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The forgotten man who gave Montana its shape

Sidney Edgerton, Montana territory's first gov, honored with week



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INDEPENDENT RECORD

What ever happened to Sidney Edgerton?

And why should we care?

It turns out, Edgerton is, arguably, the father of Montana. He was instrumental in lobbying for its creation as the Montana Territory and its current boundaries. He also served as its first territorial governor.

But Montana history hasn't been kind to him.

It appears that bitter partisanship is nothing new in U.S. and Montana politics — particularly during the Civil War — and he was one of its victims.

Edgerton was pretty much wiped from the face of Montana's history.

His strong abolitionist convictions and belief in equal rights for all people were not popular sentiments with some of those elected to the

first Montana Territorial legislature.

If it weren't for political vendettas and pettiness, Helena residents would likely be citizens of Edgerton County. Edgerton County existed a brief two years before its name was changed.

But for one week— May 17 to May 26 — we will be Edgerton County again, by proclamation of the Lewis and Clark County Commission.

'A self-made man'

You won't find Edgerton's statue or portrait in the State Capitol, nor charging across the Capitol lawn on horseback, for that matter.

But local resident and history buff Kevin Keeler is hoping to give Edgerton at least a little bit of his due — with a special Sidney Edgerton Day celebration, Saturday, May 17 (see sidebar).

"He was a self-made man," said Keeler, who created and hosts the HCTV show "Montana Territory Tales," and recently did a two-part show on him.

His background was amazing, agrees Robert Swartout, a professor of history at Carroll College, who spoke on the show.

"In 1818, he was born in (upstate) New York," Swartout said, "and it was not with a silver spoon in his mouth." His father died when Edgerton was 6 months old. "At 8 years old, he goes out to support himself.

"It was amazing he was able to obtain an education," Swartout said.

Not only did he obtain it, he became a teacher.

"By his mid-20s, he heads out to Ohio and lands in Akron, and he wants to pursue a career in law." By the 1840s, he passed the law exam and became a lawyer in Akron.

It's in Ohio that Swartout suspects that Edgerton saw slavery close up, just across the Ohio River in Kentucky.

"He becomes an early outspoken opponent of slavery," Swartout said, and he became a member of the new Free Soil Party, which opposed expansion of slavery in the Western territories.

"He enters politics in part because of his opposition to slavery," said Swartout. And Edgerton quickly joins the Republican Party in 1854, founded by anti-slavery activists.

Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1858, he served two terms as a representative of Ohio. "He is there when Lincoln is elected president and through the first two years of the Civil War," said Swartout. Edgerton was a friend and strong supporter of Lincoln.

Through reapportionment, Edgerton lost his House seat, but he was picked by Lincoln to serve as chief justice of the Idaho Territory Supreme Court. At that time, Montana was part of the newly created Idaho Territory. The area was huge, including all of present-day Idaho, Montana and a large part of Wyoming.

The territorial seat was Lewiston, Idaho, but the Idaho Territory governor, William H. Wallace, told Edgerton to set up shop in the eastern part of the territory. Edgerton took up his duties in 1863 in Bannack, where gold had been recently discovered.

Edgerton arrived not only with his wife, who came from a prominent family in Akron, Ohio, but also his nephew Wilbur Fisk Sanders, who would rise to prominence in Montana politics and history.

"A lot of miners and settlers in Bannack thought the political structure and law enforcement was too distant from Lewiston," Swartout said. "The citizens pretty much decided the territory was too big. They decided to send a representative back east to present their case."

They chose Edgerton as the man to do it, and sent with him \$2,500 in gold nuggets sewed into his overcoat — considering this was the time of highwaymen like the Plummer Gang.

Turns out that was about 8.6 pounds, or half the weight of a bowling ball, tucked into the hems of his coat, so he could show some of the wealth coming out of the mines.

"Gold from the West underwrites the war," Swartout said. "This gold is critical to the Union."

The cost of the war and the amount of firepower available was unprecedented, he said.

And while the North suffered 100 percent inflation from 1861 to 1865, it was nothing compared to the Confederacy.

As a hypothetical example, Swartout said, if a pair of boots in the North sold for \$1 in 1861, they would have cost \$2 by 1865.

However, in the South, where Confederate money was not backed up by a gold standard, a \$1 pair of boots in 1861 would have cost \$9,200 in Confederate dollars by 1865, which is why Southern shopkeepers refused to accept Southern money even before the war had ended.

Edgerton couldn't have been a better ambassador for the creation of the Montana Territory when he arrived in Washington in early 1864.

The chairman of the House Committee on Territories was a fellow Republican from Ohio and Edgerton's friend, James Ashley. Ashley was already beginning the process of splitting off Montana, and even came up with the name.

No doubt Edgerton's arrival expedited the process, and Edgerton made a strong case for drawing Montana's western boundary along the Bitterroot Mountains, rather than the proposed Continental Divide.

Thus Montana gained the riches of the Bitterroot Valley and the Flathead, not to mention the future wealth of Butte.

The Organic Act that created the Montana Territory passed in May 26, 1864. A short time later, Lincoln appointed Edgerton as its first territorial governor.

With the new territory, came the election of a territorial legislature of seven senators and 13 representatives. Among those elected were Democrats backing George B. McClellan in the presidential election, who was just anxious to end the war. There was also at least one former Confederate in the assembly. Some Democrats were from border states and were critical of Lincoln and the Union.

In contrast to them was Edgerton, who some would consider a Radical Republican, Swartout said.

"He was a staunch critic of slavery, he supports the Emancipation Proclamation and he supports the 13th Amendment," which abolished slavery.

"He was a staunch believer in equality," Swartout said. "He believed all should have an equal shot at pursuing the American Dream. He brings this ideal to Montana. Edgerton is not only a strong opponent of the Confederacy, he sees it as an illegitimate effort to destroy America."

In the summer of 1864, Lincoln was not sure he would win re-election, Swartout said. If McClellan won, he likely would have wanted to end the war without the commitment of getting rid of slavery.

However, in September, Gen. Sherman took Atlanta, rallying the morale in the North, and he marched to the sea, Swartout said.

"This was a godsend for Lincoln, who wins handily in November."

Ousted

"Edgerton's year in office is very tough," Swartout said. "Lincoln was so focused on the war, no territorial secretary was appointed," the only person who could sign warrants releasing federal money.

Edgerton wound up paying government expenses out of his own pocket to keep the government afloat, eventually wracking up a \$3,600 bill in reimbursements. Considering \$400 was an average annual salary at the time, Swartout said, it was a considerable amount.

After the arrival of Thomas Francis Meagher as secretary in September 1865, Edgerton headed to Washington, D.C., to seek compensation.

By that time, Lincoln had been assassinated, and Andrew Johnson, a Union Democrat and no friend to African Americans, was the president. "He's more than happy to remove a Radical Republican from office," Swartout said.

He did so on the charge that Edgerton left Montana without permission.

"We tend to associate intense partisanship with our own time," Swartout said, "but it was never more intense than in the years of the Civil War."

In June 1866 Edgerton officially resigned as territorial governor, having served two years, and returned to Akron, where he became a very esteemed lawyer in the community, said Swartout.

A year later, in December of 1867 the territorial legislature changed the name of Edgerton County to Lewis and Clark.

"Conventional history dismisses him as not important and as unnecessarily alienating Democrats," Swartout said, "but I think he didn't get the credit he deserves because of all the animosity."

Edgerton County Week, May 17 through May 26

Saturday May 17

1 p.m. — Procession of the National Guard 1889 Cavalry Guard

Dignitaries and guest speakers on the Tour Train up Last Chance Gulch and Broadway Avenue to the Court House, followed by Shriners parade of mini cars.

2 p.m. — Sidney Edgerton County Week Celebration at the Lewis and Clark County Court House

Presentation of the Colors by the Montana National Honor Guard. Montana Masons, Daughters of the Nile Drum corps will perform.

Guest speakers will talk on Montana territory history.

Lewis and Clark County Commissioners will speak and the Proclamation of Edgerton County Week will be read. The Celebration will end with a ceremonial cannon shot.

Speakers include:

- Ellen Baumler, Court House Square and the early Helena neighborhood
- Jon Axline, Edgerton's influence on early Montana roads and freight routes
- Jeff Malcomson, Sidney Edgerton , the man and his thoughts.
- Kevin Keeler, Sidney Edgerton, the creation of Montana Territory and why did they change the county name
- Bruce Whittenberg, Montana Historical Society director
- Lewis & Clark County Commissioners

Note: Bring a lawn chair, event may take an hour

Also: This is the day of the Lewis and Clark County History Fair Downtown