad was 1,200 miles away, and the mails often were delayed for months by Montana winters or marauding Indians. The newspaper's library comprised one book, a copy of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary with "printer's ink in the shape of thumbs and finger tips adorning its pages."19

Judging from what his two immediate successors said, Dimsdale was expected to write the editorials, collect and write the "locals" (short news items), read all proof, "take a turn at the man-power press when the exigencies of the occasion required, and go on a tour with the boys later to see that the police were doing their duty. . . ."20

It is not known how much Dimsdale was paid for his duties, but Henry N. Blake, who temporarily replaced him while he was sick and

19Blake, op. cit., p. 259.

later succeeded him, received $45 a week.\textsuperscript{21} By comparison, printers made as much as $100 a week,\textsuperscript{22} miners averaged $50 a week, bookkeepers made as high as $175 a month and laborers and teamsters settled for $50 a month with board and room.\textsuperscript{23}

Residents of Virginia City paid $2.70 a dozen for eggs, $1.10 for a pound of coffee, $1.40 for a pound of butter and $30 for 100 pounds of flour.\textsuperscript{24} Prices went up as winter dragged along and freight wagons could not get over the snow clogged mountain passes to supply the merchants of the camp. M. M. Manner, one of the original proprietors of the Post, said, "We had no potatoes or vegetables but we ran across a few onions."\textsuperscript{25}

Although Dimsdale probably did not have much help in filling his columns, with the exception of correspondents who submitted lengthy letters from other Montana mining areas, there was a small army in the print and job shops. As many as 13 pressmen and printers were working for Tilton and Dittes at one time in 1866.\textsuperscript{26} They were,


\textsuperscript{22}Blake, op. cit., p. 263.


\textsuperscript{24}Montana Post, Dec. 23, 1865, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{26}Blake, loc. cit.
according to one former editor, a strange blend of evil and good:

They were faithful and competent, willing to do anything in and about the printing room, not hampered by the regulations of any labor union, and charitable whenever appealed to. But with some exceptions, they were familiar with the glass that inebriates, and controlled by the demon of gambling in its seductive forms.27

The inside of the Post likely saw many sessions with Dimsdale lecturing the printers on the evils of drink, gambling and hurdy-gurdy dancers.28 At least he editorialized frequently on those themes.

The Post's staff was given liquor sometimes by individuals or business firms. Dimsdale passed one such gift of Cherry Brandy on to the "boys" and the printer's "devil" and all testified that "the quality was uniform from top to bottom."29

The staff's condition after the drinking sessions possibly affected the quality of its work, and Dimsdale admonished the employes of the Post for carelessness when a sufficient number of "typos" appeared in a story. And "typos" did appear frequently. When Dimsdale wanted to criticize someone or something in print, he usually managed to do it humorously and as one fellow newsman said, he was "a man of infinite jest."

The Post's "local" news column invariably carried squibs in which Dimsdale thanked citizens or business firms for gifts they had

27Blake, op. cit., p. 262.
28A hurdy-gurdy was a frontier dance hall.
29Montana Post, July 15, 1865, p. 3.
brought the paper. He was showered with everything from turnips, eggs and candy to fancy sleeve buttons. Quite possibly these were not outright gifts but merely items given by readers in return for free copies of the Post. Many of the firms that usually donated gifts advertised in the newspaper anyway and perhaps the extra mention in the news column was part of a business package. Dimsdale always attested to the excellence of the products he received and directed his readers to stop at specific firms.

Henry N. Maguire, who was editor of the Post while Dimsdale was writing The Vigilantes of Montana and taking a business and pleasure trip late in 1865, had different ideas about this small business venture:

All matters of individual interest are treated as business, not local matter, and as such must be paid for. We hope this will be borne in mind hereafter and that parties wishing public notice will reflect whether their notice demands attention in the editor's room or at the clerk's desk.31

In the next edition this terse announcement appeared in large bold-face print under the masthead: NOTICE: THE CONNECTION OF H. N. MAGUIRE AND THE MONTANA POST, CEASED ON THE 1ST OF JANUARY, 1866, D. W. TILTON & CO.32

Dimsdale resumed his duties in that issue, the gratis cookies,

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30 This type of arrangement existed with other early American newspapers, according to Frank Luther Mott in American Journalism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), p. 159.

31 Montana Post, Dec. 30, 1865, p. 3.

32 Montana Post, Jan. 6, 1866, p. 2.
candies and brandies continued to arrive at the Post's office and merchants and others received their usual complimentary mentions in the "local" column.

Fresh from a 250-mile journey through western Montana, Dimsdale reported that he had made the trip "for the purpose of obtaining ocular demonstration of the truth of the stories of its marvellous riches and resources— we can truthfully say that we have written, save inadvertent error." 33

His only way of obtaining news from many areas in the territory was to ask miners and others in the locality to send him weekly reports of mining and business activity and other items of general interest. Those correspondents wrote consistently and signed themselves "Everywhere," "Gleaner," "Tyro," "Lead Pencil," and other such concoctions. When they became too wordy or began to lose the ability to distinguish between news and rumor, Dimsdale chided them:

To Correspondents—Our friends who favor us with their correspondence will please accept our thanks for their kindness— but they must remember that type is incompressible . . . . We are unable to insert anything that has not a direct reference to the public weal or which does not contain information necessary to be circulated for the benefit of our citizens. 34

Any lack of tact in addressing correspondents might lead to ill feeling and no more news from a certain steady writer. Dimsdale was careful to limit and dilute his messages to correspondents.

33 Ibid.
34 Montana Post, Sept. 2, 1865, p. 2.
Traveling by mule, horseback or whatever other method was convenient, the little Englishman covered his "beat," the 12-mile stretch of Alder Gulch. It was a crowded area, with the towns of Central, Nevada, Junction, Highland, Summit and Virginia City crammed into the gulch. Actually, Alder Gulch almost was Montana. According to a census taken in 1864, the territory had 15,822 residents; 11,493 lived in Madison County, which contained Alder Gulch.35

Dimsdale's name never appeared in the masthead except for the period between July 1, 1865 and Nov. 4, 1865. Maguire removed the "T. J. Dimsdale, Editor" from the masthead when he temporarily replaced the Englishman late in 1865 and it never reappeared in the Post, even after Dimsdale resumed his editorial chores in January, 1866.36

He made his trip, in part, to get more subscribers from the Deer Lodge area, and he mentioned later he did obtain "largely increased subscriptions."37

When the Post's subscribers and advertisers were remiss in paying the newspaper, Dimsdale prodded them with a reminder laced with humor:

A dead secret--There is a secret of a nature so mysterious, connected with the weekly appearance of the Montana Post, that a great many of our advertising friends seem to be totally unaware of its existence. The fact is--in strict confidence--our paper actually

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35Montana Post, Oct. 8, 1864, p. 3.
36Montana Post, Jan. 6, 1866, p. 2.
37Montana Post, Dec. 2, 1865, p. 3.
costs us money. Having mentioned this circumstance, we have made arrangements to accommodate the rush of conscience-smitten subscribers, anxious to do the fair thing by the publishers. Any person suffering under remorse for his long delay, can assuage his sorrows by paying his account in dust, greenbacks, wood, or anything we can use. Paper is a cash article, and as scarce as gooseberries at Christmas, at that. Money we must have, and all honorable men aware of the fact, will act accordingly.38

The Post had 9,000 subscribers at 50 cents a copy in 1864 and 1865.39 Dimsdale ran a newspaper that outsold the combined circulation of the Montana Democrat of Virginia City and the Montana Radiator and Rocky Mountain Gazette, two Helena weeklies.40 For the number of subscribers, there were few letters to the editor as we know them today and most merely agreed with Post editorial positions.

According to one former Post editor, Virginia City was an ideal place to run a newspaper:

If ever a people pulled together... those of Virginia City did. There were no factions nor feuds nor cliques among the good people of that city set among the hills; no division except on political lines, and when the polls were closed these were all off, except in the newspapers. So all this made it an ideal community in which to do newspaper work... .41

38Montana Post, April 8, 1865, p. 3.

39Joseph Kinsey Howard, Montana High, Wide, And Handsome (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 41. A year's subscription to the Post was $7.50. Circulation figures from the Montana Post's office are unavailable because the firm's business records were destroyed in a Helena fire.


41Mills, op. cit., p. 282.
Lively, incisive comment on a wide variety of topics appeared on the editorial page of the Post. Dimsdale's readers could be assured of finding five or six lengthy editorials in each issue. Judging from the statements of James H. Mills, Dimsdale had little direction from the business side of the paper or from the owners. Mills, who became editor of the Post three months after Dimsdale died, certainly had editorial freedom. When Mills was in the process of assuming his editorial duties, Tilton introduced him to the printers and said, "There's paper, pencils, a table and chair; here are the boys; they'll put in type and print what you write. Now just edit this paper to suit yourself and never ask me about anything but your salary."\(^{42}\)

Dittes lived in Helena looking after the interests of the Post there and supplying news for Dimsdale's "Helena Items" column. Tilton headed the business department of the enterprise and spent much of his time on business and pleasure trips to New York, Kansas and other distant states. The two men must have thought highly of Dimsdale to leave the inexperienced journalist in almost complete charge of their fledging newspaper operation.

The Post was a six-column, four-page newspaper until the middle of 1866 when it was increased to eight pages. It printed a four-page supplement from January to May of 1866 but gave up the idea in favor of an eight-page paper in May.

The front page of the paper carried an abundance of international

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 276.
and national news for a frontier newspaper. On one typical news day the following headlines appeared:

"The English Recovering From the Panic,"

"Explosion of Nitro Glycerine at Sydney, Australia,"

"Little Hope of a Peaceful Solution of the European Complication,"

"Invasion of Canada by the Fenians," and

"Death of Lieutenant General Winfield Scott."^43

If Virginia City residents weren't somewhat informed about national and international happenings, it wasn't Dimsdale's fault. Of course they might find out about a war in Europe four months after it started but with Montana weather and Indians, sometimes both on the rampage simultaneously, getting mail more quickly was an impossibility. But when news had to move, it did. The news of the death of President Abraham Lincoln reached Virginia City 10 days after his assassination.^44

The Montana Post was a territorial newspaper, not just a local sheet. Dimsdale filled its columns with a mine of information for those who wanted to know about Montana during its booming gold rush days in the 1860s. Its letters from correspondents in the mining camps reveal the quaint life of the miners and settlers. Dimsdale published the wholesale and retail prices of commodities, the arrivals, departures and the passenger lists of stages, the

^43 Montana Post, June 16, 1866, p. 1.

^44 Montana Post, April 29, 1865, p. 1.
challenges of men wanting to fight each other in the prize ring and
the names of residents who had mail at the post office.

The best means Dimsdale had of obtaining news from the outside
world was from state newspapers. He soon discovered that some readers
were getting their news from the states from those newspapers instead
of the Post. The Post came out on Saturday and the state newspapers
arrived earlier in the week. To solve the problem, Dimsdale worked
out an arrangement with the post office. When the express brought the
newspapers, distribution to subscribers was held up until Dimsdale
could cull his stories from the publications and get the Post on the
street. When his readers got their Post, they were informed they had
mail at the post office. Dimsdale believed protection of local
industry was necessary for the development of Virginia City.45

Dimsdale encouraged his readers to submit essays and poems and
soon some simple literary efforts began appearing in the Post. But
would miners read poetry? One resident of the area claims they did and
adds, "some of them liked it, too."46

Dimsdale delighted in finding erroneous statements about Montana
in other publications:

Tribune Almanac: We find that the Tribune Almanac
contains some information that will be news to our
citizens. We are told that Caleb Lyon is our Governor,
and that his time will expire in 1868. We are also
informed that W. F. Sanders (Union) was elected delegate

45Jean Davis, Shallow Diggin's (Caladwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers,

46Martha Edgerton Flasman, "From Post" (paper in Montana State
over Samuel McLean (Dem.). We are damned sorry that this last statement is so far from correct. Governor Sidney Edgerton will be as astonished at the first averment as much as our friend Sanders is at the latter. We have always found the Tribune Almanac very correct and reliable, but even in New York they do sometimes make mistakes.\(^7\)

He disliked printing rumors and sometimes told his readers he was not going to print a particular story until all the facts were in. He often editorialized in news stories but it was mostly in the area of politics and anyway everyone knew which side the Post was on.

Dimsdale's personal views on the duties of a journalist were well stated in one editorial:

-One of the most sacred duties of a journalist, as well as one of his most honorable privileges, in a free country, is the thorough discussion of all questions affecting the public weal, and the relentless exposure and refutation of all those sophistical arguments and subterfuges by which men seek to justify crimes against their fellows, committed which a view to self aggrandizement of the few, at the expense of the many.\(^8\)

To Dimsdale, those were not just words. He practiced what he called the "most sacred duties of a journalist" and gave Montana a commendable frontier newspaper.

\(^7\)Montana Post, April 15, 1865, p. 3.
\(^8\)Montana Post, April 22, 1865, p. 2.
CHAPTER II

ALDER GULCH, MINING MECCA OF THE WEST

Like many frontier "cities," Virginia City and the other camps in Alder Gulch owed their existence to the discovery of gold. When the gold gave out, the people left and usually all that remained were a few weathered shacks.

James Henry Morley, a Virginia City resident, wrote in his diary in November, 1864:

Only eighteen months ago this was a "howling wilderness," or rather a howling desert, which the deer, elk, mountain sheep and wolf occupied unmolested, and where the busy beaver built and sported along the thicket bound streams, truly truth is more wonderful than fiction, and excels in marvellousness even the Arabian Nights Entertainments, but truth and the marvellous go hand in hand when Young America finds a good gold gulch.¹

In 1864 it was a great gold gulch, giving up more than $30 million. Twelve years later the total amount reached $60 million and Henry Blake, former editor of the Post, said the figure was deemed too moderate by many pioneers of Madison County.²

The pages of the Post and the pen of Dimsdale captured the excitement of the gold discoveries, and like the miners who swarmed into the gulch, he was overly optimistic about their wealth.


But who could blame him? Happy miners brought their nuggets and gold dust sacks to Dimsdale and gloated over their success. One miner hauled in a gold brick that weighed 116 ounces—worth $2,100. Dimsdale told his readers "it is quite exhilarating to hold it in one's hand."  

But he didn't let the miners come to him and then write about the wealth in Montana soil. He made frequent trips to mining areas checking the validity of claims. One trip took him to the Deer Lodge area late in 1865, and the stories he mailed to the Post are filled with glowing phrases of the mineral wealth in the area and the beauty of Montana.  

On a trip to the Helena area, he rode on horseback up and down Last Chance Gulch asking miners how well they were doing. He wandered up lonely mountain valleys enthralled with the scenery and the mines. He scrambled up rocky gulches to inspect lodes of silver and gold. He checked quartz claims that had been freshly dug into the bedrock, dropping down into the mines for a closer look. Dimsdale had to see for himself despite the fact that the mines often were poorly shored up and "many a poor fellow lost his life by these caving in on him."

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3 *Montana Post*, May 5, 1866, p. 3.
5 Melvina Lott, "History of Madison County, Montana" (paper in Montana State Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana, 1931), p. 64.
Dimsdale wrote:

I traveled over a lonely and romantic succession of wooded parks and beautiful mountains. . . . I saw some splendid quartz, spangled thickly with gold, and brought off some which I picked out myself, in a drift. The dump pile speaks for itself. It is palingly auriferous, and although "blind quartz," may be rich, quartz in which gold can be seen must be good to a certain extent.®

In areas where he couldn't make a personal inspection, he encouraged letters from persons telling of the fortunes of a particular locality. The miners and writers invariably said "their" area was one of the richest in the territory. Dimsdale had to contend with paradoxical letters such as this one:

I am a constant reader of your valuable paper; whether I am a subscriber or not, is nobody's business. I find, looking over the columns of the Post, that every district, whether it be a gulch mining district or a lode mining district in the territory, is spoken of in your paper as being a "big thing." Well, this is all very fine to talk about; but to come down to Brass Hats, and tell you my honest opinion, I don't believe there is a richer lead mining district in this territory or any other territory, than the Ram's Horn District.7

Dimsdale had a problem. If he made discoveries elsewhere in Montana look too good, the citizens would leave Virginia City in droves and merchants would suffer. If he didn't make them sound good enough, Eastern investors would lose interest in Montana.

He eased around the dilemma by printing news of discoveries in other parts of Montana, while trying to make Alder Gulch look profitable to eastern money interests in hopes they would invest in quartz mills and mines.

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®Montana Post, Nov. 7, 1865, p. 1.
7Montana Post, July 25, 1865, p. 2.
Dimsdale grandly prophesied there was work for 1,000 quartz mills in the vicinity, about as wild and inaccurate a guess as he could make. Of course his optimism was founded on what he could see and what information he received from amateur mineralogists in the area. Five years after his boast to eastern capitalists, the United States Commissioner of Mining Statistics reported only 25 mills in Madison County and eight were not working.

The editor probably was making the territory look too good to offset the bad impression of Montana in the minds of some eastern residents. One orator is reported to have said this about the western frontier in general:

What do we want with this vast worthless area, this region of savages and wild beasts, of shifting sands and whirlwinds of dust, of cactus and prairie dogs? To what use could we ever put those great deserts or endless mountain ranges, impenetrable and covered to their base with eternal snow?

A miner's convention was held in August, 1865, and it was decided that "a committee be appointed, whose duty it shall be to prepare a memorial, setting forth the facts connected with mines and miners, that our delegates might have something to fall back on."

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8 Montana Post, June 17, 1865, p. 2.
10 Joseph Kinsey Howard, Montana High, Wide, And Handsome (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 52. Howard attributes the quote to Daniel Webster although there is considerable controversy as to its source and authenticity.
Dimsdale was one of three men appointed to the committee. N. P. Langford, who had just returned from Washington, D.C., said people there had a gross ignorance of the life of the miners. He added that easterners could not believe that not more than one in 100 persons earned a fortune in mining.

Dimsdale's biting pen went to work when Washington legislators passed a complicated mining law which he predicted would financially hurt the masses for the benefit of the few. After printing the text of the law in the Post and fighting it before it was passed, he proceeded to criticize the legislation:

The main provision of the act . . . states that a company holding a quartz vein or lode shall spend one thousand dollars in improvements upon it, before they can claim a patent, besides the cost of a plat by the government surveyor, and a further sum of five dollars per acre for the ground. As it is utterly impossible for nineteen out of twenty men to make the expenditure required, this amounts to a denial of the right of any but large capitalists to seek for or invest in quartz.

A most objectionable feature of this one-sided legislation . . . declares that no single person can hold more than two hundred feet (one claim) on any given lode. This amounts, in Montana, to an order for the confiscation of many hundreds of holdings which would have cost the possession [sic] in numerous instances, all that he was worth in the world.

Another tirade ended with a plea that "all we ask is to be let alone." 13

He had a penchant for wanting to protect the miners of the gulch from government legislation or the remarks of other newspapers.

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12 Montana Post, Aug. 18, 1866, p. 4.
13 Montana Post, June 30, 1866, p. 2.
He found in a Utah newspaper a story that said Montana miners were grabbing land without prospecting it, then putting the titles in the hands of friends who later gave them back. Miners could hold only so much title to a fixed amount of land and had to prospect it before claiming it.

Dimsdale informed the Utah newspaper that "Montana law requires an affidavit of the discovery of a well defined crevice and wallrock, together with the deposit of a specimen of quartz, sworn to be the product of the crevice." He was out to protect the miners and used his columns for this warning: "All you fellows who have gulch claims in the Prickly Pear and Deer Lodge country, had better represent them soon. They will be jumpable on the first of February."

The miners of the gulch irritated and perplexed Dimsdale with their loafing and drinking. After panning enough gold for some whisky at the closest saloon and some fast-stepping with the hurdy-gurdy queens, they left the digging for the fun. The precise Englishman reminded the miners that "a lazy man is a blot on creation."

The fun-first, work-later miners had been ignoring Dimsdale, prompting him to write:

14Montana Post, Sept. 23, 1866, p. 2.
15Ibid.
16Montana Post, Jan. 21, 1865, p. 3.
17Montana Post, July 15, 1865, p. 2.
Miners Wanted—If 500 of the men who are loafing around Helena and parts adjacent would come to Virginia, they could find employment at good wages, in the district without delay. Ordinary hands get $5, bedrock men, $6 to $7, and drifters from $9 to $11, with scarcely any to be had for love or money, though posters calling for squads of men numbering from forty downwards are constantly to be seen in our streets.  

After pleading with the miners to get to work for a month, he threatened that if the men didn't come quick "we must hire some kind of foreigners to work our quartz lodes." The foreigners he meant were the Chinese who holed up in one end of the gulch to the chagrin of Dimsdale and most of the populace. Dimsdale called the Chinese "the yellow peril" and told them to migrate back to California and stop glutting the territory's labor market.

But the miners wouldn't budge. The persistent Dimsdale finally gave up as the miners maintained their independence, wages remained high and the mine employers refused to send any Chinese into their mines.

The labor shortage existed because gold had been discovered in Last Chance Gulch in the Helena area and excited miners left Virginia City by the hundreds. In the same issue that he noted two miners pushing a one-wheeled cart out of town toward Helena, he reminded them that "the Golden Arrow points steadily to Virginia City as the future Queen City of the Mountains." Thousands of other

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18 Montana Post, June 9, 1865, p. 3.
19 Montana Post, June 30, 1865, p. 3.
20 Montana Post, Aug. 19, 1865, p. 2.
21 Montana Post, Feb. 18, 1865, p. 2.
miners thought Dimsdale had the arrow pointed the wrong way and headed for Last Chance Gulch in 1865 and 1866. By 1867, Virginia City had dwindled to 1,500.\textsuperscript{22}

When gold could be mined by the placer method—using a gold pan and a rocker—Alder Gulch was the center of mining interest in Montana. After the profits grew sparse for the placer miners, men had to dig to bed rock by stripping and tunnels to get to the gold. This was quartz mining and meant much more work for miners, so many went where the work was easier.

In an editorial headlined "Quartz Mining to Predominate—Hints to Eastern Capitalists," the equally optimistic Henry Maguire, who had replaced Dimsdale while the latter was on a trip, painted a rosy picture of Montana's future:

\begin{quote}
The time is now close at hand when mining in this Territory will change its character. Although millions—much greater amounts than have yet been exhumed—will continue to be taken from the placer, already discovered, and new placer fields will continue to be developed . . . the time is close at hand when Montana must be more distinguished for her production of the precious metals, from leads than from placer diggings. Our quartz veins are unrivaled in wealth; and it is believed by old quartz operators—men who have had experience in all the old fields—that in extent and number of distinct ledges, Montana surpasses any other part of the world . . . . Next spring and summer, the number of mills that will be put in operation will make placer mining subordinate.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

But no matter how good the Post made mining look in Montana, eastern investors generally were not interested in pouring money into

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\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Montana Post}, Nov. 25, 1865, p. 2.
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the remote lands of the territory. Profits awaited them at home in war financing and after the Civil War money could be made in reconstruction.  

While Dimsdale was convinced fortunes awaited many men in the mineral resources of Montana, he left no doubt a miner's lot was not an easy one:

There is no harder life than that of the prospector and miner. In frost and snow, without shelter, and often without food, the hardy explorer pursues his calling. . . . It may seem to some that the prospector's life is easy. We have heard of men "having nothing to do but ride around and stick up a stake and pocket a fortune." Let any man try a little "riding round" in a country where, for many a weary mile, no cabin or trace of human habitation is to be found. Let the additional luxury of 20 degrees below zero, enforced by a cutting wind, be added, and the fortunate discoverer has pretty well paid for his lode, ere, he gets it.  

When stinging Montana winters froze the ground and streams, mining became impossible. Miners were out of a job until spring and the many who hadn't saved gold dust when times were good went to bed hungry many nights. To make matters worse, merchants raised prices when supply trains from Salt Lake City failed to arrive with much-needed products.

Such was the case in the winter of 1865. A large shipment of flour failed to get through the mountain passes because of deep snow and Virginia City was faced with a crisis which climaxed with the "flour riots" in April.  

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24Barsness, op. cit., p. 274.


26Historians have termed a series of incidents that took place in Alder Gulch in April, 1865, "the flour riots."
The trouble stemmed from the price of flour during the winter and spring. As early as September, 1864, the Post had predicted a shortage of this essential item, saying "there is not such a quantity of flour in town as will suffice to meet the winter's consumption, and the great influx of people renders the accumulation of provisions very unlikely."27

A month later the Post commented that "flour went up four dollars the morning of the snow. If it continues to go up as the snow comes down, where will it stop."28 The price of flour subsequently shot up from $28 for 100-pounds in November to $40 a sack. Dimsdale lashed out at speculators who were hiking the price at the expense of miners and others in the gulch.29

People got hungry and angry at the same time in early April, and an organized crowd went to Newbank's store in an effort to take what flour it needed. Sheriff Neil Howie convinced the crowd to disperse, which it grudgingly did. Had it done otherwise, it would have been welcomed by "28 men, armed to the teeth," who were barricaded in the store.30

Dimsdale couldn't decide at that point which side was right. While he noted that "while the people of Virginia City are complaining of $40 for a sack of flour, the latest advices from the Last Chance

27Montana Post, Sept. 24, 1864, p. 3.
28Montana Post, Oct. 29, 1864, p. 3.
29Montana Post, April 8, 1865, p. 2.
30Ibid.
country quote flour at $53 per sack,"31 he was saying in the same issue:

Speculation should not be indulged in without any restraint in articles of food . . . and he must be a bad man who will persist in a course of action which, while it ensures personal advantages, necessitates the injury and evokes the maledictions of the suffering poor.32

Two weeks passed and the price steadily went up until it reached $130 for a 100-pound sack.33 The men had had enough. A group of 480 armed men marched the two miles from Nevada City to Virginia City led by a man on horseback waving an empty flour sack as a banner. The men searched every store, house, cabin and cellar in which flour might be hidden. There was little resistance by merchants, and 82 sacks were found "concealed under oats, in boxes, barrels and one large 'find' was stowed away under a hay stack."34

Dimsdale then reported:

One of the chiefs of the body walked into our office, and a written copy of a notice to the dealers, signed "Flour Committee," ordering them to sell flour at the $27 to $30 per sack, for the future. For the printing he handed over the dust in advance. No act of violence has been reported to us up to the hour of writing.35

31 Ibid., p. 3.
32 Ibid., p. 2.
34 Montana Post, April 22, 1865, p. 2.
35 Ibid.
The next day the flour was sold at its original price. The merchants lost, it is estimated, a total of about $1,000. The Flour Committee then asked Dimsdale and J. E. McClurg to witness the payment to merchants who had lost flour in the seizure.\textsuperscript{36}

After the seizure of the flour, Dimsdale condoned the action of the Flour Committee and attacked the merchants involved in the incident:

Buoyed up to a sense of security, by the prompt action of the authorities in quelling the last disturbance—these worthy representatives of Gripe and Holdfast determined to make catspaws of the officials and the citizens, and while under the shelter of their protection, they run up flour, in a day, to $100 per sack and openly boasted that they had a right to sell for what they pleased; intimating their intention to raise prices still higher. Quickly on the heels of the jubilation came their downfall, with none to pity them.\textsuperscript{37}

Looking back on the incident, Dimsdale said "the affair was the most extraordinary proceeding—so far as regards the entire absence of turmoil, violence and destruction characterizing such movement—that ever was chronicled by the pen of a journalist."\textsuperscript{38}

The first new flour arrived in May, and by June prices were back to normal. The \textit{Post} was back to normal too, after facing a shortage of its own in the supply of white paper. It ran out on Feb. 18, 1865, and was forced to print on brown, pink and blue wrapping paper until June 17, 1865. On that date, an elated Dimsdale wrote "it is pleasant to say good bye to dubiously colored sheets, and to

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.
return to our legitimate hue."\(^{39}\)

But if the miners had black moments, they also found humor in their rugged way of life. Dimsdale said he knew of more than 20 miners, loaded with picks, shovels, kettles, frying pans and blankets, who followed a man who said he was looking for his hog. The miners, thinking the man really was acting on a tip and close to a rich lode, tracked him for two days. When he finally found the hog, a few red faces appeared beneath the whiskers of the miners.\(^{40}\)

Although he bragged about the mining in Montana more than any other economic endeavor, Dimsdale was not the conforming, short-sighted frontier editor that one student of early Montana journalism labeled him.\(^{41}\)

Dimsdale envisioned a Montana of diversification, with mining just one area of prosperity. He frequently emphasized the theme that "it should not be supposed that mines and mining offer the only opportunities for making rapid fortunes in this territory." He reminded his readers that there were excellent opportunities in agriculture and stock raising, manufacturing farm implements, chemical tanning and in operating machine shops. His tendency to wax optimistic about anything concerning Montana's future prosperity led him to

\(^{39}\)”Montana Post, June 17, 1865, p. 3.

\(^{40}\)”Montana Post, Dec. 3, 1864, p. 2.

conclude grandly in one editorial: "These are only a few of the ways of amassing wealth, but there are millions of dollars in them beyond a peradventure."\(^{42}\)

He was convinced Montana was the ideal place to live and work. He wrote, "We have travelled far and seen much of the world, and the result of our experience is a love for our mountain home that time and change of scene can never efface."\(^{43}\)

Leaving the editorial "sanctum" late in 1865 for a pleasure and business trip around the territory, Dimsdale filed long stories of his travels to his replacement on the editorial stool, Henry Maguire. His descriptive passages filled the pages of the Post.

Taking an easterly course, we followed the winding of Prickly Pear Creek, nearly to its source. The romantic beauties of this part of the valley defy description. Surely mortal eye never rested on scenery at once so charming, so wild and so imposing. A sunset in this valley was worthy of the pencil of Claude Lorraine, and the wild rocks and gloomy ravines which penetrate the mountains, would form a fitting subject for Salvator Rosa.

The creek now murmurs hoarsely as it foams along its boulder-strewn course and anon roars angrily as it leaps down the numerous falls which chequer its path. . . . The valley, at one moment, opens into small green parks covered with bunch grass, and again, like the shadowy veil of a bright eyed Senorita, the dark rocks draw across the path and change the soft beauty of the scene to the gloom of the sombre canon. On the slopes of the hills, majestic pines--the grim wardens of the defiles--lift their stately heads. One Lord of the hills rears his giant form straight as an arrow for over one hundred feet, without a branch, and measures 24 feet in circumference at the base.\(^{44}\)

His reference to the two European artists indicates some appreciation or knowledge of art. In other articles he quotes

\(^{42}\)Montana Post, Feb. 24, 1866, p. 2.
\(^{43}\)Montana Post, Sept. 2, 1865, p. 4.
\(^{44}\)Montana Post, May 20, 1865, p. 2.
Shakespeare, Talleyrand and the Bible in a manner that is unostentatious and unstilted. Classical quotations are sprinkled through his writing and he uses them to introduce the chapters in his book, *The Vigilantes of Montana*.

Dimsdale wandered through the mountain country of Western Montana in wide-eyed astonishment. Once, he observed "two hills which rise suddenly out of a plain, and being totally separated from their fellows of the ranges. . . . They are curious and romantic in their isolation." Asking his companion if the two hills had names and getting a negative answer, he dubbed the two hills Hob and Nob and told the man to inform travelers who came that way that they were so named.  

On his journey to the Deer Lodge country late in 1865, he made his only reference to his personal drinking habits saying:

"Though I am a strictly temperate man, and have always been one, yet it does sometimes happen that I taste a drop of "something warm of a cold night"—and I find that neither tea, coffee nor punch has the raw taste, in Blackfoot, that it has in Virginia."

Writing his column by candlelight, he promised more the next day and curled up to sleep in his buffalo robe.

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45 *Montana Post*, Dec. 9, 1865, p. 2.
47 Ibid.
Virginia City, as a booming gold town, lived and died with Thomas Dimsdale. When he arrived in July, 1863, gold had just been uncovered in Alder Gulch and fortune hunters by the thousands migrated to the scene. They moved out just as fast and in equal numbers in 1866 and 1867 when rich gold strikes were announced elsewhere. Dimsdale died on Sept. 22, 1866, and didn't see the Virginia City he predicted would remain a permanent, prosperous metropolis become a depleted gold camp.

The scholarly Englishman was the epitome of civic pride at a time when his readers could not have cared less about the fate of Virginia City. They had come to take gold from the ground, not to stay and call the place home. They didn't want civic improvements because that meant taxes.

Dimsdale's optimism for the future of his adopted home apparently was untempered and unseasoned with the histories of other boom towns that had become ghost towns when the mineral wealth gave out. But infected by the excitement and economic activity around him, he was caught up in the spirit of the mining mecca of Montana and prophesied that here was one city the world was going to recognize for some time.

So began a lonely campaign for the improvements more permanent places had taken for granted—passable streets, a fire department,
sanitary water, trained doctors and dozens of other additions to make the gulch a more livable place.

He had a right to be proud of Virginia City. After all, it had become Montana's first incorporated city in December, 1864.\(^1\) Two months later the legislature named it the territorial capital to replace Bannack.\(^2\) Those events gave the persistent Dimsdale encouragement to begin his crusades for a better Virginia City.

The first city council met in March, 1865, and approved a license fee for merchants. Businessmen paid fees ranging from $20 to $300 a year and they didn't like it. One wrote to the Post asking, "Why should we have city government? Quit the charter before our town is depopulated on account of taxation."\(^3\)

Dimsdale had different ideas. After a visit to the city council chamber, he editorialized:

We came away impressed with the conviction that, so far as the intention to do uprightly is concerned, there is no lack of determination on the part of the civic authorities, and on the score of ability to carry out their views, we think the citizens need have no fears.\(^4\)

City officials needed prodding to get things done, according to Dimsdale. And they needed someone to see they were doing their jobs properly. After checking the books at the recorder's office, he wrote:

\(^1\)Montana Post, Dec. 11, 1864, p. 1.
\(^2\)Montana Post, Feb. 4, 1865, p. 2.
\(^3\)Montana Post, March 18, 1865, p. 2.
\(^4\)Montana Post, March 25, 1865, p. 2.
We were much struck with the extreme neatness and excellence of the entries in the books. Some specimens of penmanship by De Witt Waugh are very beautiful. We venture to say that in no place in the Union is there a more tastily kept set of records.  

When he did stumble on an exposé of a county official, he said:

County Treasurer--We are informed that it is the practice of this distinguished official, whenever any currency reaches the treasury, to pay himself in cash instead of county warrants, as he should do, in common with all county officials who must do it. We wonder how he arrives at 16 1/2 per cent, paid in greenbacks, calculated on county warrants, and what price he calculates the warrants at.°

If corrupt city officials lost their positions through editorial exposure or any other means, the Post never mentioned it.

City councilmen were making little improvement in the wretched street conditions in 1866, and Dimsdale attacked their inactivity with editorial outbursts and editorial digs in news stories about their official acts. He advised readers that "for lessons on masterly inactivity, and instruction in the art of 'How-not-to-do-it,' call at the Council Chamber. Let us have a live organization, and an end to this dumb show."  

Two weeks later it became difficult to "call at the Council Chamber" because the officials held secret sessions. Dimsdale couldn't resist another pot shot at the city fathers:

The program for a secret session of the Council is as follows: Strangers withdraw; door closes; window blinds are pulled down, and the anxious public look

°Montana Post, Oct. 14, 1865, p. 3.

°Montana Post, May 19, 1866, p. 2.

°Montana Post, March 24, 1866, p. 3.
through the half-inch cracks. Members speak as loudly as possible. The fee bill is in a state of aggravated secrecy. Not more than twelve men have heard all the debate.8

In the next issue of the Post, he remarked snidely:

The City authorities have, at last, undertaken the gigantic operation of making a rock foot path from Olinghouse's Corner to Content's block, across Wallace street. Hereafter ladies can cross the street without absolute destruction to their dresses. It is never too late to mend your ways, but sometimes, it would have been better had it come sooner.9

The civil powers had snubbed the inquiring Dimsdale earlier in the year when he wrote, "We will gladly publish a report of the receipts and expenditures of the City Government in detail, if they are handed to us. . . . We hope to have the facts prior to the February election."10 The figures never were printed before the election.

The streets of Virginia City were little more than winding, muddy, rutted pathways between buildings. Dimsdale pleaded for improvements, but they were slow in coming. His picturesque, wordy writing style added humor to the depressing street conditions:

We have ascertained that the bottom of our streets is good; but it is rather a long distance to it. The semi-fluid and all-pervading mud cannot be described. We flounder desperately through but speak not of our boots. The ghost of a blacking brush disturbed us last night. He said he was still with cold and his master had nothing for him to do. We hadn't either.11

8 Montana Post, April 7, 1866, p. 3.
9 Montana Post, April 14, 1866, p. 3.
10 Montana Post, Jan. 13, 1866, p. 3.
11 Montana Post, April 1, 1865, p. 3.
The streets, usually crowded, always emptied quickly when yelling cowboys galloped down the main thoroughfares. Dimsdale was quick to shake his finger at the cowboys for such noisy, unsafe disturbances:

Outrageous—We conceive it to be our duty to call the attention of the authorities to the highly improper practice of galloping horses through the streets of our town. A very small brain fired with tangle-leg, ensconced behind a low forehead, and a very big pair of spurs, are usually the most noticeable articles of the rider's outfit. The public safety demands the stoppage of the practice.\textsuperscript{12}

An overabundance of dogs was a problem even in frontier days. After Dimsdale urged city officials to do something about it, they declared dog owners would pay a $2 license fee or have their pets shot. Dimsdale, estatic that action finally had been taken, wrote:

On the average, there are twenty-seven battles royal, ten general engagements, and five hundred and ninety-six skirmishes, daily; twenty-seven ladies have their crinoline disarranged by being converted into cities of refuge, (we give the invasions of crinoline in round numbers); at a given signal about twenty-nine times per night, the laws of harmony are suspended, and a chorus, in which the wail of puppyhood and the agonized yelp of bitter despair are topped off by the responsive howl of two hundred and one watch-dogs in charge—makes night hideous, and sleep impossible. . . . On and after this day, the death penalties are to be enforced. Pupdom quails. . . . Farewell, dorgs. Truly their bark was worse than their bite. Adieu, Teaser. Farewell, Snap. Good bye, Cap. The Marshal cocks his revolver. Ta, ta, forever. "Your bark shall no more thunder on the Main"—Street.\textsuperscript{13}

Hogs were a nuisance, too, and the eloquent Englishman had to warn readers to leave their butcher knives in the cupboard because the

\textsuperscript{12}Montana Post, July 1, 1865, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{13}Montana Post, June 17, 1865, p. 3.
hogs that wandered in and out of open back doors belonged to a man named Snider.\textsuperscript{14}

Frontier mining camps were massive fire traps with their paper and wooden shacks and flimsy tents, and fire was a constant threat to Virginia City. Dimsdale suggested a plan which met with general approval:\textsuperscript{15} "A night watch should be instituted. One good, sober, vigilant man could be found to patrol from sun to sun, over all the town, and to give the alarm of fire, should such a casualty happen during the hours of darkness."\textsuperscript{16}

That idea was supplemented with another from the imaginative editor. After advocating that cisterns be placed around town at vital points so fires could be quelled quickly, he noted that "the public cistern . . . is well contrived in all respects save the holding of water. It was filled a few days ago, but the fluid has departed."\textsuperscript{17}

The citizens used the creek that flowed by the town as their drinking source until Dimsdale and a waterworks company informed them the water was unfit to drink. Dimsdale determined, after an analysis of the water had been made, that its high copper content was causing

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  \item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Montana Post}, June 30, 1866, p. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Muriel Sibell Wolle, \textit{The Bonanza Trail} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1953), p. 184. I was unable to determine from the \textit{Montana Post} or other sources if this plan met with approval. Mrs. Wolle got her information from a source I was unable to locate.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Montana Post}, Oct. 29, 1864, p. 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{Montana Post}, Feb. 3, 1866, p. 3.
\end{itemize}
much sickness in the town.18

A waterworks system, completed in November, 1864, brought water through wooden tubes from a spring about a half mile from town. Some residents seemed to suspect any water not dipped out of the creek in a bucket, but Dimsdale assured them the new method was better.19

There were few doctors in the gulch, and Dimsdale wasn't quite sure which ones were licensed to practice. The Post called for legislation to stop the quacks who were maiming patients and advocated that "some severe punishment should be meted out to people who maim and afflict by their ignorance, those who rely on a supposed skill having no earthly foundation but ignorance, brass and a doctor's shingle."20

Doctors were praised by name in the columns for successful operations, but the competent physicians went unnoticed in the Post if a patient died during surgery.

One resident recalled, "No one could employ a doctor because of his reputation of success in his profession—the country was too new. . . . There were good doctors in Montana at the time—most of them, and also the other variety going to Virginia City."21

19Ibid.
20Montana Post, Dec. 24, 1864, p. 3.
While on the "beat," Dimsdale got a closer look at how the doctors performed. The roof of the California Exchange collapsed about 11 p.m. one night because of vibrations from a dance next door. One John Gardiner was buried in the ruins and after the heavy logs were shoved off his body, Doctor Brown and Dimsdale "used every means to restore the unfortunate man, but he breathed only once."^22

That same week, the versatile editor gained some additional but rather peculiar medical experience. He assisted two doctors in the amputation of a woman's left leg and reported that "the patient, Mrs. Walton, is doing well." He added that after the operation, the woman complained of pain in the portion of the limb already removed. Insisting her leg was painfully twisted outward, she begged one doctor and the dumbfounded Dimsdale to twist it back to its normal position. On returning to the doctor's office and seeing the bloody stump twisted in the manner she described, they set it in a more comfortable position. When they returned to Mrs. Walton, she said her leg felt fine the minute they moved it. Dimsdale remarked, "The statement is literally true, but the whole thing is beyond our philosophy."^23

Dimsdale usually stood up for Montanans, Jews, Missourians and other groups criticized by individuals and other newspapers. On prejudice in general, he wrote:

There is one piece of advice that we would give to our people, individually and collectively, and that is to avoid all general denunciations, and to eschew personal

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^22 *Montana Post*, April 29, 1865, p. 3.

ague as inconsistent with that innate gentility which marks the genuine American. . . . There is scarcely an adult specimen of a native Montanan to be found that is an intelligent citizen of the U.S. Our population is drawn from the most widely distant sources and is composed of the most heterogeneous units. All come for the same purpose—to better their condition—and harmony should prevail where all pursue a common object. Let us hear no more of Tender-feet, Other-siders, Pike's Peakers, etc. As a harmless jest, the names are unobjectionable, but used as a watchword of party, they are highly mischievous.  

He was quick to defend Jews and Missourians when they were criticized in the Virginia City, Nevada Union:

A poor, demented, no-account, from the city of Virginia, Nevada, named E. H. Morton, has been wandering through this territory, and belches forth his sufferings in the Virginia Union of the 8th ult. He can't find gulches like those in California. Jews and Missourians, he says, rule the country, and he is generally miserable and wants to go home to Snowland. There is another thing he can't see, and that is, what a foolish creature he must be to write such nonsense about Montana. . . .

The insult to the Jews proves, merely, that Morton was born out of due time. He evidently belongs to the dark ages. The idea of speaking insultingly of men because they trace an unbroken descent from the kindred of David, Solomon, Issiah, Josephus, and Jesus Christ, and to whom the world is indebted for the Old Testament, and, in modern times, for the true principles of finance, shows "invincible ignorance" of the toughest kind. What there is objectionable in the character of many of the Hebrew race, is the result of the persecutions of the big and little Mortons of times gone by. . . .

The men of Missouri can afford to smile at Morton. The price of St. Louis flour won't fall much on account of his strictures. If he were only half as good a man as any one of scores of Missourians in this territory, he would have money enough to keep up his spirits, and sense enough to keep silent when he lacks information. Wholesale denunciations mark a weak mind.  

\[\text{Montana Post, March 31, 1866, p. 2.}\]

\[\text{Montana Post, Aug. 5, 1865, p. 2.}\]
Although he sympathized with most minority groups, he was prejudiced against the Chinese. The Chinese had debarked by the thousands in California in the 1850s, and bad feelings were aroused creating a general anti-Chinese sentiment. Most of the ill feeling had been "based on the rumor that the Chinese were going to take away jobs from American miners, a thing which never did develop."\(^{26}\)

Californians had carried stories and rumors about the Chinese to Montana and the residents of Virginia City were prepared to dislike them when the first group rolled in via stagecoach. Dimsdale greeted the new arrivals by sarcastically noting that "the brother of the sun and of the moon is now represented in Virginia City by a delegation of six members, Ho-Fie, So-Sli, Lo-Flung, Ku-Long, Whang and Hong." According to the \textit{Post}, all the "mice" left Virginia City when the Chinese arrived.\(^{27}\)

Dimsdale fed the mining camp's dislike for the Chinese with cruel editorials periodically blasting their very existence. As far as he was concerned, "A Chinese can never be made into a citizen, and we say get rid of any human animal that is not susceptible of improvement or elevation. We should be transported to know that the last of them were exported."\(^{28}\)

He criticized the Chinese for living sumptuously on what white men would starve; they fill every lucrative post; they follow in the track of


\(^{27}\)\textit{Montana Post}, June 3, 1865, p. 2.

\(^{28}\)\textit{Montana Post}, Aug. 19, 1865, p. 2.
our pioneer miners, and rob our gulches of millions of dollars, while everything they earn or steal goes to China. This we do not believe in. If these people were to live here, and spend their earnings amongst us, we should welcome their presence, if they were pea green, instead of the color of a stain of molasses on a table cloth, which is about the hue of the celestial delegation. They absorb everything and return nothing. A scouting party is in our midst, composed of cooks, washermen and prostitutes; these will report to San Francisco and China, and we shall be flooded with an irruption of Messrs. Ku Long & Co., accompanied by Mademoiselles He Fie and So Sli. What have these folks done in California? They have worked out all the gulches, so that when thousands of whites were willing to work for $2.00 a day, the employment was gone, and the gold was in China.29

Two months earlier he had said Chinese would be hired to work the Alder Gulch mines if idle miners didn't go back to work. Mining jobs that paid up to $11 a day went begging.30

Dimsdale editorialized:

America should be the home of American citizens, and of those who intend to become citizens. Chinamen are totally unfit for this position and China women are all of a class not mentionable to ears polite.31

The curious Dimsdale, wondering what a Chinese funeral was like, attended one on a blustery fall day in 1865. He wrote a detailed account of the funeral, resisting the impulse to insert editorial bias into it—although he must have been tempted by the weird nature of the ceremony.32

29Ibid.
30Montana Post, June 30, 1865, p. 3.
31Montana Post, Feb. 10, 1866, p. 2.
32Montana Post, Oct. 28, 1865, p. 3.
He was invited back by the Chinese four months later to partake in their national New Year's day celebration. He gave the Chinese credit for a little hospitality for having invited him, enjoyed some cigars, sweet meats and wine and "retired, without company, duly impressed with the august ceremony." His reference to retiring "without company" probably was meant to assure some readers that he hadn't taken one of the numerous Chinese prostitutes home with him for the night.

Dimsdale's campaign against the Chinese was continued through the 1860s and 1870s by later Montana newspapers and editors.

The Chinese were a relatively small thorn in Dimsdale's side compared to marauding Indians in Montana. When Montana became a territory in 1864, "The Blackfeet tribes, agitated by the breath of war, were unsettled and sullen and ... to add to the danger of an outbreak, the Indian country was being filled, not only with licensed traders, but unlicensed whiskey sellers."

A year later conditions were just as bad, if not worse. The Post carried numerous accounts of Indian massacres, often written by survivors of the attacks. The Sioux were killing numerous settlers in the Gallatin Valley in the eastern part of the state.

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33 Montana Post, Feb. 17, 1866, p. 3.
34 Barsness, op. cit., p. 238.
36 Montana Post, Sept. 2, 1865, p. 2.
and the killing of 10 men near Fort Benton was just one of the many Indian incidents. 37

Montanans took time off from Indian fighting to scratch a line to the Post and use its columns to tell their friends they were safe:

Dear Friends at Home--Our company arrived here this noon and found the citizens burying the dead who were killed by the Indians last night. About four o'clock, 19 men were attacked by a force of 80 Indians, and the Indians got the best of the fights. Only three of the men escaped.

Yours in haste, George C. Batchelder. 38

The Post pleaded for troops to protect the settlers and miners but the government could not spare men while the Civil War was being fought, then couldn't spare many troops when it was over until mopping-up operations were completed. Acting Governor Thomas F. Meagher requested troops, but Major General William Tecumseh Sherman turned down his request in March, 1866, for a regiment, saying he had only one regiment of regular cavalry for Montana, Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico. He was not going to send troops to one remote territory and leave the others unguarded. Sherman said, "We cannot for months, if this year, promise to place any cavalry in Montana." 39

Three months earlier Dimsdale had printed a letter from Meagher saying military forces would arrive in Montana in the early spring. 40

37 Montana Post, June 10, 1865, p. 1.
38 Montana Post, Jan. 7, 1865, p. 3.
39 Montana Post, March 17, 1866, p. 2.
40 Montana Post, Jan. 13, 1866, p. 2.
Part of the government's Indian policy in Montana called for captured Indians, suspected of wrongdoing, to be turned over to civil authorities. Politicians and others in the east thought the redskins were not as bad as frontier editors and residents made them out to be, according to Dimsdale. He deplored U.S. Indian policy:

When the Indians want a subsidy and an accompanying present of blankets and equipment—which is pretty often—they go on the war path; murder a few scores of pilgrims; ravish and mutilate some dozens of women; make pincushions of a few families of children, with their arrows; run off some Government stock; raise the price of provisions in the Far West to starvation height, and then, when they are pursued and cornered by some energetic man like General Conner, they make a peace, and prepare for a new war with the money and material supplied by Government. This can be all stopped, and it should be, without delay.

General P. E. Conner was replaced by another man several months later, prompting Dimsdale to leave his editorial stool for the rostrum. At a meeting called to protest the superseding of Conner, Dimsdale spoke and endorsed the "get tough" policy of the general.

As usual, the editor didn't just complain about a problem without offering a solution. Boasting that he had "some little experience of these American Arabs," he advocated:

First, the locations of these red road agents on a reserve, out of the way, and a scrupulous care of the honesty of the traders or agents appointed, and secondly, an absolute prohibition of their ever leaving their ground on pain of being shot like dogs when caught.

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41 Montana Post, Jan. 21, 1865, p. 2.
43 Montana Post, Dec. 16, 1865, p. 2.
44 Montana Post, Feb. 4, 1865, p. 2.
Four months later he said, "We are glad to see that the plan proposed some months since, in this paper, for the settlement of the Indians on a reserve approximating the northern frontier, is under consideration by the Government."\(^{45}\)

But after a summer of Indian attacks, he had different ideas on handling Indians:

If a civilized enemy were to commit the one thousandth part of the crimes and outrages that are daily enacted by the red fiends of the wilderness, nothing but the wholesale extinction of the race would satisfy the vengeance of the people of this Republic.\(^{46}\)

He told Washington officials their Indian policies, or lack of them, were not working in Montana. But he wasn't guilty of blowing the Indian troubles out of proportion. On occasion he reprinted what he termed erroneous stories from other western newspapers and pointed out inaccuracies. He quoted the Territorial Enterprise of Virginia City, Nevada, as saying 100 wagons had been attacked by Indians and all hands had been killed in a Montana raid in the summer of 1865. Dimsdale said only 16 wagons were in the train, few persons were killed and the newspaper should be careful not to pick up every rumor that floated out of Montana.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) *Montana Post*, June 24, 1865, p. 2.


\(^{47}\) *Montana Post*, Sept. 16, 1865, p. 2.
CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL CITY OF THE NORTHWEST

The Post boasted, to all who would listen, that Virginia City was the "social city of the Northwest." It was a title Virginia City deserved and a distinction editor Dimsdale helped bring to the community. Alder Gulch was also a small center of culture in the Northwest and Dimsdale helped create that climate by boosting literary societies, theaters, singing and dancing schools and other endeavors in his editorials and news stories.

The leading people of Virginia City were cultured and well-educated, although vastly outnumbered by the rowdy, boisterous miners. The few leaders who pushed for more cultural activity in the city had to contend with an uninterested majority.

Sunday was the big day for the miners. They left their work and let down their hair, seeking excitement. The stores were open and auctioneers eloquently praised their wares on every corner. The men had their choice of prize fights, dog fights, horse races, gaming tables, dance houses or wild parties in saloons.¹

That type of existence appealed to most of the men in the community but not to Dimsdale. He tried, mostly in vain, to get his readers out of the bars and hurdy-gurdy houses and into the theater, the ballroom and the singing school.

The Post complained Virginia City was a dead town in 1864. Why, it wanted to know, "can't somebody get up a nice dance, such as we had the pleasure of witnessing a month or so ago." It complained about the lack of theater and Negro minstrel shows.

During the two years in which Dimsdale ran the Post, the cultural atmosphere was enriched. The first theater in the territory, the Montana Theater, opened Dec. 10, 1864. Dimsdale was overjoyed that such a civilizing medium as the theater had come to Virginia City. He wrote glowing reviews of the theatrical productions, no matter how bad they were. During his two years on the Post, he wrote only one uncomplimentary review:

The farce, "A Nice Quiet Day" came off well and is on the bill for to-night. All other performances, however excellent, (so far as mirthful effect is concerned) must yield to Thursday's exhibition. A certain Major Alberta produced a five act rigmarole entitled "The Untried Man" playing the leading role himself... in a costume of wonderful incongruity, dragoon's pants, and overgrown black toga, and a hat combining the beauties of a coal-scuttle and a muff, ornamented with a pair of ass's ears... The audience fairly screamed with laughter, and received the piece with cries of "time," "foul," as the text suggested the idea. At the close, the author seriously returned thanks to the audience and warned any one that the play was copyrighted! The management deserve credit for their desire to please their patrons, at whose request the piece was performed, but the murder of the Queen's English and the "exasperation" of the haitches by Alberta, were beyond anything ridiculous... tonight... "The Untried Man" will not play. He has been tried and found wanting.¹

¹Montana Post, Oct. 29, 1864, p. 3.
²Montana Post, Jan. 21, 1865, p. 3.
What Dimsdale thought about a play differed markedly sometimes from what other reviewers thought. A New York Tribune newsman, on assignment in the West, attended a Virginia City play called "Lady of Lyons" and observed that "the beautiful diction of the play was rendered in a style which the fastidious and snobbish author would hardly have survived had he been there to see it."  

Another reviewer from the East commented on a play he had attended:

Either because of the refined taste of some of the auditors, or the advanced talent of the performers, the playing was not the broad farce which might have been entertaining, but was confined to Shakespeare and heavy tragedy, which was simply disgusting . . . in the debut of a local celebrity . . . he chose the part of Othello, and all Virginia assembled to applaud. The part was not well committed . . . and ended with the actor's own emendations, which were certainly questionable improvements.  

The way Dimsdale looked at the theater, it had to be supported. He believed patrons would not attend the theater if he wrote how poor performances were. But at least he was willing to reprint critical reviews that appeared in eastern newspapers about Montana theater. As he put it, it was necessary "to see ourselves as others see us."

To insure a reasonable attendance at the theater, Dimsdale had to assure patrons "the house is perfectly secure and strong" and ample police protection would be on hand to quell disturbances. He added, "None need stay away, unless, indeed, it be the young men whose vulgar

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5 *Montana Post*, May 10, 1866, p. 5.


7 *Montana Post*, May 10, 1866, p. 5.
behavior and loud calls were evidence of a want of good sense, which rendered their room more valuable than their company."

Entertainers were sometimes hard pressed to perform because of unwieldy city government policies. After watching several performances of a traveling magician and comedian called Martin the Wizard, he was appalled to discover the man had left town before his run of performances was completed because civil authorities said he needed a license to perform. When Dimsdale was told the Wizard was fined for not having the license and couldn't buy one because the city had none to sell until a month later, he shook his finger at the civil powers and said, "This is too bad."9

Dimsdale preached about the wholesome influence of the theater, but he couldn't drag the miners away from the saloons and dance halls. Despite the Post's heavy support of the Montana Theater, it closed in March, 1865, and Dimsdale never did say why.10 However, traveling troupes and impromptu groups continued to present plays.

Dimsdale used the pages of the Post to publicize a singing school, which he conducted weekly at his school house on Idaho street.11 He urged some of the younger folks to form a "dancing Club" where everyone could dance and sing and keep off the streets and out of trouble. After prodding the citizens into action to form the club,

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8 *Montana Post*, Feb. 3, 1866, p. 3.
9 *Montana Post*, June 16, 1866, p. 3.
10 *Montana Post*, March 18, 1865, p. 3.
11 *Montana Post*, Dec. 3, 1864, p. 3.
he remarked, "It's a wonder to us, that nobody has thought of the formation of a dancing club before this."\textsuperscript{12}

Dimsdale also preached the virtues of forming a Literary Society. When one was organized late in 1865, Dimsdale delivered the main address at the Inauguration Ball of the Young Men's Literary Society. H. N. Maguire, or another member of the staff who covered the story for the Post, wrote:

One of the most prominent and interesting features of the festivities, was the lecture of Prof. Dimsdale of the Post—which of course came first on the programme. It was to with marked attention and satisfaction, and at the concluding words, "On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined!" the graceful figuring began and proceeded an unbroken spell of pleasure till twelve o'clock. . . . \textsuperscript{13}

The success of all the cultural endeavors advocated by Dimsdale cannot be determined by reading the Post or the diaries of early pioneers. But they must have provided welcome diversion for the citizens in the winter when they were snowed in and it was too cold to work the mines.

Of course, other activities abounded in Virginia City from 1864 through 1866. The men could gamble, watch prize fights, visit the dance halls or just drink. Dimsdale saw those avenues as pathways to sin, while many miners saw them as roads to happiness.

Dimsdale didn't mind if the miners drank a little. In his "Local" news column he would invite "lovers of good cheer" to try the "wines, liquors and cigars" at a local establishment. Then on the

\textsuperscript{12}Montana Post, Jan. 28, 1865, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{13}Montana Post, Dec. 23, 1865, p. 3.
same page he congratulated citizens in Nevada City for setting up a branch of "Good Templars" and added that "no argument is needed to prove that nine-tenths of the follies and crimes that ruin men and disgrace society are traceable to indulgence in strong drink."  

His campaign to close the hurdy-gurdy houses was ineffective. When and if they did close, it was because the town was stagnating as Helena and other areas boasted richer mining discoveries. He begged the city officials to declare the houses a nuisance or at least make them close at midnight, but there is no indication they did either.

The hurdy-gurdies were not as noisy and evil as Dimsdale said they were, according to one visiting New York newsman:

At one end, a well-stocked bar, and a monte bank in full blast; at the other a platform, occupied by three musicians; between, many lookers-on, with cigars and meerschaums. "Take your ladies for the next dance," shouted the orchestra leader; and half-a-dozen stalwart fellows, fresh from the mines selected partners from the ordinary, bedizened women who stood waiting. . . . The dance finished, the miners led their partners through the crowd to the bar for whisky, at twenty-five cents a drink, or champagne at twelve dollars per bottle (gold); then a short pause, followed by another diversion; and thus the sorry revelry continued until nearly daylight, interrupted only by two fights. . . . The women are of questionable--or rather, unquestionable--reputation, but public decorum is preserved; and to the miners, who have hardly seen a female face for six months, they represent something of the tenderness and sacredness of their sex.  

Gambling was another vice that stripped the miner of his resources, according to Dimsdale. He kept telling readers that

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14 *Montana Post*, April 8, 1865, p. 3.

15 *Montana Post*, May 10, 1866, p. 5.
"three-card monte" and "dice lotteries" were just swindles to take their money. Here, again, it appears his warnings were not heeded, for he continued printing his anti-gambling barbs in the Post until his death.

Despite Dimsdale's dislike for the entertainment pursuits of many citizens, they couldn't wait to read the latest Post to see what he had to say. He chased them out of the Post's office once with this lecture:

Some persons seem to think that the printing office is properly a public place of resort, especially on publication day, when the loafers crowd the "print shop" as they call it, waiting for the chance to snatch and "confiscate" a paper. Now boys, don't do so any more. It is an announcement to the printers, and a sign of ill-breeding on your part.16

Sometimes the "boys" got a little too inquisitive, prompting the irritated Englishman to write, "The height of impudence; to go into the office and read what the editor is writing."17

Those were the dull days, apparently, when the "boys" had nothing better to do than bother the editor. To keep the inactive busy, Dimsdale had numerous suggestions. One such suggestion seemed somewhat out of place on the Montana frontier. He proposed grandly that the miners form a "Cricket Club" in Virginia City. They quickly informed him that the game was called baseball in America and proceeded to form two teams. He congratulated himself for suggesting the idea,

16 Montana Post, March 18, 1865, p. 3.
17 Montana Post, Nov. 26, 1864, p. 3.
then reported the "first nine" won the first baseball battle by 33 "points."\textsuperscript{18}

Dimsdale also used his columns to encourage billiards, ice skating, horse racing and other sports. But the principal sport in Virginia City was boxing, and Dimsdale let the prize fighters challenge each other through his columns. In fact, that's how one of the longest fights in ring history got started.

On Oct. 8, 1864, a husky, six-foot Irishman named Hugh O'Neil offered to fight "any member of the fighting fraternity" for $5,000 in gold.\textsuperscript{19} A week later the Post carried the answer of a wiry, little boxer named John C. Orem. Orem, who was 52 pounds lighter than O'Neil, said he was game for a fight.\textsuperscript{20} The match was set up for Jan. 1, 1865, but later was changed to the next day, a Monday, on Dimsdale's request. Dimsdale congratulated the men for "altering the day appointed for their encounter" and took it as proof that "our pugilistic friends have more reverence for the Sabbath than to think of desecrating it by fighting."\textsuperscript{21}

The fight was a natural. O'Neil was the whisky-drinking, woman-chasing symbol of evil. Orem was the clean-living, teetotaling underdog.

\textsuperscript{18}Montana Post, May 5, 1866, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{19}Montana Post, Oct. 8, 1864, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{20}Montana Post, Oct. 15, 1864, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{21}Montana Post, Dec. 10, 1864.
The fight between Orem and O'Neil went 185 one-minute rounds and ended in a draw with both men masses of welts and bruises. It lasted from 1:40 in the afternoon until "daylight was failing," and Dimsdale was there to cover it for the Post.

The 138-pound Orem bounced out of his corner to face his 190-pound opponent, and Dimsdale began his almost blow-by-blow account of the entire 185 rounds. His colorful story of the fight covered five of the six columns of the front page in the next edition, and most of the copy was in small type. 22

Dimsdale's sports writing, compared by some to that of George Gordon, sixth Lord Byron, 23 described the bout in this stilted fashion:

After a little sparring Con bent a right handed straight shooter heavily into Hugh's ribs a little below the arm pit, receiving a counter from Hugh, somewhat short, in a corresponding location. Con slipped to his knees, but jumping up let fly his left on Hugh's knowledge box . . . Con put in two with his right under Hugh's left optic . . . staggered Hugh with a left-hander on the potato mill. Hugh's cook is distilling the vermillion. Orem, though so much overmatched and overweighed, full of pluck and spirit, dropped in one on the cheek and retired to mother earth for the finish. . . . Con got in two right handers first on the optic and next on the cheptic; Hugh closed and Con fell in a devout attitude. . . . Hugh is standing and looking daggers . . . Orem pretended to withdraw, changing front to the rear, then suddenly wheeled to meet his opponent, sticking out his tongue and laughing. . . . O'Neil fell on his seat of honor. . . . In this round Orem fell and Hugh fell on his saddle fashion, striking at the same time Orem in the face; great confusion; loud cries of "fair," "put him out," "go on" . . . and O'Neil planted a rattler on the ribs. 24


Dimsdale kept remarking about the heroism of Orem and the fact he was so much smaller than O'Neil. He said at the close of his story it was a fair fight, but he seemed to imply also that O'Neil had used questionable tactics. He dubbed Orem "The Fearless" and sighed hopefully that "we sincerely hope that such men may never meet again. Of pugilistic honors they must have had enough."^{25}

Three weeks later the Salt Lake City *Daily Union Vedette* printed a half-page advertisement charging Dimsdale with writing "a string of balderdash, purporting to be a faithful report of a prize fight." The article was signed "Vindicator" and had been mailed to the *Vedette* from Virginia City two days after Dimsdale's story was in the *Post*. The writer charged that Dimsdale "who besides exhibiting a remarkable unfairness, displays a gross ignorance both of the art of reporting, and of the language which he pretends to teach."^{26}

Vindicator said he was a friend of O'Neil and accused Dimsdale of several inaccuracies: giving a lengthy biography of Orem before his story but just a few lines about O'Neil; saying both men were ready to quit when O'Neil was still in good shape; not mentioning Orem had been knocked out of the ring and several other omissions.^{27}

Quoting liberally from the advertisement, Dimsdale replied bitterly to Vindicator's charges:

^{25}Ibid.


^{27}Ibid.
It has been the reporter's unpleasant duty to record three prize fights in this city, in one of which a fellow-countryman of his own was beaten... No partiality was complained of in either case, nor would he stoop to slander a son of the Green Isle, to which he is attached by the holiest ties.°

He described in detail the scope of O'Neil's injuries and why he was unable to continue. Dimsdale said he printed little biographical data about O'Neil because "it was only after long-continued and repeated solicitation, that Hugh O'Neil gave the few facts concerning his previous career, noticed in our report."^9

Dimsdale answered the charges in convincing fashion and the controversy died in the Post with that edition.

^8Montana Post, Feb. 18, 1865, p. 2.
^9Ibid.
CHAPTER V

PROFESSOR DIMSDALE

It was recess time at the small log school house on Idaho Street. Students ran out the door and down the slope where they slid down the slippery straw stacks. Inside the building, the slim schoolmaster picked up his writing pad, sat by an open window and gazed out at Boot Hill Cemetery. Then Thomas Dimsdale continued writing the story of the bad men who lay buried in that cemetery. He was writing the first book ever published in Montana, The Vigilantes of Montana.¹

Following the recess period, Professor Dimsdale (everyone who taught in Virginia City was called Professor) watched his students slip back on the wooden benches and began another lecture. This was October, 1864, and the scholarly Englishman had just been appointed editor of the Montana Post.

Dimsdale's school was fairly well filled with students at the time, and he was prospering when Daniel Tilton and Ben R. Dittes offered him the editorial position. His students paid $1.75 a week, Virginia City had no public school and "pupils were quite as numerous as he expected or wanted them to be."²

His advertisement in the Post promised a good education.

Prof. Dimsdale begs to inform the public that he has opened a SCHOOL on Idaho Street, behind Mr. Lomas's Corral. Having been long and successfully engaged in tuition, he feels sure that the friends of education will support him in his attempt to establish a really good school in Virginia City. All the branches included in the curriculum of the best seminaries will be taught in the most approved manner.

TERMS: $1.75 per week.

A night school will be opened next Monday for those whose vocations prevent their attendance during the day. The strictest attention will be paid to the morals and deportment of the pupils. Young beginners, $1.25.3

The Post called attention to Dimsdale's advertisement and assured readers

the promises made by Prof. Dimsdale will be strictly carried out, and that parents and guardians will find it to be to their interest to send their children to a place where their moral and intellectual progress will be cared for by a man whose experience and testimonials prove him to be eminently fit for his calling.4

The gentle Englishman had organized his school a year before in the fall of 1863. It was the first school in the territory, and Dimsdale was the first teacher in Montana. He subsequently became the first Superintendent of Public Instruction in the young territory.5

Dimsdale formerly had taught at Millbrook, Ontario, for a few years, and one of his former students there recalled him "as a model schoolmaster and an educated gentleman of the old school with abilities

3
Montana Post, Sept. 17, 1864, p. 2.

4Ibid.

far above what were demanded in the position he held as head schoolmaster in a country village.\textsuperscript{6} One of his former students in Virginia City described him as the teacher she remembered most distinctly:

He was an Englishman, small, delicate-looking, and gentle. I liked him. It seemed to me that he knew everything. In his school all was harmonious and pleasant. While his few pupils buzzed and whispered over their variously assorted readers, arithmetics, and copy books, the professor sat at a makeshift desk near the little window of the log schoolhouse writing, writing during the intervals between recitations, at recess time always writing. When during 1865, his \textit{Vigilantes of Montana} was being published in the \textit{Montana Post}, it must have been the composition of those articles which had so engrossed him.\textsuperscript{7}

Writers of letters to the \textit{Post} said the Professor's popularity with the students was crowding Dimsdale out of his small school and called for the building of a larger one.\textsuperscript{8} The "Local" writer for the \textit{Post} noted in December, 1864, that the teacher kept the seats a little too hard to sit on for comfort but added that "Professor Dimsdale does not keep the children tied to them so long as to weary them or even disgust them with the school room, and hence they are pleasant, obedient and studious."\textsuperscript{9}

Early in 1865, Dimsdale turned his teaching duties over to a Mr. Davis to devote all his time to running the \textit{Montana Post}.\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{center}
\textsuperscript{6}Anaconda Standard, July 9, 1893, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{7}Ronan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{8}Montana Post, Nov. 5, 1864, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{9}Montana Post, Dec. 17, 1864, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{10}Montana Post, May 20, 1865, p. 3.
\end{center}
But he was not to stay out of the sphere of education for long. He filled his editorial pages with strong pleas for an education system in Montana and for better schools and teachers. The territorial legislature later passed a law on Feb. 7, 1865, providing for organization of a school system. Dimsdale, through his promotion of educational activities, was regarded as having been largely responsible for passage of the law. Governor Sidney Edgerton appointed Dimsdale Superintendent of Public Instruction for Montana July 10, 1865, and in the words of one historian he "was certainly the best man available for the task."

The position was regarded as a political plum tossed from the Republican governor to the chief spokesman for the GOP in the Montana press. There were a few growls of graft "at the carrying away of the plum by so outspoken an antagonist as he was of the party who had the power to confirm or reject the appointment." The legislature was controlled strongly by the Democrats.

The new office had a title but no salary. It had not been provided by the legislature, perhaps in retaliation for the verbal

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12 Certificate of the appointment of Thomas J. Dimsdale as Montana Superintendent of Public Instruction, July 10, 1865 (Montana State Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana).

13 Raymer, loc. cit.

mauling Dimsdale and the Post had given the legislature during its first session.15

Dimsdale, as Superintendent of Public Instruction, had no defined duties, no authority and no pay. But he was effective, through the columns of the Post, in bringing a system of education to Montana. The school tax was levied at his insistence, according to Dimsdale, by the Madison County commissioners who had forgotten the matter until the editor reminded them.16

The first public school in Virginia City opened in February, 1866,17 after Dimsdale had spent more than a year espousing the benefits of a public school system. Although he wanted to bring the children who ran wild on the streets to the school, most of the students who attended were those who had filled the private schools.18

Using the columns of the Post, Dimsdale urged teachers to come to Virginia City, and he wanted only the good ones. By "good" he meant "that the individual should be in manner and education, a gentleman and practiced in the art of instruction. No one else is wanted and none other could make a living."19

He deplored the lack of education in some of the citizens and sarcastically pointed out examples:

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16Montana Post, March 24, 1866, p. 2.
17Montana Post, Feb. 3, 1866, p. 3.
18Barsness, op. cit., p. 255.
19Montana Post, June 16, 1866, p. 3.
Where's the Schoolmaster?—On Monday, the following classic inscription might be noticed on the side of a freight wagon which was passing through the street; "Frad wandet for lost chance." Shades of Webster! Did this signify "Freight wanted for Last Chance"? 20

Dimsdale had definite ideas on how an educational system should be run. He had specific remedies for problems. Although his former students said he was not a stern taskmaster, he wrote that "drill in a common school should be exact and military. Children like it. It improves their health and abates the weariness of routine... Boys and girls learn best together. Their seats only should be separated." 21 He believed females, even at an early age, acted as a civilizing influence on the opposite sex.

Dimsdale saw no station in life for two classes—the lazy and the uneducated. There was hope only for the educated:

There is more money in a good education than in anything else that a man can give to his child; and it is surely of vital importance to a republic that its citizens understand the issues on which they will be called to vote. How they can do this properly, without being educated, passes our comprehension; and how a girl can be fitted for the station of wife or mother, without a thorough training, is what we have hitherto failed to understand. Better do without government, other than a people's court, than sacrifice the rising generation. As a preventive to crime and its costly train of evils, education is the only reliable antidote. Ten out of eleven criminals are uneducated. We would sooner follow a child to its grave than leave it uneducated, exposed to the temptations of life and the vicissitudes of a tortuous course through an unsympathizing world. Small as is our share of erudition, we would not exchange it for all the gold in Montana. 22

20Montana Post, April 8, 1865, p. 3.

21Montana Post, March 11, 1865, p. 2.

22Montana Post, Aug. 5, 1865, p. 2.
Dimsdale held the job of Superintendent until about March, 1866. About that time the legislature was considering a salary for the position and Acting Governor Thomas F. Meagher, a Democrat, sought a replacement for Dimsdale. Dimsdale and the Post had criticized constantly the official acts of Meagher.

Meagher wrote to the Council of the legislature telling it he was replacing Dimsdale with Peter Ronan "for not having sent in to this Office his report, appertaining to his duties and department, as respectfully requested by me some weeks ago." Because of his failing health or because there was little to report (there were no public schools until a few days before he was fired), Dimsdale did not make any reports to Meagher on the state of education or schools in Montana.

The former school teacher indicated to his readers that he was not at all displeased with the course of events:

New Officers--John S. Rockfellow has been appointed Territorial Treasurer, vice John J. Hull, relieved; John H. Ming is Territorial Auditor, vice John S. Lott relieved. Peter Ronan becomes Superintendent of Public Instruction, vice Thos. J. Dimsdale, greatly relieved.

Three weeks later, he told readers he thought it a little unfair he had not been paid for his work and added he thought the next superintendent should be paid.

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23 Montana Post, March 3, 1866, p. 3.
24 Raymer, op. cit., p. 249.
25 Montana Post, March 3, 1866, p. 3.
26 Montana Post, March 24, 1866, p. 2.
CHAPTER VI
FROM "SANCTUM" TO PULPIT

Besides his drive to increase the educational opportunities in the frontier mining camp, Dimsdale was active in church life. After being reared in the Church of England in his native land, he organized a small congregation of worshippers and founded the Protestant Episcopal Church in Montana at Virginia City on Christmas Day, 1865.¹

Dimsdale was the lay reader for the church until shortly before his death. Bishop D. S. Tuttle of the church said this about Dimsdale's performance in the pulpit:

"He was a good reader and attracted a small congregation, though at first he made them smile somewhat, as, reading for several Sundays from the English Prayer-Book, he prayed most loyally for the Queen and entirely ignored the President."²

Although Dimsdale didn't cover well in the Post the services of his own church, it appears the other Virginia City newspaper, the Montana Democrat, did. He once thanked the Democrat for a complimentary story on the service at his church but added the story was wrong because it said he gave a sermon. He assured the opposition he hadn't begun to use the pulpit yet to preach his views and merely had read


the prayers from a litany of the Episcopal Church.\textsuperscript{3}

A visitor to Virginia City in 1864–65 reported the boom town had two thriving churches and "very recently the principal merchants have agreed to close their houses on the Sabbath."\textsuperscript{4} This was one of Dimsdale's minor crusades that was partially successful. He often had told his readers merchants made "more money by the observance of the Sabbath than by its desecration."\textsuperscript{5}

The important merchants may have bought that line but small operators and storekeepers ignored him. But why not---Sunday was the gala day in Virginia City when miners with bulging gold pouches left their work for the day in search of excitement and merriment.

Though attendance was small at Virginia City churches, citizens were well acquainted with the Bible. During the winter, when the mails were held up for two or three months by the snow, they often had nothing to read but the Post and the Holy Bible. Dimsdale apparently was in the same predicament because he often quoted the Bible and frequently used it when he wanted to draw analogies in his editorials.

Although he sometimes would criticize his readers for being too "ignorant and irreligious" to know that a certain Sunday was Palm Sunday, he seldom became angry in editorials dealing with religion

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{3}Montana Post, Dec. 30, 1865, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{5}Montana Post, Jan. 13, 1866, p. 3.}
unless he was writing about the Mormons. He said Mormonism was simply "religious adultery and sanctified rape." To him, polygamy was a practice that resulted in cases of "adultery, seduction and illegitimate commerce" and the Mormons had no right to call it religion.6

Staff members of the Salt Lake City Daily Union Vedette sent Dimsdale copies of sermons that Mormon elders had delivered and that was all the fuel he needed for numerous editorials.

Dimsdale culled an article from the Salt Lake City Telegraph that referred to his stand on Mormonism:

Visiting Us—Friend Tilton, proprietor of the Montana Post, called in upon us yesterday, blooming in health and smiling in success. Tilton has been very successful with his paper, has an excellent editor in Professor Dimsdale, a clear-headed gentleman, sound on nearly everything but Utah. Brother Dimsdale, come down and see us. We are not half as bad as we are colored, and we have excellent peaches.7

Dimsdale thanked the Telegraph and said he had a fondness for peaches but no love to share with Mormons. Dimsdale, who usually kept out of fights with other editors except on politics, said he wouldn't attack any Mormons or newspaper editors except on their principles:

Our duty is to examine principles, and not to abuse individuals or communities that differ from us. For our own part, we are not supposed to be very nervous or given to bodily fear, where there is any show of self-defense, or a creditable end to a quarrel; but to openly make love to half a dozen bright-eyed houris in the same house, and to let them know it—wheugh! We perspiringly admit that

6Montana Post, March 3, 1866, p. 2.
7Montana Post, Oct. 28, 1865, p. 2.
we could not come to the scratch, and that, in such a case a back door, with well oiled hinges and a snap lock, would be the most useful and most valued article of furniture in our house.\(^8\)

Dimsdale found Mormonism distasteful primarily because it devalued the woman; he thought she should be praised and commended for the life she played on the frontier. He wrote:

A woman is a queen in her own home; but we neither want her as a blacksmith, a plough-woman, a soldier, a lawyer, a doctor, nor in any such professions or handicraft. As sisters, mothers, nurses, friends, sweethearts, and wives, they are the salt of the earth, the sheet anchor of society, and the humanizing and purifying element in humanity. As such, they cannot be too much respected, loved, and protected. From Blue Stockings, Bloomers, and strong-minded she-males generally, "Good Lord, deliver us."\(^9\)

That old fashioned, stay-at-home attitude contrasted sharply with the rising independence of women in the mining camp. One citizen vowed:

I would never bring a family here, as every other man who has come here with his wife has lost her. Women can earn money here faster than men, and they very soon become dissatisfied with their husbands and take up with other men and that is the last of them. You may have a woman with mind enough to stick by you; but, if so, she will do better than the women who have come here by hundreds. . . .\(^{10}\)

The percentage of men losing their wives probably was exaggerated, but the claim women could make money quickly had some validity. In an editorial entitled "Advice to Immigrants," Dimsdale wrote:

\(^8\)Ibid.


\(^{10}\)Montana Post, May 26, 1866, p. 2.
Females who can use their hands smartly, are sure of immediate employment at high wages, and a good character will insure not only magnificent pay, but a deferential treatment and a kind attention, before read of in novels.11

Maybe he didn't realize it, but Dimsdale made life in the kitchen look pretty drab compared to the various positions open for women in Montana.

According to one author:

These working women enjoyed an easy camaraderie with the miners. Single men and women visited back and forth in each other's cabins freely, paying no attention to the stuffy pretensions of newspaper editors and bankers. . . . 12

Dimsdale actually helped that situation along by inviting women to Montana and telling them what good-looking and well-to-do future husbands were waiting for them. He often pleaded with them to come to Montana, instead of other Western states, saying Montana needed females because "women make society--men are made by society. We could accommodate three or four thousands of them nicely in Montana, and be much the richer for the venture."13

And maybe he was right. If Dimsdale's editorials didn't bring the fair sex out West, a man could always put a classified ad in the Post:

Wanted--A correspondence with some lady, with a view to matrimony. One who has been divorced in the Territory preferred. Red hair, or one who stutters need not apply. Must not be averse to my being out late at night, and on

11Montana Post, May 19, 1866, p. 2.


13Montana Post, July 8, 1865, p. 2.
my return must ask no questions. Money is no object, still would not let a few thousand paltry dollars separate an otherwise eligible couple. Have travelled all over the world, more especially in the Sandwich Islands. Profession, a gentleman; can support a wife like a lady. All letters addressed to the president of the Nevada Clam and Oyster Company will receive prompt attention.

Dimsdale assured the women Virginia City was a nice quiet place:

A child of five years old could travel alone at midnight, carrying a purse of gold in its hand, with perfect safety; while the poorest woman could sleep in a lone tent on a hill side, as safely as in the White House.

Women readers must have been confused by the contrast between Dimsdale's glowing testimonials of peace and harmony in Alder Gulch and the "Indictments Found" column. During a typical week, one man was indicted for attempted murder, three for challenging others to a duel and carrying deadly weapons, five for incest, adultery and bigamy, one for mayhem and one for assault and various other charges.

When newspapers in the East and elsewhere printed stories saying or implying Montana was a reckless, wild land and all the women were painted hussies, Dimsdale quickly refuted the charges with editorials and news stories. He set himself up as the defender of Montana womanhood.

Occasionally, he wronged a woman himself, such as the time he

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14 Montana Post, March 31, 1866, p. 3.
15 Montana Post, Aug. 12, 1865, p. 2.
printed an erroneous story saying a Miss Durgan had just married a Mr. Patton. He printed a retraction saying:

The lady repudiates the ceremony as imaginary, and is still in thought, in heart, in fancy--free. We implore forgiveness. It was the fire that threw a false light on the affair. We have sinned editorially and typographically, which we will strive not to do so again.17

After all that talk about marriage, Dimsdale himself finally walked to the altar on May 1, 1866.18 But it wasn't with a woman persuaded by an editorial to come to Montana. His bride, Annette Hotchkiss, was the first white woman to settle in Virginia City, arriving early in 1864.19

A member of the Post's staff bemoaned the fact the editor had joined "the noble army of martyrs who have gone before him" but added that because of the "professor's pleased smiles and jolly looks" the whole thing was probably all right.20

The Post's correspondent in Diamond City thought just the opposite:

Seeing in the last Post that it has come to hand, that Professor Dimsdale, of the Post, has packaged up his duds and departed from the land of single blessedness, henceforth to dwell in the State of Matrimony, County of Cure, and town of Bliss, weeping, and sad and lonely, we are left behind. With many a wish of joy, a long and happy life, we draw our sleeve across our eyes and say

17 Montana Post, May 20, 1865, p. 3.
18 Montana Post, May 5, 1866, p. 3.
19 New North-West, Aug. 29, 1874, p. 3.
20 Montana Post, May 5, 1866, p. 3.
farewell—forever. We hope you will write to us occasionally, and tell us of that beautiful land, for we do not expect to cross its boundary line—failing to find the fair one that will appreciate our good looks, and agree to journey with us to its sacred precincts.  

Dimsdale never experienced all the lasting joys of married life he wrote about so often. He died four months and 23 days after his wedding.

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21 *Montana Post*, May 19, 1866, p. 2.
CHAPTER VII

YANKEE DOODLE, DIXIE AND THE BALLOT BOX

Montana legend says "The left wing of the army of Confederate General Price in Missouri never surrendered; it retreated to Montana."^1

Dimsdale hardly would have disputed the point. As editor of the Post and chief spokesman for the Unionist-Republican party in Montana, he fought a noble but losing battle against the Democratic party between 1864 and 1866.

During the infant years of Montana Territory, three factions fought for political supremacy: A small but aggressive group of Republicans; a similarly sized group of Copperheads, Northerners who sided with the South during the Civil War, and a strong majority of Democrats, most of who were staunch secessionists and brought their rebel war cries and songs of Dixie to the Montana frontier.

Political battles were laced with rancor, invective and bitterness. Though the Civil War actually was being fought half a continent away, Dimsdale's editorials indicated it was being fought in Montana, too. Instead of easing tensions between Northerners and Southerners in Montana, he consistently deplored what he considered the stupid position of the South and the traitorous course it was pursuing.

It wasn't wise to express such views, especially if you were a newspaper editor with 9,000 subscribers, most from the land of Dixie.

According to N. P. Langford, Internal Revenue collector:

"I was in a Territory more disloyal as a whole, than Tennessee or Kentucky ever were. Four-fifths of our citizens were openly declared Secessionists. . . . Then we had Jeff Davis Gulch, and Confederate Gulch . . . . In our local matters, we were completely under the rebel rule. . . . I had not the support of one fourth of our people, and threats of violence were the rule, and not the exception."

If such threats were made to Dimsdale, the pages of his newspaper indicated they were not effective. He continued to call Jefferson Davis an "arch traitor" and reminded his riled-up readers that "This Territory is not southern ground, and cannot be, in any event."

With the war in its final, furious stages in the winter of 1864-65, Dimsdale grandly predicted Union victory in his news columns. To him, every Union victory was a major step towards the inevitable downfall of the South and every Northern loss was a small, temporary barrier.

While the battle raged in the East, tempers flared between Northerners and Southerners in Montana. One day both sides threatened to shoot it out on the street, but the women stepped between the warring factions and peace was maintained. When the band played Dixie at the

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theater, Northern sympathizers would shoot their guns through the
ceiling and when Yankee Doodle was played the rebels would do the
shooting.\textsuperscript{4}

When the news that Abraham Lincoln had been re-elected President
in November, 1864, reached Virginia City, Dimsdale, Wilbur F. Sanders
and a few other Republican leaders gathered around a huge bonfire to
celebrate the victory. After running up Old Glory and giving a few
lusty cheers for the Union, the men left for the nearest bar to
celebrate further.\textsuperscript{5}

Virginia City quieted down when the \textit{Post} printed the news of
President Lincoln's assassination, 14 days after it happened. Dimsdale
was pleased to note even the stores and bars closed from 1 p.m. to
sundown after the news arrived. He left the editor's desk to speak at
a public meeting, expressing his deep sorrow over the tragedy.\textsuperscript{6}

But others did not take the news so hard. In some mining
camps, Southern girls danced in the street, chanting the news that
"evil Abe" was dead.\textsuperscript{7} A Southern poet expressed his happiness by
tacking a poem on the office door of Dimsdale's agent, W. A. Ackerman,
at Prickly Pear City:

\begin{center}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4}Melvina Lott, "History of Madison County, Montana" (paper in
the Montana State Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana, 1931),
p. 71.
\item \textsuperscript{5}Montana Post, Nov. 26, 1864, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{6}Montana Post, April 29, 1865, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{7}Ibid., p. 1.
\end{itemize}
\end{center}
Abraham Lincoln elected President, Montana Post, November 19, 1864.
Glory enough for one time!
Old Abe had gone to Hell!
Hurrah for Jeff Davis!
Grand Reception of Old Abe in Hell!
Big Dinner!
The Devil's Band played "Welcome the Chief!" 8

An angry Dimsdale answered:

We think that the most ardent secessionist, out of a mad-house, will consider it time to shake his skirts clear from contact with the animated carrion that penned this able, manly and elevating manifesto. There will ever be some questionable forms of life, bearing the outward shape of humanity, engendered by the festering of corruption and feedings on rottenness, like those crawling and writhing vermin that we saw revelling on the putrid carcasses of beast of burden. Is this an exponent of the rank and file of secession? We expect that Southern men will take this in hand; ferret out this brutal defamer and punish him. One advice we give him, and that is to ask mercy of God for his soul; for if discovered in the dunghill he may make his home, man will have none of his body. 9

Dimsdale was intensely patriotic. He preached patriotism in his columns and in public speeches. He was Central Committee Chairman of a special July Fourth celebration in 1865 and persuaded various organizations to march in a parade. 10

During the celebration, the Post reported that Dimsdale was called on to read the following sentiment, "The North and the South! May the only strife between them be, which shall do most for the welfare of their common country." 11 In the same issue of the Post, Dimsdale

8 Montana Post, May 13, 1865, p. 2.
9 Ibid.
10 Montana Post, June 24, 1865, p. 3.
11 Montana Post, July 8, 1865, p. 2.
wrote a patriotic poem entitled, "The Stars and Stripes."  

After the war, Dimsdale wrote numerous editorials saying the North and South should shake hands and be friends, but he didn't miss an opportunity to inject humor into the downfall of the South:

Missing--Lost, mislaid, stolen or strayed, a man named Jeff Davis. He had lately sold his furniture, owing to the failure of some speculative scheme in which he had embarked. It is thought he headed for Havana, intending to try the cigar business—all his projects having hitherto ended in smoke. Any person giving information of his whereabouts, will receive a Major-General's commission in the Southern army and a cord of Confederate scrip.

He lost some of his humor during election time. Nearly every candidate he backed lost because of the overwhelming number of Democrats and Southerners in the gulch. During the territorial elections of October, 1864, he asked readers if they were going to let Copperheads and "Secesh" men rule in Montana. They answered with a resounding "Yes" and elected Democrat Samuel McLean as territorial delegate and a Democratic majority to the legislature at Bannack. Dimsdale had supported his best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, but the Colonel lost by 1,233 votes as 6,364 persons voted in the territory.

Although the latest census showed a territorial population of 15,822, Dimsdale thought the "large turnout" looked strange. He

12 Ibid., p. 1.
13 Montana Post, April 22, 1865, p. 3.
14 Montana Post, Oct. 8, 1864, p. 2.
15 Montana Post, Nov. 19, 1864, p. 2.
16 Montana Post, Oct. 18, 1864, p. 3.
editorialized in his news story of the election that "it is open to suspicion that an inordinate love of the franchise impelled some gentlemen to vote not wisely but too well or rather too often."\(^{17}\)

In the first territorial election, Dimsdale had complained about the action of the crowd near the polling places:

"Dixie" called for at all hours, and applauded with a will; Sterling Price cheered to the echo; Yankee Doodle groaned and greeted with "that tune's played out; Hurrah, boys, another Secesh vote; Walk along, gentlemen, vote for Dixie's land. Here are your papers. Straight Democratic ticket. No d--d Union about it." But why follow farther the disgusting details of such flagrant violations of common decency. How can the rank and file be blamed, when the leaders proclaim their willingness to vote for the Devil, if his name were on the Democratic ticket.\(^{18}\)

The Democrats may have won but Montana lost, according to Dimsdale. He considered sending a Democrat as delegate to the Republican-controlled legislature as bad as sending no delegate at all. Territorial delegates were not allowed to vote, but Dimsdale was convinced Montana had been done an injustice and he preached that belief in his editorials and speeches.

Dimsdale was placed in an awkward position in his first months as editor by having to write political editorials plus run his school. Two months after the race, the "Local" writer for the Post congratulated him for running a successful school:

We are glad to chronicle the success of his enterprise, and to commend it to the public as worthy of patronage, but we have delayed this notice because

\(^{17}\)Montana Post, Nov. 19, 1864, p. 2.

\(^{18}\)Montana Post, Oct. 29, 1864, p. 2.
it was known that Professor Dimsdale furnished some editorial articles for this paper during the last political campaign and we did not desire to place him in so equivocal a position.\footnote{Montana Post, Dec. 3, 1864, p. 3.}

Perhaps Democrats and Southerners would have taken their children out of his school had they discovered in the heat of the political race that Dimsdale was writing the scathing editorials.\footnote{Montana Post, Sept. 2, 1865, p. 2.}

In later elections, he was compelled to tell readers, "Vote the People's Ticket once, and then look out for those who vote often."\footnote{Montana Post, Oct. 22, 1864, p. 1.}

The trim Englishman was a popular political speaker in the gulch but his speeches received little space in the \textit{Post}, and he was careful not to overemphasize in the paper his role in local politics. One of his longer write ups appeared soon after he became editor:

Professor Dimsdale, then being summoned to the stand informed the audience that he was in a state of transition, from being a foreigner to becoming a citizen, but that he felt no inconvenience from the operation, and the expression, "Fellow citizens" came quite natural to him. He found that so far as principle was concerned, there was, as he expected, no change necessary. He had been a loyalist under the British flag and he intended to be one under the stars and stripes. He must be excused for feeling a little nervous, after hearing a speech from the re-embodied spirit of his friend Sanders, so lately consigned to the tomb by the Democratic party; and also, he had, in the same place, heard the Grand Turk fulminating his anathemas against the Christians in general and the Methodist Society and Sunday schools in particular. He had missed the sacred banner of the Moslem, composed of the breeches of the Prophet, but supposed that for convenience, the orator wore them. One question he wanted to ask, and that was, "When the government was consigned to Hell, as it had been so often by the speaker during the preceding meeting, to what part of the United States did the Democrats intend to send their Delegate?"
Dimsdale usually was the final speaker at a political meeting, perhaps because he left the audience chuckling with his witty, sardonic humor and sent them home in a good mood.

He gave equal coverage to Democratic and Republican activities, although it seemed as if Democratic conventions invariably were described as rowdy, noisy and unorganized while GOP sessions were organized, orderly and sensible.

The Post carried the numerous proclamations of Acting Governor Thomas F. Meagher and Dimsdale criticized them as being poorly thought out and not in the best interests of Montana. If the governor or other important officials had something significant to say in the Post, readers could be assured Dimsdale would comment on the remarks in the same issue.

He was gallant in defeat, which was often:

Modern Democracy is not our ticket. We accept the results [of the latest election] because such is the law and the will of the majority which is the only piece of pure democracy about it. . . . We editorially touch our hat to the gentlemen elected to the offices of Territorial Auditor, Superintendent of Education and the Legislature. Nobody else will ever do it, seeing that the first two offices are non-elective and the balance bogus. . . . We shall watch all attacks on the public purse . . . each man will be honestly judged by his acts.22

He kept his promise and wrote numerous stories chiding the territorial delegate, Samuel McLean, for—in Dimsdale's opinion—not looking after the interests of the people back home.

During the 14 months the Post was the only newspaper in the

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 territory, it refrained from publishing many Republican speeches, it said, because the opposition party had no news outlet. Dimsdale humorously said he didn't print Democratic speeches out of mercy to the politicians:

"Were there any opposition paper in which the Democratic party could answer for themselves, we should give a verbatim report of the speeches of the Democratic gathering being thoroughly convinced that the orators themselves, would in this find their severest punishment."

Dimsdale had only one Democratic newspaper to contend with during his tenure in the "sanctum." That was the Montana Democrat, another Virginia City paper, which began publishing in the fall of 1865. The Montana Radiator, another GOP paper, was founded in Helena in March, 1866, and another Democratic organ, the Rocky Mountain Gazette, was started in Helena in August, 1866, just as Dimsdale was leaving the Post.

Dimsdale had to cope with an exceedingly eccentric man in Major John Bruce, editor of the Democrat. He had an aristocratic background and his high-bred manners and attitudes made him appear snobbish to some of the rugged miners. The only thing in his favor was the fact he was a Southerner.

Dimsdale invariably ran an editorial rebuking something the Democrat had said the week before. It was usually along political lines and Dimsdale's comments were free of attacks on personalities. Dimsdale's

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writing lacks and vitriolic slander and vicious name-calling in other frontier papers such as the Oregon newspapers of a decade earlier with their "Oregon style of journalism."

The Democrat constantly was attacking the Post, according to Dimsdale, and blaming him for numerous journalistic misdeeds such as making up stories, distorting the truth and suppressing news. The validity of the charges probably never will be determined because, among other things, only three copies of the Democrat published before Dimsdale's death are known to exist. Dimsdale often answered the charges by saying that "the people of Montana do not want to read about editors or their differences. They require information, advice and instruction."25

But if Dimsdale by-passed the practice of political name-calling, his correspondent, Franklin, didn't. Franklin was Dimsdale's anonymous political writer who aroused the legislature in Bannack with his spirited coverage of sessions during the winter of 1864-65. That was the first legislature in Montana, and Franklin said it was "filled with some of the most venal, corrupt and shameless legislators in the world."27

Franklin had a clever pen, a biting wit and the ability to hide his true identity while rubbing and bending elbows with the

25 The copies are in the Montana State Historical Society Library in Helena, Montana.

26 Montana Post, Jan. 6, 1866, p. 2.

politicians in Bannack. He described what he called the crudeness, underlying motives and private petty plans of the legislators and wrote so vigorously that he prompted Dimsdale to comment, "We must not be too hard on the members."28

Dimsdale's anonymous correspondent ignored the remark, at least as far as the legislators were concerned, and after suffering under the bite of his pen for nearly two months, they passed a resolution censuring him:

Resolved, By the House of Representatives of the Territory of Montana, that the author of said communication, is a willful and malicious libeler and calumniator of the Representatives of the people, and that this house pronounces the charge of corruption against members of this Legislature wicked, willful, malicious, falsehood and calumny.29

Dimsdale's only comment was that Franklin was able to take care of himself. What had prompted the censure motion was a communique from Franklin in the Post. It said, in part:

Honorable members and legislative bummers have drank nothing until yesterday for a week. So sudden a change of habits of course would produce serious results if no specific were found which would protect them from the fatal effects of temperance. . . . Private bills are passed by for the more pressing duties of the session, although I would not discourage those who have "axes to grind" provided they are able and willing to "pay the fiddler." And this last remark leads me to say that there are in this assembly, some of the most venal, corrupt, and shameless legislators in the world. . . . Men openly in the streets propose to sell votes for a given price, and in any legislative body that ever before congregated, would be kicked out incontinently. . . . Out I say on all such iniquity, and I hope the people of

29Montana Post, Feb. 11, 1865, p. 2.
Madison, will find who of their delegation are guilty... These solons hate me most affectionately... But do not think all are rascals. There are hands in this assembly unstained by bribes, whom these vultures have never dared to approach, be it said to their immortal honor, and by and by it will be my pleasing duty to give you their names.30

The attacks on the now furious legislators continued, and Franklin continued to play hide-and-seek in Bannack, writing that "although there is not a man here who does not know who your correspondent is, yet no two agree." He said the arrival of the coach that brought the Post to Bannack was the high point of the week for the legislators who tore open the bundles to see what Franklin had to say.31

Finding that Franklin's pen grew sharper instead of more blunt, the legislators wrote to Dimsdale, saying they weren't going to pay the $35 they owed the Post for subscriptions. He answered sarcastically:

The proprietors of this journal, on receiving the overwhelming intelligence, would, doubtless, have torn their hair, but the coldness of the weather prevented their taking off their hats, and as for the monetary loss involved, they intend by retrenching all unnecessary expenditure, and by a continuous and diligent application to business, to accumulate sufficient capital, to meet the appalling deficiency occasioned by the failure of the Council to keep their written engagements.32

Franklin began his final communication of the session by saying, "Othello's occupation's gone. The high comedy which has been on these boards for sixty days, closed Tuesday evening at 10 o'clock."33

31 Montana Post, Feb. 18, 1865, p. 2.
32 Montana Post, March 4, 1865, p. 2.
33 Montana Post, April 15, 1865, p. 1.
When the next legislative session was called for the winter of 1865-66, Dimsdale called back his controversial correspondent: "Wanted--Our old correspondent "Franklin" to watch the legislative body as of yore. The compensation will be according to the old contract."34

If Franklin still was around, he didn't respond. Dimsdale, or someone else associated with the paper, reported the legislative sessions in dry, methodical fashion.

When Republican Governor Sidney Edgerton left for Ohio in 1865, Democrat Thomas Francis Meagher, secretary of the territory, became acting governor. The Bannack legislature had adjourned without providing for a second session as required by the organic act, the document by which the territory of Montana was created. Meagher couldn't constitutionally call another legislative session but he faced many territorial problems that needed solutions. Because of that he called a session in the winter of 1865-66.35

Dimsdale quoted the organic act to show Meagher was acting illegally, then urged the courts to declare the acts of the session unconstitutional.36 Two territorial judges later declared all acts of the legislature illegal, and Dimsdale defended them against attacks of the Democrat, which said that the judges themselves acted illegally.37

34 Montana Post, Feb. 3, 1866, p. 3.
36 Montana Post, Feb. 10, 1866, p. 2.
37 Montana Post, June 23, 1866, p. 2.
PHOTOGRAPH 7

Montana executive office, 1866. (Virginia City)
Meagher also was unsuccessful when he called a constitutional convention in April, 1866, to draw up a state constitution. Perhaps he believed the huge Democratic majority in Montana would assure him a place of power when statehood came. Democrats said statehood "was the only remedy for the many territorial grievances," while Republicans opposed statehood because "obviously they would get little or no slice of the pie."\(^38\)

Dimsdale said he opposed statehood on other grounds:

To a state organization, when we are ready to work it and support it financially, we have no objection whatever; but to thrust upon us the huge cost of such a measure, before we are prepared, and when it is known that we are, as a people, decidedly opposed to it, it is scandalous waste of public money.\(^39\)

Despite Dimsdale's pleas, the convention convened but met for just six days and is now considered illegal. It was hastily thrown together by "an incompetent gathering of delegates," and the constitution itself was lost after being taken to St. Louis for printing.\(^40\)

When Meagher had arrived in Virginia City in September, 1865, Dimsdale had welcomed him editorially, saying, "Our new secretary is no partisan. His banner is the Stars and Stripes, under which he has fought for the country, and this he regards as the flag of a nation, and not of a party."\(^41\) Meagher, a celebrated Northern commander


\(^39\) *Montana Post*, April 14, 1866, p. 2.

\(^40\) Stout, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

\(^41\) *Montana Post*, Sept. 30, 1865, p. 2.
during the Civil War, proved Dimsdale a liar when he became acting governor. After indicating at first that he had Republican leanings, Meagher became a staunch Democrat, much to the chagrin of Dimsdale, who found fault with most of Meagher's official acts and criticized them often in editorials.

Meagher quickly acquired a reputation as a drunk and rowdy, but Dimsdale didn't use that against the Irishman. He referred kindly to Meagher's drinking bouts as "Irish wakes," and on one occasion, when Meagher reportedly had been drunk, Dimsdale said the governor was incapacitated for the performance of his public duty because he had just lost his father. The next year, the Post printed on page one a letter from Meagher's "lost" father. It expressed appreciation for the sympathy Montanans had shown toward his son, who had mysteriously drowned a short time before in the Missouri River.

Despite the popular notion Dimsdale shied away from the rigors of frontier politics, he actually was second in importance in the Republican party in Montana after Governor Edgerton left the territory. His best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, led the GOP. One Alder Gulch historian said Dimsdale's "wit made his paper loved by the fun-loving b'hoys, no matter what their politics, for it fitted right in with the tongue-in-cheek attitude of the whole Territory."

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\(^{42}\) *Montana Post*, Feb. 3, 1866, p. 3.


His personal views on the duties of an editor in relation to politics were well stated in one editorial:

Independence is the life and soul of journalism—neutrality is contemptible. We do not intend to war, in Montana, upon questions in the decision of which we have no vote. Our style of battle is not "pistols at two miles;" but should the interests of the Territory, of the Union, or of mankind demand that we should again enter the lists of political controversy, may our right hand wither, if, regardless of consequences, we utter not the truth, and the whole truth. War is to be met in military fashion; but blank cartridge fusillades are not to our taste. There is no sickness so revolting as that produced by rocking laxily on the heaving billows of a dying storm. 45

45 Montana Post, Jan. 6, 1866, p. 2.
A weathered gravestone in Hillside Cemetery overlooking Virginia City bears the following inscription: "Thomas J. Dimsdale, 1831-1866. Author of The Vigilantes of Montana." It is mostly because of the book he wrote that Dimsdale is remembered today.

The Vigilantes of Montana was the first book printed in Montana.¹ It is a history of the citizens' group that stamped out a reckless band of robbers and killers in late 1863 and early 1864, after it had terrorized many Montanans. No system of organized law existed in Montana during those years, and the sheriff himself, Henry Plummer, was the leader of the organized renegades. The vigilantes executed a few road agents in 1862 and 1863, 22 more between Dec. 21, 1863, and Jan. 11, 1864, and hanged others in mopping-up operations from 1864 to 1866. The power of organized banditry had been broken on the Montana frontier, and Dimsdale wrote the story of its downfall in The Vigilantes of Montana.

Before the book was published in 1866 by D. W. Tilton & Co., Dimsdale's employer in Virginia City, it appeared in serial form in the Montana Post between Aug. 26, 1865, and March 24, 1866.

PHOTOGRAPH 8

The Vigilantes of Montana presented to the public,
Montana Post, August 26, 1865.
Historians and others have conflicting theories as to why Dimsdale wrote the book. Dimsdale himself wrote:

The object of the writer in presenting this narrative to the public is twofold. His intention is, in the first place, to furnish a correct history of an organization administering justice without the sanction of constitutional law; and secondly, to prove not only the necessity for their action, but the equity of their proceedings.

One writer speculates Dimsdale might have written it in anticipation of a bad reputation in the East to the vigilante movement. Certainly he occasionally refers to potential readers in Eastern states by calling to their attention some of the customs, jargon and ways of the Montana frontier.

A journalist who knew Dimsdale said "the professor began to indulge in day dreams of wealth" prior to the publication of the book. Dimsdale, however, saw his role as an author a little differently: "The historian must either tell the truth for the instruction of mankind, or sink to the level of a mercenary pander, who writes, not to inform the people, but to enrich himself."

Whatever his motive, the book served as the most useful outlet for his education and store of literary talent.

There is widespread belief Dimsdale was prompted to write his book because an earlier one, *Banditti of the Rocky Mountains* and

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Vigilance Committee in Idaho, described inaccurately the activities of the Montana vigilantes. Actually, Dimsdale was collecting information for his book and writing part of it in 1864, while Banditti was not published until 1865. In all probability, Dimsdale did not see the anonymously written book until the middle of 1865.

In a page one editorial on July 1, 1865, Dimsdale criticized the book:

This precious literary treasure lies before us, and we are in doubt on two points concerning it: whether there ever was a work so replete with falsehood—Gulliver's Travels and the history of Baron Michausen included in the catalogue—and second, whether there ever was so impudent an attempt to gull the public, and to make money under false pretences. Without copying the whole book it would be impossible to notice all the falsehood contained in it. A few specimens must suffice. The letter said to have been received by Col. Sanders is an invention... The robbing of the Bannack coach of the 16th of October, 1863, is simply an unpleasing fiction from beginning to end... The place, the particulars and names of the five men executed in Virginia are simply imaginary... J. A. Slade was not a member of Plummer's gang... as for the attack on his widow, a man who admits having dined at her house several times, and been well treated, never made a meaner or more dastardly attack on one of womankind. It is an outrage on common decency, and the statements, mere rumors, are not a whit nearer the truth than the rest of the book is. The story that the captain in command of the Hell Gate and Deer Lodge scouts reported sixteen desperadoes executed or frozen is entirely imaginary. The sensation paragraph about Stinson's begging for mercy when swinging with a knot under his chin is another impossible falsehood, as is also the poke in the ribs with the Irishman's cane, and the so-called witty remark accompanying it.

The book was not as bad as Dimsdale charged, because it gave essentially the same reports Dimsdale's book does and reaches a

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6Banditti of the Rocky Mountains and Vigilance Committee in Idaho (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., (1965)), p. 15.

7Montana Post, July 1, 1865, p. 1.
similar conclusion—that the action of the vigilantes was justified. The writer of Banditti depicts the vigilantes as being crueler than Dimsdale does. Dimsdale probably based his criticism on the fact Banditti is an incomplete book and gives details of only a few of the hangings. Dimsdale's book is much more thorough.

Dimsdale referred to the Banditti author's attempt to make money because several pages were left blank, indicating perhaps a futile attempt to sell advertisements.8

The authors of two authoritative books about the vigilantes, N. P. Langford and Hoffman Birney, agree substantially with Dimsdale on all major points. The three authors bicker over the spelling of names and whether a man was shot in the toe or the knee, but there are few major differences. Langford participated in some incidents he describes and was close to many more, although his book, Vigilante Days and Ways, was written 25 years later in 1890. The lapse of time might have blurred his memory. Birney's book, Vigilantes, was written in 1929 and repeats mostly what Dimsdale and Langford wrote.

After editorially charging the author of Banditti with imagining a Bannack stage coach robbery in October, 1863, Dimsdale described the same robbery in his book.9 Langford and Birney also describe it. Perhaps Dimsdale wrote the editorial before he heard the story of the incident. On nearly all other incidents, authors

8Banditti of the Rocky Mountains and Vigilance Committee of Idaho, op. cit., p. 12.

9Montana Post, Sept. 30, 1865, p. 4.
Birney and Langford agree with statements in Dimsdale's book and refute those of the anonymous author.

The author of Banditti said 16 men were hanged in one clean up in the Hell Gate and Deer Lodge areas. Dimsdale writes only 10 were hanged, and Birney and Langford agree. Birney and Langford say nothing about a gay Irishman poking recently hanged road agents in the ribs and laughing. The Banditti book implies the vigilantes left desperadoes hanging on trees for the wolves and buzzards, while the three other authors note that burials were common after a hanging. The anonymous author also writes that the wife of a bad-man and hell-raiser, J. A. Slade, was as dangerous and mean as her husband, again in variance with what the other authors say.

The weight of evidence is on the side of Dimsdale as to the authenticity of his facts.

However, a pioneer who witnessed the execution of a man named Dolan said Dimsdale inaccurately wrote that a small riot occurred at the hanging. But he concluded "Dimsdale has given a very good general description of this execution."10

An eyewitness to another incident disagrees with Dimsdale. Dimsdale writes the vigilantes were forced to stand in dripping wet clothes on a freezing night for hours while tracking a particular road agent. They had just crossed a river. A man who lived close to the river says the vigilantes came straight to his house from the river

and slept that night in his cabin after drying their clothes by the fire.  

Dimsdale made at least some factual errors and enough of them would make the vigilantes look much nobler and braver in the public eye than they actually were. How many errors of fact he might have made cannot be determined from information available.

The best way to determine if Dimsdale wrote with accuracy and fairness is to read what people of the time wrote and said about the book. Former governor W. R. Marshall of Minnesota thought Dimsdale's book was highly accurate:

This most wonderful chapter in criminal history is strictly true in every particular. I have personally conversed with Langford, Hauser, W. F. Sanders and others who had personal knowledge of the events.  

Langford thought so highly of Dimsdale's book he took it on his travels. While in New York City in 1869, he met by chance the sister and brother of the notorious leader of the road agents, Henry Plummer, who had been hanged five years earlier by the vigilantes. The two told him they planned to come to Montana to avenge the murder of their brother. Plummer had written letters to his family, lying that he was in danger of being hanged because of his Union sympathies. Langford tried to convince them that such was not the case without

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telling them what kind of a man their brother was. But they were determined to go to Montana. Langford then gave them a copy of Dimsdale's book. It convinced them the trip was unnecessary, and they tearfully thanked him for the terrible history of their brother and the other road agents.\textsuperscript{13}

Bancroft's \textit{Popular Tribunals}, a mass of information about formal and informal justice in the West, seems to support Dimsdale's book on all points.\textsuperscript{14}

The three other Montana newspapers being published when the book went on the market for $2 in 1866 commented favorably about it. The \textit{Montana Democrat}, bitter rival of the \textit{Montana Post}, agreed with the validity of the contents of the book but added:

\begin{quote}
We regret to observe, however, that a production which did so much credit to the lamented, deceased Professor Dimsdale, is so wretchedly printed. The book is done on poor paper, the press work is abominable, and the covers are flimsy and miserable, and full of typographical errors.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The \textit{Helena Herald}, like the Post a Republican paper, said the book "presents a good typographical appearance, and intrinsically is a credit to its author, and artistically a credit to its publishers."\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}Hubert Howe Bancroft, \textit{The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft}, Vol. XXXVI: \textit{Popular Tribunals} (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890).
\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Montana Post}, Dec. 1, 1866, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}
The Rocky Mountain Gazette recommended the book to all who wanted to get a true picture of the activities of the vigilantes.  

Critics of Dimsdale's work contend he could not have written a complete and objective history because he approached his subject apologetically. By endeavoring to prove "the necessity for their action" they believe he suppressed facts showing some vigilante actions to be unnecessary. But the comments of those who lived during Dimsdale's day indicate he didn't suppress facts. He didn't have to because the vigilantes needed no apology. A grim, distasteful, necessary task had to be done. They did it well, and their methods, though harsh, were necessary for complete success.

Vigilante historian Hoffman Birney writes that "Dimsdale's account is that of an eyewitness who wrote guardedly but quite accurately of the coming of the law to Grasshopper Creek and Alder Gulch."  

Since Dimsdale was in the gulch during the reign of the vigilantes and since some of the hangings were witnessed by thousands, he probably was, indeed, present at some of the events. He implies he attended hangings in his book and often says he talked with onlookers at hangings. But Dimsdale himself admits he might have erred:

If in any case his readers are misinformed, it is because he has been himself deceived (by those who gave him information for his book). As a literary production

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17Ibid.

he will be rejoiced to receive the entire silence of critics as his best reward. He knows full well what criticism it deserves, and is only anxious to escape unnoticed. And now, throwing down his pencil, he heaves a sigh of relief, thankfully murmuring, "Well, it is done at last."\textsuperscript{19}

Dimsdale, of course, could have plagiarized from \textit{Banditti}, but by comparing the two books it is easy to see that if he did copy, it was done to a small extent.

Dimsdale’s best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, was the official prosecutor of the road agents. If Dimsdale was courting his future wife before he wrote the book, he may have received material for it from her. She was "living at Virginia during the reign of the vigilantes . . . and . . . an eye witness to many of the wild scenes daily occurring."\textsuperscript{20}

Some road agents got a semblance of a trial before they were executed, and one in Helena was covered by "a special reporter of the \textit{Montana Post}.

The trial, conducted outdoors, was reported verbatim except for a brief moment when the wind blew out the reporter's candle.\textsuperscript{21}

In February, 1864, the Montana Vigilance Committee comprised more than 1,000 members and its influence extended throughout the territory.\textsuperscript{22} Many persons supported the vigilantes with money for lengthy treks across Montana in search of road agents. Territorial

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{19}]\textit{Montana Post}, March 24, 1866, p. 4.
  \item[\textsuperscript{20}]\textit{New North-West}, Aug. 29, 1874, p. 3.
  \item[\textsuperscript{21}]\textit{Montana Post}, Feb. 24, 1866, p. 4.
  \item[\textsuperscript{22}]Bancroft, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 688.
\end{itemize}
sheriffs and marshals, such as X. Biedler, John Fetherstun and Neil Howie, were vigilantes. The organization was filled with "men of education, men of breeding men who were accustomed to careful deliberation before deciding on a course of action." Even the mayor of Virginia City, Paris S. Pfouts, was a vigilante. Dimsdale likely was not a vigilante. Henry Blake, the man who succeeded him as editor of the Post, was elected a vigilante in 1866. Blake corrected the proof of Dimsdale's book before it went to the printers in late 1866.

Despite the fact the vigilantes often operated in daylight in front of curious crowds, not everyone knew who the actual members were. The vigilantes warned Dimsdale not to print their names and the editor complied—he could do little else. He does mention one member of the organization, a Mr. Biedler, but he refers to him only by his nickname, "X."

For years the identities of the members were kept secret, and even N. P. Langford, who wrote his book 25 years after the hangings took place, names just a few.

It's possible certain men threatened Dimsdale for urging the vigilantes to drive the road agents out of the territory. Dimsdale was a Mason, and legend says no member of the Masons ever was harmed


by the road agents because the Masons were the only group strong enough to oppose them. 25  

N. P. Langford writes that of 102 persons murdered by Henry Plummer's gang, not one was a Mason. 26 Dimsdale was grand orator of the Masons in Virginia City and was active in the organization.  

The Vigilantes of Montana was offered for sale on Nov. 10, 1866. 27 One week later the Post reported the first printing of 5,000 copies was nearly sold and "the call continues to be great." 28 The second printing, however, did not come off the presses until 1882. 29 D. W. Tilton & Co. published both editions, and one woman pioneer reported the "publishers in Virginia City made a fortune" off the book. 30  

When The Vigilantes of Montana appeared earlier in serial form in the Post, "it struck the popular fancy, and subscriptions came rolling in at an astonishing rate." The book "was thought by the women

26 Langford, op. cit., p. 142.  
27 Montana Post, Nov. 10, 1866, p. 4.  
28 Montana Post, Nov. 17, 1866, p. 5.  
30 Anaconda Standard, July 9, 1893, p. 3. The book is now in its fourteenth printing, and copies of the 1963 edition are available from the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Okla., for the original price of $2. Since the publishers reissued the book in 1953, they have sold 15,000 to 20,000 copies of The Vigilantes of Montana.
of the period, the Victorian, to be rather shocking." That probably surprised Dimsdale because he was somewhat prudish on various occasions.

The men thought differently about the book. When Mark Twain read it, he was ecstatic with praise. He called it "a bloodthirstily interesting little Montana book" and included a chapter of *The Vigilantes of Montana* in his book, *Roughing It.*

Twain's comments are worth repeating:

Mr. Dimsdale's chapter on Joseph Slade is well worth reading, as a specimen of how the people of the frontier deal with criminals when the courts of law prove inefficient. Mr. Dimsdale makes two remarks about Slade, both of which are accurately descriptive, and one of which is exceedingly picturesque: "Those who saw him in his natural state only, would pronounce him to be a kind husband, a most hospitable host, and a courteous gentleman; on the contrary, those who met him when maddened with liquor and surrounded by a gang of armed roughs, would pronounce him a fiend incarnate." and this: "From Fort Kearney, west, he was feared a great deal more than the Almighty." For compactness, simplicity, and vigor of expression, I will back that sentence against anything in literature.

Twain once had met Slade and dined with him.

Charles Dickens is reported to have said, "This is the most interesting book I ever read in my life."

Some of the Post readers were so pleased with the history of the vigilantes they gave the embarrassed Dimsdale a gun which he described in this fashion:

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33 *Ibid.*, p. 73

34 McMurtrie, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
The revolver is silver plated and gilt on barrel and cylinder, with an ivory handle, on which is beautifully carved in alto-relievo, the American Eagle grasping in its talons the National Shield, and the mythological thunderbolts.  

Dimsdale soon began to learn how "to shoot it off." Residents of the gulch watched with trepidation as he sallied forth waving his latest acquisition. The family cow and the children were kept out of sight when he began practicing with it. The community was somewhat elated when he became "proficient enough in handling the gun to be able to hit an oyster can at ten steps once in ten times."  

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35 Montana Post, Oct. 7, 1865, p. 3.  
36 Baker, op. cit., p. 543.
While Dimsdale's history of the vigilantes was appearing serially in the Post, the vigilantes continued to ride. On March 2, 1866, they hanged their 33rd person since their reign of power began Aug. 26, 1862, with the hanging of C. W. Spilman. The March execution was "the last case of capital punishment in Montana in which the Vigilantes organization can be said to have participated."\(^1\)

Some historians divide the period of vigilante activity and conclude the first half, up to the fall of 1864, was justified because the vigilantes represented the only law in the territory. But they condemn the organization after the fall of 1864, asserting Montana had a system of efficient legal machinery then and the vigilantes should have disbanded. And they claim the press helped make that period of extra-legal hanging possible by supporting the vigilantes.

The purpose of this chapter is to determine if Dimsdale was guilty of using the Post to prolong the period of midnight executions when Montana supposedly had an efficient court system.

One student of early Montana journalism writes:

> With the coming of the newspaper to the Montana frontier, however, we have a definite measure of public opinion in regard to the vigilance movement . . . . T. J. Dimsdale . . . published the previous year's vigilante hangings serially in twenty-nine

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issues of the Montana Post, Aug. 26, 1865 to March 24, 1866. The serial story was immediately republished in book form and had wide circulation during the ten year period [1864-1873] of unofficial and sporadic vigilante activity.

It is difficult to estimate the probable effect of what Mark Twain called "a blood thirstily interesting little Montana book." Certainly it romanticized if it did not actually perpetuate the extra-legal activity which the coming of the courts presumably made no longer necessary.\(^2\)

The charge about Dimsdale romanticizing history is valid, but it is an unfortunate habit shared by numerous pioneer writers. He glorifies the vigilantes as if they could do no wrong because he saw their goal as clear-cut and justified. But few quarrel with Dimsdale's accuracy because he probably gave the nation its best account of vigilante activity in Montana in the 1860s. He was caught up in the spirit of the time—he was a part of the mass of Montanans who strongly backed the vigilantes before the fall of 1864. He reflected their enthusiasm and admiration for the organization's acts and if one of them had written the book instead of Dimsdale, he probably would have praised them in equal terms.

What role did Dimsdale and the Post play after the courts came to Montana in December, 1864? And how efficient were those courts? In his charge to the grand jury on Dec. 5, 1864, Chief Justice Hezekiah Hosmer thanked the vigilantes for being the law of the land when none other existed but added:

They are no longer necessary. No law-abiding citizen wishes their continuance. They should at

once and forever be abandoned. Courts of law and equity
---such courts as our government and people, everywhere,
throughout our great republic recognize as authority, and
from this day forth, established in this Territory, clothed
with ample power to investigate and punish all offences
against the peace and good order of society. Let us then
erect no more impromptu scaffolds. Let us inflict no more
midnight executions. Let us give to every man, how aggravated
soever his crime, the full benefit of the freeman's right--
an impartial trial by jury . . . the very first element in
such a warfare against crime must be the general recognition
of courts of law . . . no resort to any other power is
justifiable . . .

Dimsdale commented on Hosmer's statement in the same issue,
saying he was thankful the administration of justice was entrusted to
a man as capable as Judge Hosmer. As far as the future of the
vigilantes was concerned, he had mixed feelings:

So far as the offences of murder and robbery are
cconcerned, we very much doubt whether the law itself will
afford a more absolute protection; but there are other
infractions of right that cannot be settled by the tree and
cord, and for these, the visitations of authorized justice
are the only true remedy . . . . Our quondam judges are
not dead but resting from their labors. Let not villany
dare to resist the law.\(^3\)

Dimsdale seemed to be saying that the courts might be able
to handle minor cases, but he doubted if murderers and robbers would
get their just due before the judges.

Before formal law came to Montana, "the ordinary way of
treating malefactors in a mining camp was to convene all the miners
of the district and to call for a verdict by all."\(^5\) At other times,

\(^3^\)Montana Post, Dec. 10, 1864, p. 1.

\(^4^\)Ibid., p. 2.

\(^5^\)J. W. Smurr, "Afterthoughts on the Vigilantes," Montana,
The Magazine of Western History, VIII (Spring, 1958), p. 11.
impromptu judges were selected and juries were chosen. Dimsdale writes that this was not the ideal way to mete out justice:

> During the trial the roughs would swagger into the space allotted for the judge and jury, giving utterance to clearly-understood threats, such as, "I'd like to see the G--d d--d jury that would dare to hang Charley Reeves or Bill Moore," etc., etc., which doubtless had fully as much weight with the jury as the evidence had.6

Women often attended the trials and hangings. Sometimes before an execution they would set up such a wail and cry and ask that mercy be shown that the miners relented and gave the man another chance. The miners often grew apathetic when lengthy trials dragged on and went back to their diggings, leaving the solid core of road agents to voice their loud disapproval if a verdict of guilty were found.

Dimsdale, therefore, preached a philosophy of stringing up suspected criminals before they had a miner's trial. On Sept. 24, 1864, he reported the impromptu hanging of John Dolan, praising the town of Nevada City for conducting the proceedings "with a solemnity and decency not usually seen in older communities."7 Two weeks later the Post reported a man named Rawley had been the featured attraction at a midnight necktie party. Dimsdale, or perhaps another reporter who was writing the "Locals" while Dimsdale still was getting acquainted with his newspaper duties, complimented

> our usually quiet and steady neighbors of Bannack ... for doing an act of importance to the welfare of their community. An evidence of this fact was given last

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6Montana Post, Sept. 16, 1865, p. 4.
7Montana Post, Sept. 24, 1864, p. 2.
Monday morning, by discovering that during the night previous, some person, or persons, or rather an organization, who have always done thing of that character justly and equitably, had executed a man named Rawley for whom they had been waiting and watching for the past six months.

Dimsdale has unbounded admiration, perhaps too much, for the actions of the vigilantes. In the stories about the hanging of Dolan and Rawley, he failed to describe specifically the crimes of the guilty men. His blind faith in the vigilantes prompted him to endorse their actions 100 per cent. For reasons unknown, he seemingly failed to dig into the facts in his news stories to ascertain a man's guilt or innocence. Or, if he did, he didn't offer such depth reports to his readers.

After formal law came to Montana in December, 1864, Dimsdale often implied that the courts were too lenient with road agents. Perhaps he was right because "there was no conviction of a capital offense in the courts" in the early years of the territory.

One historian of the period writes:

More than 20 persons tried for murder during the term of the first set of district judges were acquitted, the juries being drawn from the same people who had sustained the vigilance committee. It cannot much be wondered that there existed dissatisfaction with the courts, though they were not responsible for defective statutes, or that lynch-law so often hastened to remove criminals from their jurisdiction. The cause lay even deeper than I have intimated, in the great infusion of a reckless element, which was strengthened by still

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8 *Montana Post*, Nov. 5, 1864, p. 3.

larger numbers of careless and tolerant persons, whose experience of the freedom of the frontier had made them more callous to the horrors of violated law, even when it brought them face to face with sudden death.\textsuperscript{10}

In the first case tried in a Montana court, a prominent vigilante was asked to serve on the jury. When asked if he opposed the death penalty, he replied, "In all cases where it is not done by a Vigilance Committee."\textsuperscript{11} That was the sentiment of many residents of the gulch, and it was kept alive by Dimsdale's editorials and his glorification of the vigilantes in news stories of extra-legal hangings.

Dimsdale, then, was not alone in his belief that the vigilantes still had a role to play after formal law came to Montana. Two of the three associate judges in the territory concurred with him in statements they made in July, 1865. One said:

\begin{quote}
I am content to let the Vigilantes go on, for the present; they can attend to this branch of jurisprudence cheaper, quicker and better than it can be done by the courts--besides, we have no secure jails in which to confine criminals.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

The second judge agreed:

\begin{quote}
If you attempt to try one of those "road agents" in the courts, his comrades will get him clear, or if he should be convicted, the lives of the witnesses who testify against him, and of the judge who sentences him will not be worth the shoes they wear.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{11}Hosmer, \textit{loc. cit.}


\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.
The third jurist, Judge Lyman Munson, disagreed in a statement before his court in Helena a month later:

However satisfactory an excuse might hitherto have been for secret trials, and midnight executions, no such necessity longer existed, and that all such proceedings must now be left to the courts.\textsuperscript{14}

With two of the three associate justices supporting vigilante justice, Dimsdale probably felt more justified in taking his editorial stand behind the vigilantes.

When a man named "Jake Seachrist, alias Jake Silvers," was strung up in the Helena area in the summer of 1865, the \textit{Post} commented: "Who hanged him, we know not; but that he deserved his doom we feel sure. Many a thrilling tale of just and retributive vengeance is recorded in the archives of the vigilantes."\textsuperscript{15}

When an unknown assailant tried to attack his best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, a month later, Dimsdale demanded a "hempen solution" for the man if he were caught.\textsuperscript{16}

On Sept. 23, 1865, Dimsdale's correspondent in Helena reported:

On Monday morning, the beams of the rising sun fell upon the stiffened corpse of Tommy Cooke, a thief, swinging in the morning breeze, with the fatal token of the vengeance of the Vigilantes around his neck, and bearing a label the simple legend, "Pickpocket." A number of robberies were noticed in our last issue, and, through the praiseworthy exertions of Deputy Marshal "Quill" Lawrence, the perpetrator was traced up, arrested and held for trial. A court that no finessing could deceive had determined the question of his

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Montana Post}, Aug. 5, 1865, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Montana Post}, Sept. 9, 1865, p. 3.
fate. He was taken from the custody of his captors, and the next time that he was seen, his career of crime had met with an appropriate termination.  

In that same issue, the Vigilance Committee wrote a letter to the Post, saying it was going "to take matters into their own hands" because "the power of the civil authorities, though exerted to its full extent, is frequently insufficient to prevent" further crimes.

A week later, Dimsdale applauded the hanging of two road agents, John Morgan and John Jackson, who had been executed by vigilantes near Virginia City. He approved of the executions saying "several instances of theft and horse stealing were mentioned by parties in the crowd and the police." He reported three more hangings in the next week and commented that justice had been fairly dispensed in all instances.

When a man Dimsdale described as "Waterman, the Road Agent" was sentenced to 13 years in the penitentiary for robbing a stage in Nevada, he editorialized that Waterman had gotten off too easily:

It seems funny that a miscreant who stands prepared to commit murder, and did, with violence rob on the highway, should be thus treated. The sentence is in fact that the state of Nevada do pay his board and clothing for thirteen years. We believe in the rope, for such men. It punishes the criminal, and does not punish the community.

That harsh, cruel attitude seems inhumane to readers today who are not familiar with the situation in Montana in 1865 and 1866.

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17 *Montana Post*, Sept. 23, 1865, p. 3.
18 Ibid.
19 *Montana Post*, Sept. 30, 1865, p. 3.
Dimsdale was advocating violence and stern measures at a time when there was no other apparent course to follow. Two of the three territorial judges had advocated the same course of action just two months before. Perhaps the atmosphere of pro-vigilante sentiment expressed in the Post increased their activity and prolonged it. But the two judges themselves had said it should be prolonged. Perhaps there were some hasty, unwarranted hangings because of the militant attitude of the Post. The answer probably can never be determined, because the few other newspapers publishing in Montana in 1865 and 1866 all supported the vigilantes and justified their methods.\(^2\)

Pioneers had little or nothing to say about the hangings in their diaries and reminiscences. Other vigilante historians note few or no hasty and uncalled for hangings.

Vigilante activity subsided in the early months of 1866 with one exception. In December, 1865, James B. Daniels shot a man during a quarrel over a card game and promptly was placed in custody of United States Marshal Neil Howie.\(^2\)

After a formal trial, Daniels was found guilty of manslaughter. While he was in jail, 32 Alder Gulch residents petitioned Acting Governor Thomas F. Meagher to pardon Daniels. Meagher promptly reprieved the man, although in effect it was a pardon because Meagher ordered Daniels released from custody. Some say Meagher signed the reprieve while drunk. Judge Munson ordered Daniels rearrested because Meagher did not

\(^2\)Housman, op. cit., p. 49.

\(^2\)Montana Post, Dec. 9, 1865, p. 3.
have the legal power to pardon a convicted criminal. Meanwhile, Daniels boasted he was going to "take care" of some witnesses who had testified against him. A short while later the vigilantes hanged him.23

Dimsdale bitterly criticized the action of Meagher and said Daniels was hanged "by the vigilantes for his crimes, and not for his pardon." Dimsdale pointed out the man had committed a string of offences in other states and communities and deserved to die.24 That was the same pattern of reasoning he had followed in other hangings. If a man were hanged for a minor crime, Dimsdale would trace the man's history, listing earlier crimes and concluding the hanging was justified.

Dimsdale supported other isolated hangings by vigilantes in the early part of 1866, but by the middle of the year the "courts were in operation and all the machinery of organized government was functioning normally and efficiently."25

By the spring of 1867, the vigilantes had outlived their usefulness, according to local sentiment, and their activities ceased.26

In August, 1866, Dimsdale culled from the Idaho City World a story that said the vigilantes had threatened to hang Governor Meagher

23Montana Post, March 31, 1866, p. 2.
24Ibid.
because he had pardoned Daniels. Dimsdale didn't deny the vigilantes had threatened Meagher but said "he was as free to come and to go through this Territory as any man, and personal violence to him is ridiculous to think of."27

Dimsdale began an editorial battle with the World and the Owyhee Avalanche, two Idaho newspapers that criticized him because he had said many Montana road agents emigrated from Idaho where criminals ruled and justice quailed. The World charged Dimsdale had lied when he said one Idaho county had a record of 60 homicides without a conviction.28 According to one Northwest historian, Boise County up to September, 1865, had recorded "some 60 deaths by violence without a single conviction of murder in the first degree."29

Dimsdale saw his mission as dispelling in the minds of those outside Montana the belief the territory was a reckless, lawless land. He thought outsiders had a bad impression of Montanans because so many hangings took place without the sanction of the law. He probably was right. By explaining circumstances of the executions, by describing the state of law in Montana during the period and by depicting the reckless element in the territory, he probably cleared up the distorted picture of Montana justice held by some outside the territory.

27Montana Post, Aug. 18, 1866, p. 2.


But by eulogizing the vigilantes and making them appear as if they could do no wrong, he romanticized the movement. He never criticized the organization, and it seems unlikely such a group could exist so long without making mistakes. But Langford and Birney, the two principal vigilante historians besides Dimsdale, made the organization look nearly as flawless in their respective accounts.

How much the editorials and biased news favoring the vigilantes crystalized public opinion cannot be gauged accurately. Certainly the pro-vigilante spirit was strong, even without the Post's vigorous backing of the organization. Perhaps the Post's support of informal justice retarded the growth of formal justice in the territory. But, again, it appears as if Dimsdale and the Post were reflecting the spirit and temper of the time. He was so caught up in the movement that he carried his enthusiasm and admiration for the vigilantes into the columns of the Post and the pages of his book.
CHAPTER X

LOOKING BACK

The longest funeral procession in the brief, four-year history of Virginia City trudged slowly up Cemetery Hill on Sunday, Sept. 23, 1866. Thomas Josiah Dimsdale, the editor of the Montana Post, was being carried to his final resting place.¹

Born in England, he was being buried in frontier Montana. Dimsdale had died the day before of tuberculosis. Pulmonary troubles had plagued him through much of his life. He died, clasped in the arms of his best friend, Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders.²

Illness had forced him out of the editorial "sanctum" during the first week of July, 1866, and into the country where he hoped exercise and a change of diet might improve his health.³ His condition worsened rapidly and, according to the Post, he "lay at death's door." When the extent of his illness became known through the pages of the Post, "every description of assistance had been spontaneously afforded . . . by the large body of friends that the news of his sickness had summoned to his relief."⁴

²Ibid.
³Montana Post, July 7, 1866, p. 5.
⁴Montana Post, July 21, 1866, p. 5.
PHOTOGRAPH 9

Thomas J. Dimsdale's grave, Hillside Cemetery. (Virginia City)
While on his sick bed, he continued writing articles for his newspaper and eventually returned to the editor’s desk in the middle of August, 1866. Fewer than two weeks later, his frail body again weakened and he left the Post, writing his last editorial during the final week of August. Once more he saddled up his horse, said farewell to his friends and rode off into the country. He never returned.

His widow, Annette, was his only living relative in the United States. She later remarried and died in 1874 at age 38.

Dimsdale’s obituary in the Post was surrounded by wide, black column rules. The only other individual accorded the same recognition in the newspaper’s two-year history was President Abraham Lincoln, who had died the year before. Dimsdale’s obituary said in part:

This brief outline of his public and private tasks would be incomplete, if we did not add the testimony of all parties, that they were performed with untiring industry and commanding abilities. His labors upon the Post and exertions to develop the resources of the Territory will be cherished by its inhabitants and perpetuated by the historian. His interest in the press never ceased, and in the intervals when his sufferings relaxed, he composed upon his couch articles for our columns. . . . He brought to the editorial chair a wonderful versatility of talent and ample stores of knowledge, which had been derived from the perusal of a large number of books.

The Masons, whom Dimsdale had served as Grand Orator in Virginia City, eulogized him and said he was a man

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5Montana Post, Aug. 18, 1866, p. 5.
7New North-West, Aug. 29, 1874, p. 3.
8Montana Post, Sept. 29, 1866, p. 4.
favored alike by nature and culture, with a well disciplined mind and a ripe scholarship, he was a wise counsellor, an intelligent lecturer, and a most affable and genial companion. In friendship he was true, and his benevolence was unbounded.9

Other territorial newspapers briefly noted his passing, saying Montana had lost a fine scholar and editor.

But it was business as usual on the day of Dimsdale's funeral. The Post reported one other funeral, two marriages, one prize fight and "two balls at the hurdy-gurdy houses. We could not attend all of them, but the Post was duly represented. If this is not a business town, who can point out one?"10

Several other Western newspapers recorded his passing in words similar to those in the Salt Lake City Daily Union Vedette:

The deceased had many personal and public friends throughout these territories. His manly course as the chief editor of the Post—one of the largest, liveliest and ablest journals of the Great West—will ever endear his memory among the masses of Montana and surroundings. His history of the Vigilantes of Montana stamped him of itself, as a writer of ability and independence. The Post, he placed, long before his death, second only to such papers as the Sacramento Union and the Springfield Republican.11

Such was the high praise for a man who entered journalism with no experience in the field. Did he deserve it or were the words mere perfunctory gestures fabricated in the hour of a man's death?

Certainly Dimsdale was a man who put out a lively newspaper. He didn't shy from controversy—in fact, he seemed to relish it.

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9Ibid.
10Ibid., p. 5.
Public issues found a forum in his newspaper, and he welcomed and encouraged comment on matters of public concern and importance.

He was an energetic, driving man, and perhaps the rigors of being a frontier editor helped sap the energy and life out of him in those two short years. The long, hand-cramping hours spent writing stories, the constant trips up and down Alder Gulch covering the "beat," and the long, irregular hours took their toll of his frail constitution.

But if the outer man was weak, the inner man more than made up for the deficiency in courage, spunk and toughness. He was, according to one Alder Gulch historian,

the man whom the miners unhesitatingly chose, along with J. E. McClurg, to account for the flour they seized in the "flour riots" of '65; the angry man who waged a campaign against the medical quacks in town who were maiming patients because they had no more medical foundation than "ignorance, brass and a doctor's shingle," the unsqueamish man who was tough enough to assist at emergency amputations; the courageous man who chose to stand up and be counted as a friend of the Vigilantes and as a staunch Unionist when it was risky to do so.12

He was a man who had to see for himself. He had the courage to go into the mines to ascertain their true value at a time when many were caving in and killing and maiming miners because of poor shoring. Dimsdale uncovered small incidents that made him a friend of the downtrodden and oppressed—such as the time he shook his editorial finger at the civil powers for booting a magician out of town because he didn't have a license to perform and the city fathers wouldn't sell him one. Or the time he lashed out at the ferry boat operator because

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the man wouldn't take a traveler across a river when the latter had no money. Forced to swim, the man drowned.

A fellow journalist who knew Dimsdale said he was "a fellow of infinite jest." Humor was a tool he used frequently in his editorials. It was a weapon he wielded cleverly to prove his points and make ideas he opposed look silly and worthless. He brought the British pun to the Montana frontier and simple as some of them might have been, they must have brought a smile to a weary miner's face. For instance, he urged laborers to frequent Tom White's bathhouse if they wanted to make a "splash" with their neighbors.

He found humor even in death, telling his readers that the Post charged a small fee to record marriages but if they died, that event would be reported for free in the Post. He said even the "grumblers" on the Post subscription list could find something for themselves in the newspaper. He printed lists of conditions in Alder Gulch worth grumbling about, telling his readers he knew some people were happy only when griping and he and the Post wanted to please as many persons as possible.

His Victorian attitude towards life probably made him appear prissy and prudent to some hardened residents who were not going to stop cussing, gambling, drinking and toting a gun just because a fussy newspaper editor didn't like it. But Dimsdale realized he wasn't going to make perfect citizens out of everyone and often wrote that one of the charms of frontier life was the nearly complete freedom individuals enjoyed--away from the restraints of a more civilized, organized society.
Dimsdale crusaded constantly, however, to bring to Alder Gulch anything or anyone who would act as a civilizing influence. Dimsdale tried to bring a little more class, sophistication and culture to the rugged, lonely lives of the miners. His success was not as great as he had hoped but considering the environment in which he labored, any small gain was regarded as a victory toward raising Montanans into a more civilized sphere.

Because of his roles as editor, educator, church leader and organizer and promoter of cultural activities, he was a central figure in his time. He was a man, who if he wasn't always listened to, was at least trusted and respected by fellow citizens.

One student of frontier journalism has some pithy observations that merit scrutiny:

The picturesque figures that emerge from the general scene of pioneer journalism are interesting, colorful. But they are not great figures. Too much of their energy was given to name-calling, over the political back fence. Sectionalism too often obscured their vision of the general good. And even the gentle Dimsdale, one of the most scholarly of the frontier editors, had to be "one of the boy's" and write the bloody tale of the Vigilantes, whose psychology, however admirable, must have been so unlike his own.\(^{13}\)

Not really. Dimsdale believed consistent law breakers should be punished quickly and severly by whatever means were handy--be it the vigilantes or efficiently functioning courts. It may appear paradoxical to some that he abhored violence yet supported the vigilantes. But the

violence Dimsdale opposed was that of the road agents, and the best means to eradicate them quickly was with vigilante tactics.

Perhaps some vigilantes hated violence but felt conscience-bound to take the law into their own hands. Dimsdale himself might have ridden with the vigilantes had his physical condition permitted him to make the rigorous treks in search of road agents.

Dimsdale was not a frontier editor who wasted his energy "name-calling, over the political back fence." True, he might label a strong secessionist who was running for office during the Civil War a "traitor" or "pseudo Democrat." But after the war ended in 1865, he stressed political issues, not personalities.

The frontier editor has been criticized for visualizing no more than "his camp, his town, his side of the mountains." Dimsdale consistently editorialized on the social and economic challenges and opportunities of the entire territory—he saw his paper as more than just a mining journal. His prediction the territory would become an excellent lumbering and agriculture state has been borne out.

Many historians wrongly convey the impression Dimsdale was a shy, retiring man. He was caught up in the exciting whirl of life in Virginia City and had to be somewhat of an extrovert to engage in as many activities as he did. And he was a popular man, asked to speak at political meetings, rallies, literary club meetings, dances and church gatherings. If he were shy, it didn't show when he addressed the audience.

\[1^{4}\text{Ibid.}\]
Dimsdale's major journalistic flaw was slanting his news coverage of vigilante activities to create a favorable picture of the organization. That strong pro-vigilante slant permeates his editorials and his book. Moreover, wide readership of the book has helped prolong the romantic atmosphere that surrounds the history of the organization. Dimsdale romanticized history and in doing so started a trend followed by the two other major vigilante historians, N. P. Langford and Hoffman Birney.

But Dimsdale was the only person to write a contemporary account of their activities. The two other authors wrote their histories of the vigilantes years after the events took place.

How many facts, if any, Dimsdale suppressed to make the vigilantes look good will never be known.

Dimsdale acted honestly in his attempts to motivate people to come to Virginia City and Montana. While waxing optimistic, perhaps too much at times, about the opportunities in Montana, he was careful to temper that attitude with stories depicting how hard life was in Montana for many people, especially the miners. He left no doubt in the gold-hungry eyes of many Easterners that no one became rich at mining in Montana unless he worked hard, long and often in deplorable conditions.

Dimsdale was an editor with a sense of history. His writing in the Montana Post captured the spirit and flavor of Montana in its first two years of territorial existence. It was a period of Montana history blazoned with glitter and swank, and the territory had a journalist who wrote descriptively and scholarly. He held up a mirror to society, then perceptively described what it reflected.
He deserves to be remembered as Montana's first spirited, outspoken newspaper editor instead of merely as the author of that "bloodthirstily interesting little Montana book," The Vigilantes of Montana.
APPENDIX

The five editorials of Thomas J. Dimsdale reprinted here were selected to give the reader a better understanding of his writing and personality. They were not his best editorials or his worst. They constitute a representative sampling of his work. It is hoped that by analyzing the editorials from the standpoints of style and content, the reader will become better acquainted with Dimsdale as an editor and an individual.
WHY I CANNOT VOTE THE DEMOCRATIC TICKET

First—Because I am a Union man and the secessionists vote the Democratic ticket, so there can be no Union about it, or they would sleep in the other bed.

Second—Because Fernando Wood, the leader of the Democrats, brought in a bill supported by his party, to take away the miner's property, and I want to secure it to them with a good title.

Third—Because I cannot understand how a peace democrat, (if honest) can vote for McClellan, who is for war. There is inconsistency and falsehood on the face of it.

Fourth—Because the Democratic canvassers maintain their entire loyalty and devotion to the Union cause, when asking a loyal man's vote, and tell a secessionist that they are Jeff's men, but to keep it dark.

Fifth—Because I am in favor of free speech, free press, and free schools, and free speech is only an introduction to a coat of tar and feathers, where the Democratic leaders learned their politics.

Sixth—Because I hold a Copperhead to be the meanest politician on the face of the earth, and all the Copperheads vote the Democratic ticket.

Seventh—Because peace offered by the North means "let the South go," and then I must pay for what the South will have to pay if the war goes on.

Eighth—Because I cannot, if I so vote, ever look a widow or orphan in the face after bringing the father or the husband to death, and then surrendering all that he had won. I should feel like a murderer.

Ninth—Because the South declares that peace, with Union, is impossible—and I will not insult victors by proclaiming them vanquished, and their beaten foe conquerors.

Tenth—Because I want no hungry politicians in office. I want just men, and the Democrat candidates look to the fleece and not the flock.

Eleventh—Because I go for the Union, and prefer joining men whose creed and actions agree, and the first measure of a Democrat would be to strike some twelve or thirteen stars from the Union flag.

Twelfth—Because to send to Washington a delegate, holding the principles of the Chicago Convention amalgamated with the Richmond Virus is an insult to the government, treason to my country, and treason against God and my own soul. Therefore as I can't vote for it, by the shade of Washington, I'll vote against it, and please God, early in the morning.

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1 Editorial in the Montana Post, October 22, 1864.
Standing on a rocky cliff, against which the foaming breakers spend their strength in vain, it has been our lot to see a gallant ship striving to escape the horrors of a lee shore and an iron-bound coast. Tack after tack has brought her, tempest tossed yet still safe, to the last outstretching headland, but here a squall strikes her, and like the foam, away she scuds, rushing apparently into the very jaws of destruction. As she nears the breakers, the storm ceases for a moment and then with renewed fury bursts upon the gallant bark. The shaking sail tells the old seaman in command that the wind has shifted a point, and his eye lightens as he grasps his trumpet. There is no room to wear; and to tack would be to fore-reach into the embrace of death. His quick eye sees all at a glance. "Stand by to clubhaul the ship! Clear away the best bower!" Each man executes his task. A moment of suspense, and again the trumpet roars, "Stand by to let go the anchor! Unshackle at fifty fathoms!" "Aye! Aye!" from the seamen. Another moment and "Let go! Stand by to slip the cable," rings like a clarion on the storm-blast. The anchor flashes in the wave. The cable tautens on the weather bow. There is a momentary lull, and the good ship swings round on the other tack. The cable is slipped, and the helm and sails shifted. A moment of suspense, as she chreens till her yards dip in the foaming surges, and then, as she recovers, gathers way and heads for the offing. "She rights!" "We're off the shore!" flies to the lips of the thankful crew, and many a murmured "Thank God" and many a warm pressure of the hand, among the faithful mariners, testifies that the danger is over and the ship saved.

It is so now. Borne on the rough waves of rebellion; the storm of sedition around her; the breakers of anarchy, and the stern and gloom rock of dissolution ahead, the ship of state arrived at the crisis of her eventful voyage. The anchor of Hope was the loyalty of Union men; the cable was love of country; the holding ground, the memories of the past, clinging most closely to the popular ear when most assailed, Old Abe was the captain. The good ship Union has her head seaward, and thank God, we're saved, and off shore.

Traitors may scowl, and cowards sigh, because they went with the multitude to do evil; but too late. Thousands would give their last dollar, if they could but recall the fatal ballat that has made them aliens in the land of their birth. They pronounced against her; they argued, bribed, besought, intimidated, bushwhacked, threatened insurrection, and tried to burn the cities of their own native land, when they could not succeed in wrenching from her the confession of shame and defeat and the title to half her broad domain—and-failed!

What a mine of misery and eternal remorse is in the word! To fail in a good cause is honorable, but basely to attempt, and then meanly to fail, after all the bragadocio of the last few weeks; rocks and mountains hide us from the eyes of men, and the ever abiding infamy of inseperable

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2Editorial in the Montana Post, November 19, 1864.
association with Vallandigham, Jefferson Davis, Wood, and the rest of the tribe of parasites, who, knowing that dregs can only rise by abullition or putrefaction, sought their elevation by the rottenness of corruption, and the distempered ferment of useless faction—failed!
So many erroneous impressions are afloat on the subject, that we feel it our duty to put the matter before the public, in its true light. Viewed in the abstract, all enterprises of a commercial nature are speculative; for every man buys with the hope at an advance on cost, sufficient, at least, to repay him for the trouble, time and money expended in the pursuit of his business. No one can gainsay the fact that a man is justified in seeking a fair remuneration for his labor, but there are cases in which no sound moralist or philanthropist can assert the righteousness of the means employed to secure wealth, in a hurry. When speculators, for instance combine to raise the price of necessaries by artificial means, such as buying up small stocks for the purpose of monopolizing the traffic, and thereby producing want and misery among the poor, such speculations cannot be regarded as just, though they may be, and really are, legal. Speculation should not be indulged in without any restraint in articles of food; because the many suffer for the good of the few, which principle, however aristocratic, is an open war with democratic institutions and the rights of mankind. "He that withholdeth the corn, the people shall curse him, but blessings shall be upon the head of him that selleth it." Without going into the question of the authority of the Scriptures, the equity and truth of this maxim is apparent, and he must be a bad man who will persist in a course of action which, while it ensures personal advantages, necessitates the injury and evokes the maledictions of the suffering poor. Speculation in articles of luxury is not liable to this structure. No one is really injured by the absence of superfluities, and it is a mere matter of election, whether or not the price asked be given. Transactions of this kind involve no wrong to the masses, no sacrifice of pure and upright feeling, and are therefore not censurable.

It is all very well to say that a man may do as he likes with his own; but there are limitations to the applications of this rule. A man's life is his own as much as his property; and yet, thousands have been branded with cowardice and infamy for refusing to risk life and limb, for the rescue of the helpless, where no reward but a self-approving conscience awaited the venture and rewarded the peril. The nation rings with acclamations awarded to those who battle for their country as volunteers, and instinct teaches us that selfish aggrandizement is not the one end of man's existence, nor even a laudable one. It is a small mind that is bound up in a buckskin purse, and no passion is so lowering and destructive as avarice. If this grovelling sentiment once obtains the mastery of a man's mind, he becomes deaf to the calls of humanity and honor. But why need we describe a miser or an extortioner. All men join in excereration of such a character. Ordinary speculation is a benefit to the community; but a public wrong of no small magnitude is

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3Editorial in the Montana Post, April 8, 1865.
wrought when wealth is sought by capitalists, at the expense of the public weal. Enterprise has made this country; but it is the absence of monopoly and favoritism, combined with the application of the principle of fair play to all and help for the poor, which so worthily distinguishes the United States among the nations of the earth.
A poor, demented, no-account, from the city of Virginia, Nevada, named E. H. Morton, has been wandering through this Territory, and belches forth his sufferings in the Virginia Union of the 8th ult. He can't find gulches like those in California. Jews and Missourians, he says, rule the country, and he is generally miserable and wants to go home to Snowland. There is another thing he can't see, and that is, what a foolish creature he must be to write such nonsense about Montana. A country with some fifty good gulches already discovered, and many thousands of quartz leads; countless acres of pasture, and farms by the hundred, of the richest kind, affords this poor bib and tucker waif of fortune nothing to see, and no foothold for his stake. If they have any more of the breed about Virginia, they ought to keep them at home. They do look so silly among men. It was not by the exertions of boo-hoo tenderfeet of the Morton style, that Nevada became a state; but he is not the first man that has pleaded, that he never had anything, in order to prove that he never was anything. If he stays long enough, the people ought to subscribe a wooden spoon for him. We suppose he represents the Virginia break-downs. If some of the Missourians he talks about happen to meet him, he will learn to fear them, if he don't love them.

The insult to the Jews proves, merely, that Morton was born out of due time. He evidently belongs to the dark ages. The idea of speaking insultingly of men because they trace an unbroken descent from the kindred of David, Solomon, Issiah, Josephus, and Jesus Christ, and to whom the world is indebted for the Old Testament, and, in modern times, for the true principles of finance, shows "invincible ignorance" of the toughest kind. What there is objectionable in the character of many of the Hebrew race, is the result of the persecutions of the big and little Mortons of times gone by. If Morton were to stand near Lionel Rothschild, he would look like a cracker besides a bridecake. The men of Missouri can afford to smile at Morton. The price of St. Louis flour won't fall much on account of his strictures. If he were only half as good a man as any one of scores of Missourians in this Territory, he would have money enough to keep up his spirits, and sense enough to keep silent when he lacks information. Wholesale denunciations mark a weak mind. How would the energetic citizens of Nevada like to be called Morton?

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^Editorial in the Montana Post, August 5, 1865.
As the number of immigrants to Montana is already great, and is yet only the indication of what may be certainly expected to arrive within a few months, we consider it our duty to offer a few words of advice to our new and intended fellow-citizens, many of whom will see a mountain country for the first time, and find that they are in a locality with social laws and usages, in many respects, widely dissimilar from those of the districts, the customs of which they have hitherto been familiar with. Under these circumstances, many of the tenderfoot or helpless class sit down despondingly, and wish they had never left the 75 cents or $1 per diem, of the primitive Egypt; and others, casting a few wild looks around, incontinently start back again, filling the ears of pilgrims with doleful prognostications of failure, as they make for their home with a speed only lessened by fatigue and diminished resources, as they approach the Jordan which they so eagerly crossed on their previous wild goose chase.

There are many however of stouter heart, who still waste a great deal of valuable time, get down in spirits, and out of money, from sheer lack of the knowledge how to proceed. The most common error is to suppose that a man can get just what he left behind, at marvellously increased rates of wages. Some lucky ones do so; but out of twenty who look for this, nineteen obtain employment of a kind totally different from that which they expected. We have seen preachers turned into prospectors and blacksmiths, doctors hauling cordwood, dentists farming, milliners making butter on a ranche, tailors cutting shingles, and clergymen's most prized relatives tending bar. All of them were doing well. A man must be ready for a turn at anything that will make money honorably, no matter whether it be currying mules, peddling newspapers, driving team, or digging in the mines. Strong armed men have always a berth waiting them in the mines, on ranches, or in any one of a thousand employments, all well paid. Our advice is that of the Irishman to his son when going to his first fight, while his hair was being cut short for the purpose of his friends getting more readily at the anticipated cuts in his cranium: "Father," said Dennis, "this is my first fight; what shall I do?" "Whenever you see a head, my boy, hit it," said his father. That is mountain style. Carry water, anywhere where a chance offers; do anything for your board only, if necessary, and, if there is any vim or use in you, you will be able to make a character, and obtain employment more suited to your antecedents than that which you first undertook. Conduct like this will command success; but, in the mountains, you must go to the work, for the work will not come to you.

Farmers with a little capital can take up a ranche at once, if they can find one unoccupied, by merely staking and recording it;

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5Editorial in the Montana Post, May 19, 1866.
holding possession by actual work and residence thereon, against all comers. An easier way is to go shares with another man, he finding seed and you labor.

Good mechanics can always do well at their trade, if it be a useful one. Sobriety and morality are, in this Territory, of more value than gold; for the possessors of these virtues must and will succeed while those without them will almost certainly fail. Females who can use their hands smartly, are sure of immediate employment at high wages, and a good character will insure not only magnificent pay, but a deferential treatment and a kind attention, before only read of in novels.

The individuals we never want to see are those who think the world owes them a living, in idleness. Shame and ruin is the portion of females of this class, and hopeless penury and bummerism is the lot of the males. A man's father is not inquired about in Montana; it is his father's son that folks are anxious about, and it makes no difference whether the respected parent was Tom Sawyer's uncle or the Earl of Boobyfield, so long as the son is a good man. Lose no time in making selection of honorable labor; but, in mountain phrase, "pitch in." If you are not prepared for this style of business, stay at home. The pig and the Indian are the only autocrats of the mines, and they are not much respected, though they do nothing but eat, grunt and sleep. Avoid style; go in for a fortune, in your shirt sleeves, and you will make money and a home worth having, as surely as you cross the plains.

With these remarks we invite all good men and women to the mountains, and beg to inform the softshells and the die-easys that their room is of more value than their company. Ask any mountaineer whether our advice is sound, and he will furnish his answer in two words: "Y-o-u bet!"
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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A. BOOKS


A scholarly presentation of the history of the area including a compilation of public documents, newspaper articles and papers of early pioneers.

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A well-researched mass of information on formal and informal justice in the early West.


First published in 1865, this contemporary account of vigilante activity in Montana and Idaho is incomplete and contains numerous factual errors.


A thoroughly researched and polished history of Alder Gulch in the 1860s. It is probably the most extensive history of the area.


Although written 65 years after the vigilantes reigned, Birney's history is valuable and utilizes early manuscripts and interviews with pioneers. The author draws heavily from the vigilante histories of N. P. Langford and Thomas Dimsdale.


These works in 10 volumes contain articles written by early settlers and journals describing the work of frontier editors in Montana.

An engrossing story of life in the early West as seen through the experiences and anecdotes of journalist Clemens.


A collection of tales from Montana ghost towns. Interesting but not generally useful.


Originally published in 1866 as the first book in Montana, Dimsdale’s history is a contemporary, complete account of vigilante activity. It is the best history of the vigilantes but is biased in favor of the organization.


Heard lists old books still in existence and how much they are worth today.


Howard uses selected incidents from Montana history to prove his thesis that the state’s natural resources have been ruthlessly exploited. He presents a "different" historical view of Montana.


Written in 1890, this is the most complete history of the vigilantes of the 1860s. Langford was in the center of vigilante activity and writes sympathetically about the group.


A complete, researched bibliography of books, pamphlets and broadsides printed in Montana between 1864 and 1880.


This extensive state history totals three volumes, two containing biographies of early pioneers. A general, detailed and documented Montana history.

This three volume Montana history includes two volumes of biographies of early pioneers. In describing Montana in the 1860s, he draws heavily from Dimsdale's book.


A main character in the early history of Montana, Stuart recounts significant events shaping the state. He kept a daily diary, and the two volumes of his work are accurate and authentic because of that fact.


A three volume state history including possibly the best account of Montana in the 20th century.


Tuttle, an early Montana church leader, describes the state of religion in Montana in the 1860s.


This book, containing brief histories of Western ghost towns and historical sites, is useful to the traveler but not to the researcher.

B. PERIODICALS


An excellent history of the rise of Montana territorial journalism. Baker includes sketches of early pioneer journalists he knew.


Housman points out how Montana newspapers favorably treated the vigilante movement in the 1860s. The article contains some factual errors.

Miss Johnson proves in convincing fashion that the Montana Post was Montana's first newspaper.


An authentic picture of life in Montana in 1866, as described by Langford in a letter to James Wicks Taylor, a Treasury Department official in Washington, D. C.


Manner, the first printer to work for the Montana Post, writes a sketchy article describing life in Montana in the 1860s.


A descriptive account of how life in Montana appeared to a visitor in 1865.


The pungent memoirs of Henry N. Blake, second editor of the Montana Post and a capable lawyer and jurist in Montana, are included in this biography. The article contains a valuable account of political life in territorial Montana.


A convincing essay depicting some of the bad aspects of the vigilance movement in Montana and how vigilante historians Dimsdale and Langford were unfair in their excessive praise of the organization.


This colorful, complete account of the activities of Daniel Tuttle, Montana's first Episcopal bishop, gives an excellent picture of the 1860s and 1870s in Montana as seen by a clergyman.
C. UNPUBLISHED SOURCES


A sketchy diary, written by a miner and useful primarily for illustrating the simple life of the early Montana miner.


Housman's work is probably the most complete study of the Montana territorial press. It is valuable because it goes into great detail to show how the environment of the times made the newspapers of that day what they were. It fails because Housman unjustly criticizes Dimsdale, something he would not have done had he carefully read the Montana Posts published between 1864 and 1866.


This is a poorly written, error riddled, disorganized history of Madison County.


Morley kept an almost daily account of his activity as a pioneer and miner in Montana. Interesting but narrow in scope because he spent too much time discussing the weather and his personal mining fortunes.


A brief article written by a Montana resident of the middle 1860s. She relates what a newspaper meant to people then and describes some problems newspapers faced.


Another short report but valuable because it tells how Montanans regarded the Montana Post in the 1860s.

Porter, by quoting early newspaper articles, recounts how the Montana press viewed early theater in the territory. She does little critical interpreting or evaluating.


A pioneer and former student of Professor Dimsdale tells of the rugged life of the early Montana settlers.

D. NEWSPAPERS

Anaconda Standard, July 9, 1893.

Anaconda Standard, Aug. 12, 1900.

Anaconda Standard, September 28, 1906.


Vigilante historian Birney gives a brief, complimentary review of Dimsdale's book.

Daily Union Vedette, Salt Lake City, Utah, January 28, 1865.

Forsyth Independent, May 9, 1929.

Montana Post, Virginia City, Montana, August, 1864-January, 1867.

Microfilm at Journalism School library, Montana State University, Missoula, Montana.

New North-West, Deer Lodge, Montana, August 29, 1874.

Rocky Mountain Husbandman, White Sulphur Springs, Montana, August 5, 1927.

Semi-Weekly Butte Miner, August 22, 1885.

St. Ignatius Post, August 20, 1926.
E. MISCELLANEOUS SOURCES


Fenner, an early Montana settler, wrote a sketch of his life for Mrs. Howey and the Montana State Historical Society Library.