

**Montana Historical Society  
Board of Trustees Quarterly Meeting  
April 17, 2025, 9 A.M. MST  
Opportunity Bank Conference Center  
1550 Vandelay Ave  
Helena, MT 59601**

**CALL TO ORDER:**

Tim Fox called the meeting to order at 9:00 A.M. Jenni Carr took roll. [\[Exhibit A\]](#)

**Montana Historical Society Board of Trustees members present:** Norma Ashby Smith, Kim Briggeman, Tim Fox, Mary Helland, Pete Johnson, Lorna Kuney, Steve Lozar, Rachel Reckin, Jay Russell, Ken Robison, Jude Sheppard, Bill Whitsitt

**Montana Historical Society Board of Trustees members attending virtually:** Carol Donaldson, Candi Zion, Bill Jones

**Montana Historical Society Board of Trustees members excused:**

**MTHS Staff present:** Molly Kruckenberg, Director; Emily McKeever, Administrator; Jenni Carr; Administrative Assistant/Membership Coordinator; Ginny Sullivan, Development Officer; Martha Kohl, Outreach and Education Program Manager; Roberta Gebhardt, Library and Archives Program Manager; Jennifer Bottomly-O’looney, Museum Program Manager; Jeff Bartos, Publications Program Manager; Pete Brown State Historic Preservation Program Manager

Steve Lozar blessed the meeting in Salish.

**Review of Minutes:**

**Motion:** Ken Robison moved to approve the January 16, 2025 meeting minutes. Lorna Kuney seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit B\]](#) [\[Exhibit C\]](#)

**President’s Report – Tim Fox**

Tim welcomed the trustees and encouraged them to attend the Heritage Center tour later today. He expressed excitement towards the future of the Montana Historical Society.

**Director’s Report – Molly Kruckenberg** [\[Exhibit D\]](#)

**Molly thanked the board members for their attendance and began her report with new staff.**

**MTHS Staff Update:** Emily introduced the new staff in Administration: Beth Strandberg (not present), Human Resources Generalist 2. Molly introduced Ginny’s new staff: Colton Tash, Public Information Specialist. Jerry introduced his newest staff member: Chevelle Evans, Security Guard. In the Museum Jennifer introduced: Sam Lindgren, Facilities Specialist; Hans Schrader (not present), Curator. Martha introduced new staff to Outreach & Education: Josie Salois (not present),

LeahJo Tietz (not present), Kaelie Giffel (not present), Tour Guides. Tim asked if there were tour guides that could sign for the hearing impaired. Martha answered that O&E has contracted with someone who could sign if it is requested.

**Motion:** Lorna Kuney moved to approve the hiring of new employees. Norma Ashby Smith seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit E\]](#)

Two staff members have reached longevity with the State of Montana: Maggie Meredith and Heather Hultman. There are several ongoing recruitments. Molly anticipates that by the next board meeting, MTHS will be nearly fully staffed.

Molly provided the current MTHS statistics regarding visitors, members, website and social media engagement, and items accessioned.

**Montana Heritage Center Update:** Molly reiterated that she hopes the board can join the tour later today. Exhibits have been going in, and contractors are currently working on prepping the floor in the addition. The renovation of the Veterans and Pioneers Memorial Building (VPMB) is ongoing. The cold storage has been completed. There is a significant amount of abatement ongoing. The ground floor, second floor, and third floor have finishes going in which is very exciting. In the next quarter, MTHS staff will begin moving back into the building. The move will begin in mid-June and continue through August. MTHS staff continue to meet with the Tribal Stakeholders monthly. Bill Whatsitt asked if there were any “surprising” concerning the abatement. Molly answered that the contractors did find significantly more asbestos than anticipated which is part of why the remodel is taking longer. There is a significant amount of work ongoing in the Homeland Gallery including Exhibit Installation. Molly shared drone footage created by the contracted marketing firm, Sovrn. [\[Exhibit F\]](#) In addition to the construction, MTHS staff continue to work on setting up policies and procedures, marketing, and administrative work that will run the Heritage Center. Interpretation is wrapping up, and very soon, text panels will be sent to printing. Tim asked when the Russell’s will be returned from the Charlie Russell Museum (CRM) in Great Falls. Jennifer answered that MTHS already has the materials back. Pete asked about needing to resubmit the RFP (request for procurement) for the café. Molly answered that the original RFP was “too complicated” for vendors as it asked the vendors to choose all of the equipment and furnishings that would go into the space. MTHS staff have shifted their approach and now will work with the architecture firm to provide and install the equipment and furnishings so that they will have a “turnkey” space to move into. Norma added that they just had the biggest Charlie Russell auction in Great Falls and raised almost \$9 million. Ken asked if it would be an advantage to the CRM in Great Falls and MTHS to do joint advertising to bring people to visit both galleries. Molly answered “absolutely” and intends to have collaboration conversations with them. Tim shared his vision of a collaboration including an interpretive tour starting in Helena, a chartered bus with box lunch to Great Falls to visit the CRM and returning to Helena. Molly thanked Tim for his ideas and stated that she would reach out to the new CRM staff soon to brainstorm ideas. Jude mentioned that she read the article about Norma in the Montana Lifestyle Magazine and acknowledged her efforts in moving the auction forward.

**Legislative Update:** Session must wrap up in May, so the state is nearing the end. The biggest legislative task is to get the budget through. Emily McKeever and Tami Gunlock in the Administration Office worked to add amendments that increased the MTHS budget. There is currently an appropriation for \$1 million for the Montana 250 Commission. The amendments passed out of

committee on Tuesday and are on the Senate floor today. There is a large request in the Long-Range Information Planning Bill for around \$900,000 for a comprehensive Customer Relation Management (CRM) software suite. This would include one fulltime FTE to manage the database. This has been heard in the Senate but has not yet been voted on. There was an agency “clean-up” bill to remove termination dates on a couple of revenue accounts. The bill has been moved through and filed with the Montana Secretary of State. Molly has communicated with BOT members who were up for confirmation. The reappointments have been confirmed by the Senate. Leadership staff have been tracking around 60 bills throughout the session. Bill Whatsitt offered appreciation towards Molly on communicating requests to the legislature.

### **Membership-Development-Communications Report – Colton Tash; Claudia Bickel**

Claudia Bickel introduced herself and began the membership report. She shared the current statistics with the new membership levels going into effect. Claudia shared the explanation in the drop in members. She also explained some marketing efforts for membership moving forward. Kim mentioned that MTHS’s “birth year” is 1865, so reopening in 2025 could be a benefit. Claudia followed-up with a campaign video from Sovrn to show the development efforts. [\[Exhibit G\]](#) Tim asked how the video would be distributed. Colton answered that it is currently on the montanamuseum.org website, it will be sent out with a QR code, and Sovrn will shorten it to put it up on social media. Bill Whatsitt added that if Sovrn shortens it that MTHS staff could work with Montana broadcasters to get the word out. The campaign is currently at \$58,958,488.81, so MTHS are close to the \$59 million. The sponsorship opportunities for the mobile have ended, but it raised around \$440,000. The education endowment is currently at \$3.4 million. MTHS has been invited to submit a grant application to Blue Cross Blue Shield. The development team are currently hard at work finishing up donor recognition videos and plaques. The spring appeal is going out at the end of the month in a two-part process. First, a thank you letter to donors who have given \$5,000 or more with a “soft ask” appeal – this will go out to about 200 people. The main appeal will go out to contacts MTHS has had over the last 4 years so it will touch around 9,000 people. Norma asked if MTHS was short on funding. Molly answered that MTHS is trying to push for the \$60 million goal but are not currently short on any funding. MTHS would like to celebrate hitting that goal during the Grand Opening events. Bill Whatsitt asked if there would be costs that weren’t originally anticipated. Molly answered that yes, there are always more things that come up. Steve commented that over the years there was some negativity towards the building cost and whether it was “needed” and he appreciates the success of MTHS and staff’s accomplishment towards creating something great. Kim asked if he could share the video. Molly answered, “absolutely.”

Colton continued the report with the communication and marketing efforts. MTHS has been mentioned in the news upwards of 15 times – mostly due to the Chuck Johnson plaque event, but also mentions of the press book Catastrophe at Custer Creek, an article on Brands Under the Big Sky, and O&E Program Manager Martha Kohl. Ginny and Colton are working on refining the press-release process. Colton updated the trustees on the analytics of MTHS’s social media outreach. MTHS has contracted with an outside Graphic Designer to help with brochures, advertisements, templates, and other materials. The contract with Sovrn is set to expire at the end of the fiscal year. MTHS is moving forward with interviewing candidates to contract a website redesign to make the website more accessible and user friendly.

The marketing team has developed a draft communication plan for the soft opening. The summer celebration will be June 25-28, 2026. Colton is working with the Governor and other donors regarding the dates for the fall opening – a ribbon cutting ceremony, press conference, media preview, reception, and tours. There is no date set as of now, but the team is hoping for some time in November. The summer vent will include a donor gala, local business tie-ins, city/mayoral event, member appreciation, tours, and more. Staff are still in the early stages of planning but will continue to update the BOT as things become solidified. Bill Whatsitt thanked Colton for his work, but asked if he has additional suggestions whether he should just schedule a conversation with Colton. Colton agreed that would work.

#### **Election of Officers – Tim Fox**

**Motion:** Norma Ashby Smith moved to re-elect Tim Fox as President, re-elect Bill Jones as Vice President, re-elect Bill Whatsitt as Secretary, re-elect Steve Lozar as member-at-large, and re-elect Mary Helland as member-at-large. Jude Sheppard seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit H\]](#)

**BREAK:** Tim called for a break at 10:15 A.M., to reconvene at 10:30 A.M.

#### **Heritage Keeper Awards – Tim Fox**

Molly reviewed the award criteria for the Heritage Keeper, and how the candidates were scored. Bill Whatsitt commented that he wanted to score folks that went above and beyond their job description, so he scored the candidates with that in mind. He mentioned that he struggled with excellent volunteers but ranking them against other candidates who have state-wide resources and professional networks and large accomplishments. Tim acknowledged that it was a good point to “compare apples to oranges” and suggested considering a local award vs a statewide/broader award. Molly added that as a board it was decided to do two awards each year – either two Heritage Keepers or one Heritage Keeper and one Heritage Guardian. Molly suggested utilizing one for a local awardee, and one for a broad scope. Bill Whatsitt remarked that although Jon Axline goes above and beyond, he wonders how much of it is “just part of the job.” Ken added that it is exciting to have such a wide range and number spread around the state. He is less bothered by the local vs statewide nominees.

**Motion:** Ken Robison moved to nominate Jon Axline as the Heritage Guardian recipient, and Chris La Tray as the Heritage Keeper recipient. Mary Helland seconded. [\[Exhibit I\]](#)

**Discussion on the motion:** Norma commented that the only person on the list she recognized was Paul Snyder and noted that he’s done an exuberant amount of volunteer work and appreciated his efforts within the historical community and received her undivided vote. Ken Robison stated that you can’t drive around Montana without seeing one of Jon Axline’s signs. His contributions to Montana History are unmatched and he has been around for decades. Ken added that Chris La Tray wouldn’t have been on the list years ago, but he continues to share his culture and voice within Montana and beyond. Jay Russell asked what the difference between a Heritage Keeper and a

Heritage Guardian is. Jenni answered that it is lifetime achievement vs a smaller achievement. Kim Briggeman requested that when the ballots are received if the BOT could be reminded of the difference and asked for clarity on the criteria. Bill Whitsitt agreed on the candidates.

**Restatement of the motion:** Ken Robison moved to nominate Jon Axline as the Heritage Guardian recipient, and Chris La Tray as the Heritage Keeper recipient. Mary Helland seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit I\]](#)

Steve Lozar commented that over the years it has been difficult to name just two candidates for the Heritage Keeper Award due to the outstanding candidates. Steve offered to reexamine the award criteria sometime in the future. Pete added that he had a hard time evaluating the impact of someone's work when it came to statewide vs local work. Molly added that it continues to be a process that MTHS staff will work with the trustees to continue to refine and improve. Tim encouraged the nominators to re-submit the nominees in the future as the candidates were all well deserving. He added that if any BOT staff would be available to attend the awards ceremonies to please keep that in mind.

## **Program Reports:**

### **Administration – Emily McKeever**

Tim Fox acknowledged the Emily's efforts, and asked that if anything looks amiss, that that would be reviewed during the Executive Committee Meeting. Tim added that the reports weren't available prior to the board meeting, but he asked that the reports get added to the BOT packet that goes out in advance so that the board can study and review the finances prior to the meeting. Emily reviewed the Financial Report. [\[Exhibit J\]](#) Emily acknowledged the publications budget has a decrease in net position. This is due to a long-term employee retiring. Tim asked if there was anything MTHS could do to prepare for things like this happening. Emily answered that there wasn't much to be done about it, but Publications did delay the hiring of a replacement to make up some of the difference. Emily continued her report. Emily stated that the store is on track for their spending, although the revenue is coming in a little short. She acknowledged that the foot traffic was slow over the winter. Store staff are gearing up to reopen in the new building and are looking forward to that. Overall, the agency has a total revenue of \$8.4 million, with total expenses of \$8.9 million. Emily concluded the financial report with the Budget-to-Actual report and stated that she feels they are on track with spending towards the end of the year. Next, Emily provided the Private Funds report requested by the board at the January meeting. [\[Exhibit K\]](#) Bill Whitsitt asked for clarification on if the report reflects the true amount of funds. Emily answered that she did set it up for true amounts. Emily shared that she included the fund purposes in the report with some spending at the discretion of the director. Ken asked for clarification on the Robert & Genevieve Morgan Trust in the amount of \$61.13. Jennifer clarified that it was used exclusively for purchasing art for the Museum's collection. Bill Whitsitt remarked on the balance at the Greater Montana Foundation and asked if there was going to be for a studio. Emily provided a subtotal for funds available at the direction of the director as well as the funds available for the Heritage Center. Jennifer clarified that the mural funds are for the care of the future mural in the capitol, not the one downtown. Bill Whitsitt asked if Emily could

report on this annually. Emily answered she would be happy to provide that, but suggested a bi-annual report as the funds are spent down with the completion of the Heritage Center.

#### **Library & Archives – Roberta Gebhardt**

Anneliese Jackle has been accepted into the Archives Leadership Institute. She has proposed a network of tribal records and archivists. This will dovetail nicely with the Tribal Stakeholders group. Roberta followed up with the desire for a digital preservation system. Sue Leferink has submitted an ITPR for a new software for L&A. L&A will begin with reviewing items from the Governor's Office. Tim added that the Secretary of State maintains the rules for retention amongst the state, and that the review and decision making needs to be done as you go, or the burden becomes too great. He asked if the goal is "just to retain it." Roberta answered no, that MTHS will appraise and retain only the necessary documents. Tim asked if it's only done for the Governor's Office. Roberta answered, "for now, yes." Bill Whitsitt asked if there was a standard for retention. Roberta answered that there will be a standard, however, until the software is procured, there is no way to know exactly what's needed. L&A staff will continue to work with records managers, donors, and state agencies regarding records donations. Terrance Kratz is working on reviewing digitized tapes and cleaning them up. Roberta is currently in the process of hiring three additional positions. There have been eight interviews in the last two weeks, with one job offer being made. They may delay the hiring of the additional positions until there is dedicated workspace for them. L&A is also working through the logistics of moving back into the Montana Heritage Center, as well as staff training for those who are new and have never worked in the reference room.

Finally, Roberta requested a motion on the deaccession:

**Motion:** Norma Ashby Smith moved to approve the quarters deaccession. Jay Russell seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit L\]](#) [\[Exhibit M\]](#)

Jay asked if there are always so many items on the deaccession and if this is part of the move and if the lists will get smaller as time goes on. Roberta clarified that the current lists are more common than normal, but they are working on refining the collection and can remove unnecessary items. As time goes on, the lists could get smaller or not be at every meeting.

#### **Museum Program – Jennifer Bottomly-O'looney**

The Museum Program is busy with preparing for exhibit installation. Cinnabar is had at work with fabrication within the Homeland, so now the Museum staff are planning for when they can add artifacts to the exhibit space. There are a lot of factors at play as storage space is tight, but they want the artifacts to be safe so they will need to wait until the construction comes down. Norma asked what the biggest piece within the collection is. Jennifer mentioned that the Manerva went in which was quite large, the tractor was a lot of work to get into its spot, and now the last large item will be the sheep wagon which will be near the entrance of the Homeland.

Jennifer shared a loan request from the Denver Art Museum of a C.M. Russell painting, *Indian Hungers' Return*. It will be a reciprocal loan as they are allowing us use of two Blackfoot items. [\[Exhibit N\]](#)



**Motion:** Norma Ashby Smith moved to approve the loan to *Indian Hunters' Return* by C.M. Russell to the Denver Art Museum. Ken Robison seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit O\]](#) [\[Exhibit P\]](#)

Bill Whitsitt commented on the two separate locations of the painting, and whether MTHS would ask for a second request for the new location. Jennifer answered that they don't ask for a second request, but Jennifer will suggest that we bring it back to the board if they move it to a second location.

#### **Outreach & Education – Martha Kohl**

Martha reviewed the current tour efforts at the Original Governor's Mansion (OGM) and State Capitol Building. O&E has been working on systems for dispersing the Montana History and Civics Grant (MHCG). They offered schools a chance to apply that currently have tours scheduled. There were more applicants than there are currently funds for, so staff are reviewing applications and will announce the winners this week. O&E has accepted 8 new teachers to join the Teacher Leader Program. Martha invited everyone to the Lewis & Clark library tonight for a public program. The Two Lights for Tomorrow ceremony will be held this weekend with the MT250. MTHS will be sponsoring programs by Mary Bradbury. Martha introduced Melissa Hibbard to talk about National History Day. She shared that Montana History Day is program-based learning. Montana's program was dwindling prior to the pandemic, and now MTHS with collaboration with the Montana University System have been able to bring the program back. The state competition was Saturday in Bozeman, and 168 students participated with 98 projects. This is a 96% increase in participation from last year. Melissa shared about some project winners and their awards. National History Day received \$200,000 in funding.

#### **Publications – Jeff Bartos**

Publications has been busy as usual. Two candidates were interviewed for the Business Manager Position and Jeff was able to make an offer this week and is awaiting her acceptance. Jeff has been working with a staffing agency to sell ads in the Spring Magazine, but it will be beneficial to get the Business Manager on board. The 2025 Emerging Scholar Contest winner will have an article in the Autumn issue. The Spring issue of *Montana the Magazine of Western History* went out in mid-March with several great articles. For the summer issue, there will be a look at F. Scott Fitzgerald's summer in Montana. Jeff reviewed several other articles that will be in the summer issue to watch out for. The winter issue will be an anniversary issue. Jeff reviewed an error with the comeback letter that went out in February that led to several letters going to the right address with the wrong name. Unfortunately, this led to a financial loss with the mailing, although some people did return as subscribers. Publications is working on a new book *101 Places* that is nearing completion for release later this year. An intern position has been secured and will hopefully begin this summer. Publications has several projects in the works.

#### **SHPO – Pete Brown**

Pete began his report on the State Historic Preservation Office. SHPO was able to award several grants: State Bank of Terry; The Virginia City School House; The Archie Bray Foundation; The Dayton State Bank. SHPO is awarding a fellowship that was established with University of Montana and

Montana State University. Lisa Hunt at the University of Montana will conduct research using SHPO's cultural records database. SHPO operates on a federal grant from the National Park Service that is currently getting tied up. Congress did allocate SHPO's across the country in a continuing resolution that should provide them the same amount that they received in 2023 and 2024. SHPO is awaiting on a contract in place to work on the church in Great Falls. While awaiting the contract, the grant funds have been frozen at the federal level so there is some uncertainty there. The biennial awards ceremony will be held in May 16 at the Myrna Loy for the properties added to the National Register. Tim Fox requested an email invite sent to the board members. Bill Whitsitt asked if the church contract in Great Falls was expected to take this long. Pete answered that the costs went up, so unfortunately, a contract couldn't be secured. Ken added that the amount between the two grants was \$700,000 but the bids came in at \$1.2 million. The contract is signed for the mason to get to work, but the rest is dependent on decisions at the federal level. The project has been scaled back. SHPO is slated to receive funds from the National Parks Service in 2027-2028, but as it's at the federal level, Tim encourages BOT members to reach out to their congressional members to express their thoughts and concerns.

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

Tim asked for any unfinished business. There was none.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

Molly mentioned that MTHS has been working with a Tribal Stakeholders group during the construction of the Montana Heritage Center. There are plans to continue collaboration with the stakeholders on other items such as exhibits and publications. She proposed a joint meeting with the Board of Trustees and Tribal Stakeholders to build a relationship with one another. Steve Lozar complimented the MTHS staff on their collaboration with the stakeholders. Molly will work with the stakeholders to work on a date and how that will work. She doesn't expect it to happen in July, but she will work on that goal.

Jude Sheppard stated that her term is up in June, and this will be her last meeting.

**Public Comment:** Tim asked for public comment. Candi Zion notified the board of the Cabin Fever Auction April 25-26. Norma invited everyone to "Waking the Dead" June 29 at 1 P.M. and 3 P.M. in Great Falls.

## **ADJOURNMENT:**

**Motion:** Bill Whitsitt moved to adjourn the meeting at 12:22 P.M. Pete Johnson seconded. The motion passed unanimously. [\[Exhibit Q\]](#)



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Fox', is positioned above a horizontal line.

Tim Fox, President

Approved on July 17, 2025