

A Brief Historical History of Masonic Lodge Located at 101 Main Street, Lavina, Montana *“We live, we die; but leave behind a heritage that survives.”*

This land was home to several American Indian nations, including the Blackfoot, Crow and Sioux Tribes. Through the late 1700's and the mid 1800's territorial conflicts between the Crow and Blackfoot nations often erupted in the Musselshell Valley. The first Euro-American came to the area around 1809 when 150 men working for the St. Louis-based Missouri Fur Company began trapping in the area. The area was opened by the Ferdinand Hayden geological survey between the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers between 1854-1856. The Hayden expedition was funded in part by the Chouteau family of Fort Benton and in doing so, it made history becoming the first recorded group of Euro-Americans in the Lavina area. With the discovery of gold in Montana the area became by the late 1870's the home of several grazing cattle herds along Swimming Woman Creek in the northwest corner of what would become Golden Valley County. By 1881 the “79” cattle outfit and others joined ranks for roundup and ultimately met on the banks of the river near what would shortly become the first Lavina townsite. In doing so they began a practice that would endure for decades, as “Lavina” became the endpoint for the area's annual fall and spring roundups.

The rails reached Billings in August of 1881. That preceding spring T.C. Power, a Fort Benton businessmen founded the Billings-Benton Stage Company. He hired Walter Burke to build the route and he settled on crossing the river about a mile upstream from present Lavina. Here he erected a stage stable, mess house, bunkhouse and a saloon. He named the settlement “Lavina” in homage to his former sweetheart. By the following year, the settlement offered daily stage service to Billings and bi-weekly stages service east to Roundup and north to Lewistown, by then a bustling burg of over 1000 people. The first steel bridge across the Musselshell was constructed in 1885 thus securing year-round traffic.

Over the next twenty years great stock outfits moved more herds into the Musselshell country. With the Chicago Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railway Company's decision to build its main line along the Musselshell the future of the town seemed secure. But railroad surveyors, perhaps in response to landowner assistance, located the train station a mile downstream from “Old Lavina.” In 1906-07 the old town enjoyed a last burst of activity from the crews for the railroad. Without a doubt the location of the railroad was the foundation of “New Lavina.” However, a railroad track alone cannot make a town. Ludwig “Louis” Lehfeld completed a two-story, twenty-room hotel at “New Lavina,” called The Adams (in honor of Adams who donated the land) in 1908 just as trains began serving the town. By the fall of 1908, several other business had joined The Adams in serving “New Lavina,” including D.W. Slayton's Mercantile, the Lavina Bank, a livery stable and a land office. Other commercial establishments followed and Lavina soon offered every service central Montana might need. In short order, the town boasted a second hotel, a barber, a dentist, a restaurant, a saloon, a druggist, a butcher, jeweler, a milliner, an attorney, a piano tuner, a blacksmith, a harness shop, two garages, a newspaper, three-grain elevators and various other skilled tradesmen.

Lehfeldt and Slayton joined forces to establish and construct the Bank Of Lavina. As with the Adams and original Slayton Mercantile, “Louie and D.W.” chose a wood framed design. This building, that now houses the Masonic Lodge, was constructed in 1908 as a private bank with D.W. Slayton, President and Ludwig Lehfeld, Vice President. It remained a private bank until 1911 when it was incorporated as the Lavina State Bank. When drought descended on the region in 1918 and lasted into the mid-1920's the bank fell on hard times. The Lavina State Bank remained functional until 1923 when a run on the bank caused it to close. The founders used their private funds to meet the demands of its' depositors, causing each to become financially

ruined. When the Lavina State Bank failed, both Lehfeltdt and Slayton lost their fortunes. Lehfeltdt's Adams Hotel closed in 1923, and Lehfeltdt ran a bar out of the Adams Annex (across the street) until his death in 1955. Slayton fared better than Lehfeltdt, as his mercantile and business interests elsewhere in the region sustained him and family.

The Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930's followed the drought and farm depression of the 1920's, and many people who had survived the turbulent twenties abandoned their operations in the "dirty" thirties. Lavina suffered with the farmers and ranchers until the town welcomed the return of rain in 1938. With the return of record crops and the needs of the Second World War Lavina and Golden Valley again witness good times.

The Bank Building, owned now by Mr. Rorabeck, became the Lavina Post Office in 1930 and remained in the building until 1960. A new Post Office was constructed down the block in 1960 and the present Post Office was constructed in 1999. The Masons purchased the building in 1938 and constructed an addition on the west end for both the Post Office and a private entrance to the second floor for their Lodge room. The Masons removed the apartments on the second floor and converted the space into one large room. Theater seats were added to the Lodge room in the 1950's from the old Babcock Theater in Billings when it was destroyed by fire. From 1938 until 1960 the Lodge convened on the second floor while the U.S. Post Office rented the lower floor. In 1960 the Masons, under the leadership of Jim Jensen, withdrew the contract for the Post Office and began a complete remodel of the Bank building. They shortened the bank windows, established a gravity flow water system so the building would not have to be heated in cold weather, tiled the dinning room and kitchen floors, added carpet and turned the lower level in a dinning room. All the renovations were complete by 1962 and remained at this state until 2003. In the summer of 2003 it was decided to completely restore the building back to its' original state and work to get in on the National Register of Historic Places through the Montana Historic Preservation Office.

Under the guidance of Raymond A. Berry (owner of Adams Hotel) and members of the Lodge renovation begin to restore the integrity of the building. They begin by stripping the old vinyl siding, replacing it with salvaged cedar siding, replacing the windows with windows from a period (1910) building (Cushman School), replacing the two large bank windows, replacing the letters on the bank windows, period doors for the outside entrance (1900), outside period lights and prepping and painting the building in a light gold with parker gold brown trim. The final restoration was replacing the fire escape to its original location to the meet all the requirements of historical preservation. Major interior restoration began in the summer of 2004 by removing the dinning room ceiling exposing the wonderful tin rolled plate ceiling. With Greek Key frieze border tin tiles from the Lavina Opera House and gold damask fabric the walls of the dinning room were finished. A teller's bank front of the period was placed to separate the dinning room from the kitchen. The teller's cage has its original Tennessee marble at its' base and windows. The addition on the west end was turned into a space to represent the years the building was the Post Office and the bathroom with the original cast iron toilet was restored. It is important to note that all furnishings and trim were either renovated from building or reproductions of the period. The building had a new commercial roof added in the summer of 2006.

As a result of the 2004-2007 restoration efforts, the building once again displayed its historic appearance. The First State Bank of Lavina, also known as the Lavina-Temple Lodge No. 101, was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places on December 17, 2007.

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