

A New Angle

Episode 118

October 12, 2023

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle Hey folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today I am speaking with Molly Kruckenberg, director of the Montana Historical Society, an organization charged with protecting and sharing Montana's past.

Molly Kruckenberg It's important for us to share the fact that the history is not one perspective. All of our stories make up Montana's past, and we don't all experience things the same way.

Justin Angle The Historical Society is in the midst of building the Montana Heritage Center, and I'm excited to ask Molly how that's going.

Justin Angle Molly, thanks for coming on the show.

Molly Kruckenberg All right. Thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Molly Kruckenberg So I actually grew up in Pennsylvania. My dad is a farmer, my mom's a teacher. So I grew up in a rural area in western Pennsylvania.

Justin Angle And that explains your decision to study at the University of Pittsburgh.

Molly Kruckenberg That's one of the only places in Pennsylvania that I could get the degree that I wanted, which was a master's in library information science, with an emphasis in archival science. Kind of near to home, but also really what I wanted to study.

Justin Angle Yeah, Why did you want to study that?

Molly Kruckenberg When I was in college, I got a job in the college library and ended up in their small archives there and was introduced to primary sources. So those letters

that people wrote in the past, those diaries that people kept and that, I'd always loved history. From the time I was a small child till I went to college that informed even what I wanted to major in. But being exposed to those primary sources, the first person account of what people were doing, really solidified what I wanted to do, and that's how I got into library science, and being an archivist was my first career.

Justin Angle So maybe give our listeners a brief education on how historians use primary sources to do their work. Like what is the role of a primary source and how do you make sense of it? And telling a story from it?

Molly Kruckenberg Oh, that's...

Justin Angle That's a big question, we could fill a whole show with that.

Molly Kruckenberg It is a big question. But it's a great question because really the stories that we read in history textbooks, or the books that we read about history, are based on all of those primary sources. So our great Montana historians that write about our past and tell our stories, dig in and they read all of those diaries and they read all of those letters and they read all of those documents and records that our committees and groups and governments have created. And then they synthesize all

that information and kind of create that story and tell it. But it really is those personal stories that create who we are as Montanans and create our history. And it's so important that we share those individual stories and keep them. That's what I really love about history. At its very core, it's the story of every individual that's made up our state that tells who we are as Montanans.

Justin Angle Sure. And I'm trying to think of an analog from my research, I do a lot of survey research and we have to use methods to account for the people that don't respond to the survey. So how do historians account for the primary sources that didn't make it, or were never documented, or stories that weren't told?

Molly Kruckenberg So that's really hard. And we have to take that into consideration, that there are stories that aren't taken into account for. And there's other ways to look at that, like we can look at oral histories that were gathered. You can look at reports that were created by government entities. You can try to extrapolate from the diaries like what people were saying about events or other groups that were happening. And so you can kind of try to think about how other people were experiencing the past. Newspapers are a great way to look at that information, but you do have to think about that. And that's where the great analytical skills that come from studying history come into it.

Justin Angle So you've been at the Montana Historical Society almost 25 years now?

Molly Kruckenberg Yeah.

Justin Angle What was attractive about that organization, coming from Pittsburgh or from wherever you were?

Molly Kruckenberg You know, I've always loved Western history. Again, even as a small child, you know, always that iconic Laura Ingalls Wilder. Always loved that. So I always been attracted to western U.S. history. I studied that when I was in college for my undergraduate degree. So when a job opened up at the Montana Historical Society, I took it and I moved here, started out as an archivist there, and I've been at the Historical Society ever since. Spent my first, just over 20 years there in the Library and Archives program. So doing all of that work of preserving and cataloging and keeping those materials, those letters and diaries available for folks to use to do their research with, to write those books and create those documentaries and things like that. And then just the last three years moved into the director's role.

Justin Angle Super. And we should address like what is a historical society? What role does it play in our state, in our culture? What do you all do?

Molly Kruckenberg Here in Montana, the Historical Society has a lot of different roles, so we have five program areas that we really concentrate on. One is what we've talked a lot about already is those first person resources that we're collecting for people to study. We also have our museum that collects and cares for the three dimensional materials. So the artifacts, the artwork, those materials, and then creates these fabulous exhibits, right? Where people can come and look at the artifacts and learn from them. We also loan those out to museums across the state. And that's an important thing, right? We want people around Montana to have access to all of these collections, whether it's digitally through these loan programs and so many ways that we can make our collections accessible to people. We work a lot with educators around the state to make sure that our students have an understanding, or can gain an understanding, of Montana's history and culture. The State Historic Preservation Office is part of the Historical Society, so we work in a lot of different ways to make sure that our archeological sites and our built environment is preserved and recorded. And then we also have a publications program. So we publish Montana History, too. So all those resources that we gather, those historians that are coming and creating those articles

and books about them, we help publish those. We have Montana, the magazine of western history, and we publish two books annually.

Justin Angle So a lot of what you describe would require a facility of some kind. And you're in the midst of building the Montana Heritage Center, a breathtaking facility, at least according to all the renderings I've seen. Talk about this project, what is it all about?

Molly Kruckenberg It's really kind of two projects, really. One is to give us the physical home we need. We need to store these fabulous collections. We just have so many things that are so meaningful and important to Montana and so important that we have the right place to care for them. The other part is to create a building that's meaningful, that talks about Montana, and that really shares our heritage and culture in every single way, so that when Montanans want to learn and understand and talk about who we are as Montanans, in the past, and today, and for the future, they can come to the Montana Heritage Center and be surrounded by and understand that.

Justin Angle Yeah, and how do you make choices about what that will be and look and feel like?

Molly Kruckenberg You know, that's both really challenging and really interesting and really fun. We look at it, that every part of the Montana Heritage Center speaks to Montana in some way, shape or form. Everything about it speaks to Montana. And so the form of the building itself speaks to the landscapes of Montana. So as we, you know, five years ago started thinking about what the building might look like, we wanted to think about something that unites Montanans. And we came to the conclusion that our landscapes in Montana unite who we are.

Justin Angle What a great place to start.

Molly Kruckenberg Yeah, absolutely. Whether it's our plains, the rolling hills, the badlands, the mountains, the cliffs, the glaciers, all of that unites us in some way, shape or form. Whether you're in agriculture or tourism, recreation, all of us have some interaction with the landscape. So our building, in essence, philosophically, is all about the interaction between the landscape and the people of Montana, because that's where our history happens.

Justin Angle Give listeners a sense of, one of the things that was stunning to me was just the size.

Molly Kruckenberg We have an existing building that was initially the first part of it was built in 1953, is when it was opened and then a few additions put on there and that building is 95,000 square feet and that's going to be completely renovated, you know, top to bottom. It's going to be part of the new Heritage Center. When we're all done, it will be one big facility and then we're adding 66,000 square feet to that. So I'm a historian, not a mathematician, so that adds up somewhere north of 160,000 square feet.

Justin Angle That's pretty big.

Molly Kruckenberg And then in addition, and that's the physical size of the building, but we're creating a campus surrounding that. So surrounding the building, landscaping that also interprets Montana history.

Justin Angle So you're building this wonderful facility, and you have a lot of things that need a home. I'd love to learn about how you and your colleagues make choices about what gets a display, and how that display gets constructed, and what version of history is told and what is kind of that, we talked about methods earlier, how do you sort of bring those methods to life and the choices that you're leading at the Historical Society?

Molly Kruckenberg Yeah. You know, again, a really, really interesting process and one that we've been really involved in for the past three years. This is not an easy conversation to have. When the facility is done, we'll have about 30,000 square feet of exhibit space.

Justin Angle Okay.

Molly Kruckenberg So more than double the exhibit space that we had before. Almost half of that will be one gallery, called the Montana Homeland Gallery, that's roughly a chronological telling of Montana history from about 14,000 years ago to contemporary times. Even though 16,000 square feet is a lot of space that's really hard to fit that many years of history into that much time. So it's hard to make those decisions. It's hard to determine of the 60,000 plus artifacts that we have, plus all of our pieces of art, plus our million photographs, what do we use to tell those stories? Our curators have been having these conversations about what artifacts to put in, which stories to tell, like I said, for over three years now. And essentially we have gone back and said, what are the critical stories? What are the the big stories about Montana that have to be highlighted as we're going through? And so there's some basics, like we really need to tell the story of Native American life in Montana pre-European contact. So that's

that's a big part of what we're telling. So there's the big themes, right? The gold rush, fur trade era, copper mining in Butte, World War I and II, and kind of the homestead boom and bust and the Constitutional Convention, big turning point in Montana. And so there's those big themes that we're telling throughout, but then scattered throughout all of that are smaller stories that we're telling and bringing in those human voices, bringing in multiple perspectives on things that it's important for us to share the fact that the history is not one perspective.

Justin Angle Right.

Molly Kruckenberg As I mentioned earlier, all of our stories make up Montana's past and we don't all experience things the same way. So we may all go to one event or there's one, I think we were chatting before the show about, say, the Battle of the Little Bighorn for example. It's not an easy event to talk about in Montana history. There's multiple perspectives to that event. And so we're really dedicated to telling multiple perspectives on all of those events that are difficult to talk about and sharing those different perspectives so that our visitors can understand that and really determine how they want to think about those events. And I think it's so important that we do that and understand that there are multiple perspectives, there's multiple perspectives on things today. There were multiple perspectives on things in the past as well.

Justin Angle So as the leader of the organization, how do you construct a team and a process to execute on that vision of telling as many sides as you can with as much accuracy as you can?

Molly Kruckenberg Well, you know, fortunately, I have fabulous curators on our staff. So we're bringing in, we have curators who lead from two perspectives, one is the content perspective that understanding what are the stories we need to tell, what voices do we need to bring in at specific points throughout the gallery? And then also, what are those artifacts that tell those stories?

Justin Angle The things.

Molly Kruckenberg The things, exactly. And then the voices, the oral histories, the photographs and things like that. And then the other side is that how do we actually build it? What are the cases look like? What do the immersive structures look like? What do the media look like that help tell the story and help build those experiences? So we've also brought in outside historians to help review all the content to make sure that, you know, we're not missing or having just our own biases and including Native American historians in that perspective as well. We've also brought in outside firms, so

we have an exhibit design firm that's helping us design some things, we have an exhibit fabrication firm on board as well, and also a media design firm to help us design all the media. So lots and lots of work on our part of figuring out what those stories are and what those artifacts are and how we're going to make sure all of those fit, but lots of people to help us with lots of the details, too.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Molly Kruckenberg after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Molly Kruckenberg about the Montana Historical Society.

Justin Angle And so you, I would imagine, rely heavily on public funding and the gracious donations of benefactors and so forth. How do you balance, you know, if a donor has a view of how a story should be told, or wants a certain story to be told and not another, how do you kind of navigate those waters, assuming that they've come up at some point in your tenure?

Molly Kruckenberg We've actually been really fortunate to not need to address that. But it's also not something I'm willing to bend on. We are not allowing donor

interpretation into our galleries. We don't feel that that's appropriate. That's really historian based, it's not possible to keep every bias out of your exhibits and out of history. It's just we are all human, correct?

Justin Angle Yeah, I don't think that should be the objective, right? I mean part of it is being open and transparent about those biases?

Molly Kruckenberg Absolutely. And every time you're telling history, you're bringing your own biases from it. We're bringing our 21st century perspectives to it. And, you know, one of the things that is important is to make sure we're not putting our 21st century perspectives onto things that happened in the 19th century, but understanding what perspectives they had in the 19th century, which also makes us say we don't need to have those 19th century perspectives, but understanding where they were coming from and perhaps why that guided their actions then, helps us understand maybe where we should go differently today. And that's part of the reason I think that the work that we're doing to create new exhibits is so important, to create the entire Heritage Center, to be honest, it's understanding why these events in the past happened and how we keep some of them from happening again. It's understanding the changes that have happened, why they happened, the way they happened. If we understand those now, that helps us shape a different future.

Justin Angle And it feels like we're living through a time where the concept of history is contested in a way. I mean, the telling of history has always sort of been contested in some fundamental way. We've talked about some of the methods that are used to navigate that, but we're also living through a time where, you know, on both sides of the aisle we're seeing certain topics or certain interpretations of history be presented as threatening ideas, as ideas that maybe we shouldn't consider. How do you kind of view this period that we're living through now and your responsibility to kind of help Montanans find their way through and find truth in the moment?

Molly Kruckenberg I'm not sure it's our responsibility to help people find truth.

Justin Angle Okay.

Molly Kruckenberg But to help people understand the past. And I go back to this idea of providing multiple perspectives on things and providing information and allowing people to inform their own opinions. And so if we look at topics that are difficult and we need to look at topics that are difficult, and understanding them. Avoiding topics that make us uncomfortable is not an appropriate response. So, you know, in Montana, one of those topics is boarding schools.

Justin Angle Right.

Molly Kruckenberg And it would be easy to place blame in certain areas. That's not really the point. But the point is to understand, to understand why it happened, what everybody's perspective is on it, to understand that certain people were hurt by that, and maybe to understand how we can prevent those things from happening again, to create places for conversation, I think is really important. I'm a big advocate for using events of the past to create conversations around current events, so that we can move forward in the future. That's why history is so important, right? It's to understand those really difficult conversations and create better from them for the future. And there are absolutely things to celebrate about our past too, not everything's dark and uncomfortable. There are things that are really things to celebrate. I mean, the 1972 Constitutional Convention, I mean, that's a fabulous thing. There are so many women involved with that. There's, you know, so many great things. It was really one of the most progressive constitutions in the United States at the time. But those are also ways to create conversations, too, about what did that mean for Montanans and what does that mean for us today? And that's what I think's important about the work that we're doing here.

Justin Angle Let's talk about all the things you're doing to get students and young people involved in the historical society, the Heritage Center, because what you're describing here, this sort of openness to the complexity of our history and the various stories of multiple perspectives, that is a sensibility that, you know, all of us need. But young people in particular need to cultivate that early on, in my view. How are you engaging with kids throughout the state?

Molly Kruckenberg We're embarking on a campaign now to to create a fund that we can help schools around the state with their field trip costs. I mean, to be honest, it's so expensive to get students to Helena, to understand and to tour the Heritage Center. But that's essentially what we want to do. We want to get every student in Montana, at least once during their school career, to Helena to visit the Montana Heritage Center, to explore our exhibits, to explore everything that we have to share about Montana's heritage and history and culture. To tour the Capitol building, to understand how Montana's government works, how civics works, maybe to tour the downtown. But research has shown that the impact of field trips is incredible for students, just to get out and experience firsthand leads to higher graduation rates in both high school and college. It leads to higher income. It leads to so many more things. And just firsthand, I don't know how many people I've talked to have said, "I remember when I was a

student and came to the Historical society." That's what I want for Montana students in the future.

Justin Angle You mentioned this campaign of trying to create the opportunity for every Montana young person to get to the Heritage Center. You know, where are you at in that process? Have you secured funding? Like what does that look like? I know you've mentioned you have tremendous support from the governor and other leaders in the state. Give us an update.

Molly Kruckenberg It's a \$10 million campaign to kind of start this. We want it to be a fund where we've got this principle, we'll use the interest of it to fund this program and offer grants to schools. Right now, we have just over a million dollars already in hand towards the campaign. So that goal, like I said, is 10 million dollars in hand so that we can initially start those grants in the '25-'26 school year. So we're looking for some folks to help fill those coffers a little bit for us so that we can get this program up and running.

Justin Angle If folks listening want to get involved. Where would you point them?

Molly Kruckenberg Just search for the Montana Historical Society and you can find my name there, Molly Kruckenberg, and just give us a call. I'm always happy to talk about this program. I'm so excited about it because I think it's so impactful for Montana's future.

Justin Angle Molly, do you have a favorite Montana story?

Molly Kruckenberg I don't know if I can choose.

Justin Angle They're all your children at this point?

Molly Kruckenberg Yeah. I think what I can share is, you know, early on at the Historical Society, I answered a lot of research requests. So people write to us a lot and say, my family had this story can you share? Do you have any information on it? And I received a request, there's a story that the dad died and the mom lost the land and the kids went into care and it turned out to be true. And, you know, when I did all the research, you could find the information, it was found out in letters and in census records. And what ended up happening was the mother ended up in the same town that the children ended up being cared for by other family members. But she ended up being a prostitute because there were very few other ways for women to support

themselves right? When they don't have a spouse to help support them, but she never had any contact with her children after that, even though they lived in the same town.

Justin Angle Wow.

Molly Kruckenberg So a sad story, but one that talks a lot about what it meant to be in the western United States, to be a woman in the western United States, to be a child in the western United States. There was a lot packed into that one small family story, that really had some meaning to it. And just so many things kind of packed into that.

Justin Angle That's an important vignette for people to really grasp what people living through that time were experiencing.

Molly Kruckenberg Yep. And it also, in my mind, helps understand a lot of what we do at the Historical Society is keep all of those stories. We keep everybody's story there and we keep it so everybody, we can learn about all of those things. Because that story going back to your first question about how do historians use those materials? That's how they use them. You understand that story and then that does help us understand

that women didn't have other resources. And that's not because women chose to be prostitutes, it's because they didn't have other resources.

Justin Angle We have such double standards in our society. It's really hard to understand the choices and limitations that people are operating under when they're in it. And I think that is important to do in our relationships on an everyday basis, but in the past in particular. I think it's really hard to kind of try to put ourselves in the lives of these folks and try to think, you know, could I have made a different decision in that spot? What were the constraints? What were the hardships? Were there any other options?

Molly Kruckenberg One of the really most powerful things I went through was in Leadership Montana, I attended several years ago, and every person there had to talk about themselves for 8 minutes.

Justin Angle Wow.

Molly Kruckenberg It's really hard to do to talk about yourself for 8 minutes. But you thought you knew, had known, this person that you had been attending a class with and after they talked about themselves for 8 minutes, you realized you didn't know

anything about them. And that's exactly what you're just saying, is you don't we don't understand. You might read a text book about, again, someone who participated in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but until you really look at that one person or maybe even a group of people's exact perspectives, you can't really understand what happened from their point of view. You can't really just look at somebody and understand what's going on in their life, whether that's today or a hundred years ago, and understand why that decision was made and understand what those consequences were. And it's just incredibly important that we do that. And that essentially is exactly what we're trying to do with the Heritage Center and why it's so important that we're able to do this right now.

Justin Angle Yeah, it is important. And Molly, I can't thank you enough for telling us all about it. When do you expect the Heritage Center to open?

Molly Kruckenberg So we will open our doors in late summer of 2025.

Justin Angle Wonderful. Fantastic project, huge in scope and ambition. And sounds like you're the right person to be leading here. Molly, thanks for sharing the story with us.

Molly Kruckenberg Well, thank you so much for having me. Appreciate it, great to be here.

Justin Angle I have one last question. Do you know who killed Frank Little?

Molly Kruckenberg I wish I did.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Molly Kruckenberg I wish I did. I have a historian who would love to know, too. Wow.

Justin Angle But there's some value in it being a mystery.

Molly Kruckenberg Exactly. We have to have some of those.

Justin Angle All right, Molly, thank you very much.

Molly Kruckenberg All right. Thank you.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Lauren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larsen is our producer. Ella Hall is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Japanese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.