

White Paper Report

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Project Director: Patty Dean (patty@preservemontana.org)

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WHITE PAPER
THE TOUCHSTONE PROJECT:
SAVING AND SHARING MONTANA'S COMMUNITY HERITAGE
GRANT NUMBER: HD-51181-10

MONTANA PRESERVATION ALLIANCE
HELENA, MONTANA
PROJECT DIRECTOR: PATTY DEAN

PROJECT ABSTRACT

The Touchstone Project is a multidisciplinary program conceived by the Montana Preservation Alliance (MPA) to help communities preserve their heritage, threatened historic places and share their human experience with a broad audience. This pioneering approach takes traditional efforts to collect and digitize historic materials and oral interviews and makes them far more dynamic, relevant and accessible through a digital archive that will reside in a local historical repository and be uploaded to the Montana State Library's online "Montana Memory Project" (MMP).

Additionally, we will invite new information, tap new audiences and share the content across the worldwide web through social networking. Professional historians and trained curators will pilot this innovative effort with people in four small towns, ensuring that materials are handled, housed and digitized to the highest curatorial/archival standards in order to save threatened heritage while creating a hopeful model for celebrating history and reinvigorating neighborhoods and communities.

INTRODUCTION

The Touchstone Project was conceived as a multi-phased initiative to preserve the heritage of small Montana towns endangered by depopulation trends. Comprised of multi-day work sessions in each community, the Project was to train residents in rudimentary heritage preservation principles and then subsequently identify, preserve and digitize primary sources documenting personal and community histories. The "Touchstone Team" of professional archivists, preservationists, librarians, and oral history practitioners would present two multi-day work sessions to:

- 1) train volunteers in handling, digitizing and preserving primary sources,
- 2) conduct interviews for radio/on-line public radio programming,

- 3) set up a workspace and a personal computer (PC) in a local repository/venue (preferably a formerly endangered building),
- 4) create an accessioning plan and finding aids,
- 5) conduct historic resource surveys and oral histories with long-time residents.

Subsequent phases of the project were to conduct and transcribe oral histories, research and complete Montana State Historic Preservation Office historic property record forms for specific sites, and create metadata for the digital files uploaded to the MMP. A Facebook page for each Touchstone community would be launched, encouraging discussion and sharing of memories, stories and related resources for residents. Analog versions of these sources were to be deposited in a local repository (or repurposed historic property) while the digital files would be uploaded to the Montana State Library's MMP site and also copied to the hard-drive of the PC presented to the community.

PROJECT HISTORY

Four pilot communities were initially selected for the project based upon demonstrated capacity in saving endangered buildings (Sun River, Big Arm and Frenchtown) and/or a demonstrated need or interest (Fort Benton). In the end, strong local interest and additional outside funding made it possible to present Touchstone Project workshops in eight Montana communities between May 2011 and January 2013, despite historic flooding that afflicted two communities and required postponement of the original workshop dates. Each community was distinct and the experience varied widely; still, we succeeded in identifying primary sources for potential digitization in each locale, engaging enthusiastic local audiences, and recording and airing poignant interviews with local people on the rural Montana experience.

Given how engrossed local heritage keepers frequently are in many aspects of their communities' lives, the original multi-day reconnaissance in each town was pared down to a research and a one-day preliminary visit, along with a two-day Touchstone Team visit (avoiding such events as the "snowbirds" outmigration in the autumn and the stuffs of Montana small town life--school breaks, music festivals and athletic competitions--which is part of the charm and the challenge of working with rural communities).

Prior to Ms. Dean's preliminary visit to each community, she reviewed the area/community's history either on-line or at the Montana Historical Society's Research Center, focusing on historic ethnic and cultural diversity. Once in the community for the "recon" visit, she met with the local partners who ranged

from county museum staff and volunteers to Chamber of Commerce staff, preservationists, historians and librarians. Setup included procuring an accessible venue, identify local preservation issues/concerns, coordinating workshop logistics , and assessing current and anticipated archival/museum supplies needs. She also toured the community photographing heritage resources including significant landscapes, sites and buildings to orient herself to local history and preservation needs. Given that these visits were frequently the first time she had set foot in some of these communities, it was a critical element of the project.

Once cognizant of the partners’ needs and interests, Ms. Dean conferred with the Touchstone Team members to create resource binders containing historical information and instructional handouts. Over the project’s three years, binder contents were updated regularly as Team members honed their presentations for time and content considerations, and new issues—like copyright—came to light in the workshops.

The Touchstone Projects workshops were:

2011

Danvers/Lewistown, May 23-24; local partners were the *Friends of St. Wenceslaus*, a nonprofit comprised of the descendants of this Bohemian Catholic congregation (who, with MPA’s assistance, acquired and preserved the church building), the *Lewistown Historic Resources Commission* and the *Lewistown Public Library*. Seven people attended with the small number due to historic flooding in the area, road impassibility and post-flood clean-up. The workshop was held at a repurposed high school students’ dormitory, now the elegant Calvert Hotel, and the Lewistown’s Carnegie library building. The Lewistown Public Library is one of the MMP’s most prolific contributors and turned out to be a strong local partner. They uploaded eight oral history transcriptions and audio excerpts to the MMP. For his public radio and on-line program, “Mountain West Voices”, Touchstone Team oral historian/journalist Clay Scott interviewed two women who grew up on area farms during the 1920s and 1930s for his “On the Farm” segment, http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=559. The National Trust for Historic Preservation with whom MPA is a “Statewide Partner” was intrigued by the Touchstone Project so Ms. Dean posted on the Trust’s blog, see <http://blog.preservationnation.org/page/153/#.UdHhNPnhJw>

Big Arm, June 9-10; local partner was the *Big Arm Association* (a nonprofit formed to restore the circa 1913 one-room schoolhouse with MPA’s assistance); 20 attendees. Based on the Danvers/Lewistown workshop, we added the Montana History Foundation’s development officer to the Team to give an

overview of grassroots fund-raising, i.e. “friend-raising.” The closest public library to Big Arm is 14 miles away in Polson, Montana and this was their staff’s first encounter with the MMP. The workshop was held in the volunteer fire hall adjacent to the historic schoolhouse. A large closet in the schoolhouse will serve as the storage area for analog collections they might acquire. One of the workshop participants who attended the school was interviewed by Clay Scott, resulting in a “Big Arm Homesteaders” radio episode http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=5091 .

Fort Benton/Chouteau County, October 4-5; local partners were the private nonprofit *Overholser Historical Research Center* and the public *Chouteau County Library* where the workshop was held; 13 attendees. Generally regarded as the “birthplace of Montana” for its role as a fur trade post and subsequently a Missouri River steamboat port, Fort Benton is a National Historic Landmark and home to several outstanding small historical museums and public collections. The Overholser’s archival collection is catalogued in PastPerfect and they plan to provide public access to their items via this software’s Web interface option rather than through the MMP. Clay Scott’s interview with one of the county’s most pre-eminent historians was included in a 30 minute radio special on homesteading in Montana he produced, “A Fair Chance: Stories of Montana’s Homesteaders” http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=6041 .

Dillon/Beaverhead County, November 9-10; local partners were the *Beaverhead Chamber of Commerce*, *Beaverhead County Museum*, *Dillon Public Library*, *Lima Historical Society* and *Gold West Country*, associated with the State of Montana’s regional tourism program; 103 attendees including 20 University of Montana/Western undergraduate students who attended as an assignment from their history professor, see “Community Capacity” section below. Sixty students in Beaverhead County High School classes were visited by team members. Like the history organizations in Fort Benton, the museum and archives in Dillon operate at a more sophisticated level than others. The workshop was held in the “Old Depot Theatre”, a repurposed 1909 Union Pacific depot adjacent to the Museum/Research Library, itself comprised of log buildings moved onto the site. Clay Scott conducted “Homesteaders and Hired Men, an interview with a famed local rancher for his radio program, http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=5476 . As a lasting outcome of the Touchstone work, the very energetic museum director recently received a \$1,000 MMP grant from the MSL to scan and upload photographs of a Beaverhead County town flooded by the creation of Clark Canyon Lake in the early 1960s. Utilizing the PC each Touchstone community is presented with, she will be working directly with State Library staff and their scanner to ensure the work is to MMP standards for uploading.

2012

Roundup/Musselshell Valley, April 16-17; local partners were the *Roundup Community Library* (housed in Roundup High School) and *Musselshell Valley Historical Museum*; 20 attendees including one AP Roundup High School student. Postponed from the spring of 2011 due to historic flooding, the workshop was held in the meeting room of St. Benedict's Catholic Church, a late 20th century building on Main Street. While we were planning the workshop, MPA was informed that the future of the still-utilized National Register-listed 1910 Roundup Central School in the town center was uncertain given an upcoming bond measure to finance a new elementary school on the outskirts. As a result, our Touchstone Team/Montana SHPO member focused on the two-story stone schoolhouse in her fieldwork presentation to advocate for the building. This interaction with the community laid the groundwork for MPA's work—which continues to this day--to ensure due diligence is done in assessing the building's viability as a school for the 21st century. An interview with one of Montana's most successful real estate developers who grew up in Roundup was conducted and will be summarized for the MMP. Team member Clay Scott also interviewed a local homestead history expert for the "Up in Smoke: Homesteading Along the Musselshell" episode for his Mountain West Voices radio program. http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=5739

Simms/Sun River Valley, May 2-3; local partners were *Simms High School*, *the Sun River Valley Historical Society* (SRVHS) and *the Great Falls/Cascade County Historic Preservation Commission*; 19 attended including six students from Simms High School which is adjacent to the Simms Community Church where the workshop was held. Built upon a Federal government "City Beautiful" townplan, much of Simms' tiny downtown has been stripped of its historical appearance save for a women's clubhouse and a boarded-up early 20th century Shingle Style church sold to a private party years ago by the Catholic diocese. Given this building's location and history, it could be a wonderful repository but much of the local historic preservation energy has been dedicated to the acquisition of the magnificent Adams stone barn and to preserve territorial era extant adobe/clapboard buildings at nearby Fort Shaw. The SRVHS is amassing an archives collection at the fort and so were especially appreciative of the archival and storage supplies provided through the project. To further assist this striving historical society we brought Professor Frank Matero of the Architectural Conservation Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, who was conducting a Praxis course at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, to visit the SRVHS' buildings and give a general assessment of their condition and treatment. Touchstone Team member Clay Scott conducted and broadcast an episode

“Names on the Map: Dry Land Homestead Communities of Teton County, Montana”

http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=5555 .

Columbus/Stillwater County, November 27-28; local partner was the *Museum of the Beartooths*; 28 attendees. The workshop was held in the New Atlas Bar, a National Register-listed historic watering hole renowned throughout Montana. The attendees were among the most engaged for any Touchstone workshop, thanks to the involvement of the local museum and its very active director. As a follow-up to the workshop, the Museum has committed to recruiting a volunteer who will scan and upload 2,300 historic photographs from the Annin Collection that were published in *They Gazed on the Beartooths*, a three-volume local history already digitized and up on the MMP. Team member Clay Scott also conducted “The Last Leaf” interview with the daughter of an area homesteading family who graduated from Columbus High School in 1931. http://mountainwestvoices.org/?page_id=6929

2013

Helena/Lewis and Clark County, January 23-24; local partner was the *Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts*; 10 attendees at the Montana State Library. MPA has had a long-standing relationship with “the Bray”, an internationally renowned center for the ceramic arts founded on the grounds of the circa 1905 National Register-listed Western Clay Mfg. Co. (WCM) brickyard located just outside of Helena. The WCM’s history dates back over one hundred years and the history of the Bray, founded by the WCM’s arts-minded owner, is equally illustrious. Our ongoing preservation work at the Bray center on its 5 extant beehive downdraft kilns in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania’s Architectural Conservation Laboratory faculty, staff and students. The Touchstone workshop was a logical extension of this preservation work. The Bray’s archives are an unparalleled resource for documenting the mid-20th century emergence of clay from a craft medium to one of artistic expression and partnering with this very vital, active organization was an attempt to assist them in preserving this history. Artists and supporters of the Bray participated in the workshop and will be prioritizing what portions of their archives should be digitized and uploaded to the MMP. In addition, the very fine HABS/HAER documentary photographs taken the first summer UPenn was at the Bray are under consideration for an exhibition at the Holter Museum of Art, a regional museum in Helena.

As the Touchstone Project developed, various limits to capacity began to emerge that affected our scope and are instructive for future efforts:

***Community capacity:** This capacity varied greatly from town to town (whose populations, not counting Helena, ranged from 177 residents to 5,904) but size was not necessarily an indicator of workshop attendance or the capacity to benefit from the project. To generate wider interest and better acknowledge the larger historical context, we expanded the workshop scope from the community itself, e.g. the town of Simms, to take into consideration its county or a distinct cultural landscape, e.g. Sun River Valley. We quickly observed that the great majority of the workshop attendees were of retirement age, and so worked closely with our local partners to occasionally engage students to portions of the workshop as their schedules permitted. This was especially successful at the Dillon workshop where the local college students' attendance (whose academic year is organized into month-long experiential learning blocks/classes) was assigned by their history professor, and where workshop presenters also went into the local high school, reaching an additional 60 students through the course of the day.

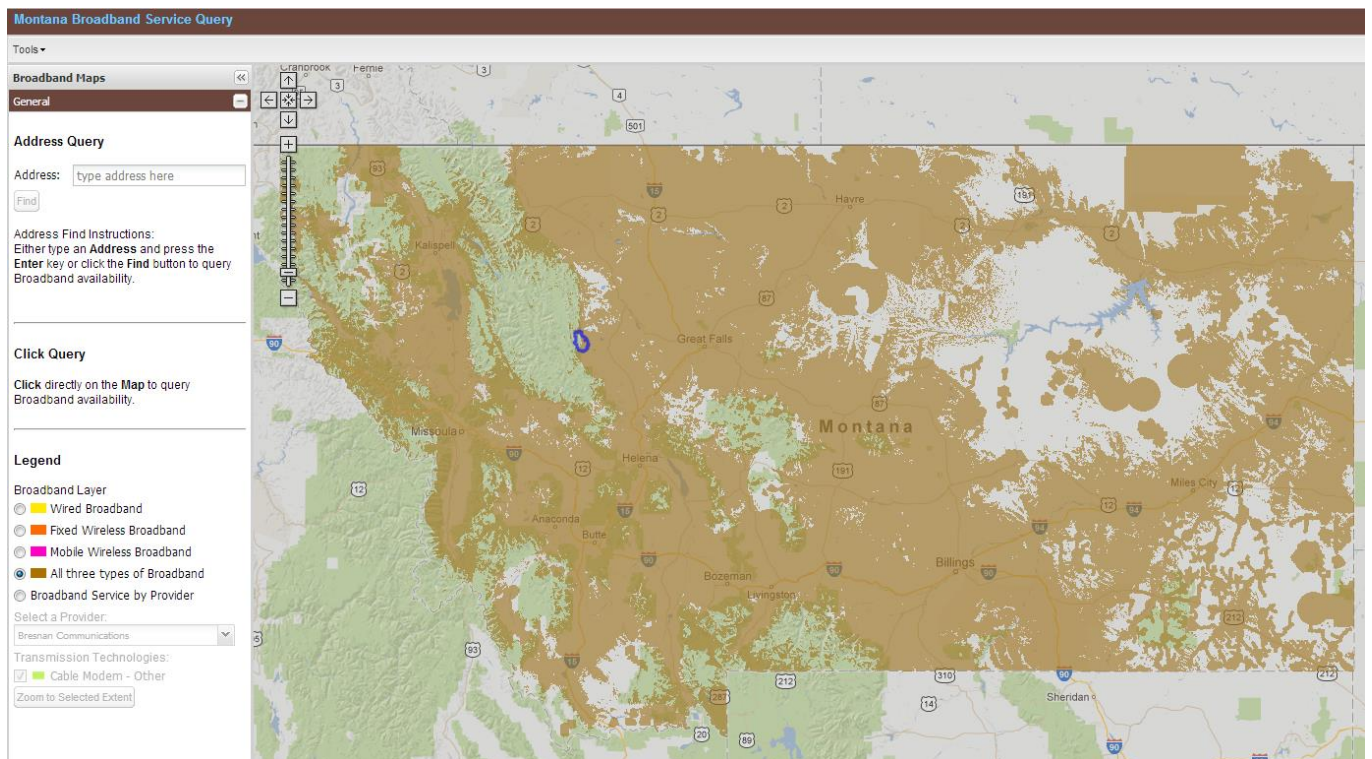
We found that the workshops whose attendees were the most engaged were those whose local museum/historical society had a strong presence (Columbus and Dillon, especially) and/or had hosted the Montana Heritage Project (MHP), a Liz Claiborne/Art Ortenberg Foundation community history initiative that ran for ten years, 1995-2005. <http://www.montanaheritageproject.org/edheritage/index.htm> The legacy of the MHP—its mission “Five steps from community-centered schools to education-centered communities”—was evident still in the six Touchstone Project towns that had participated in it. Workshop attendees from these communities, some of whom were schoolteachers who had participated in the MHP, retained a heightened appreciation for heritage resources.

As welcoming and eager as communities seemed to be to host the Touchstone Project workshops and pursue the related objectives, we found they were often stretched to the limit already with current projects. In Big Arm, for example, where MPA had provided several years of assistance and guidance in restoring the one-room schoolhouse, the head volunteer noted that even though contributing to the MMP was a desirable outcome:

“Big Arm Association's main goal is to restore the school and turn it into a functional community building and local history museum. We will be holding three events this summer [2012] to raise funds to continue the work. We are very excited about eventually having the time and money to process the historic documents and photographs and to be part of the Montana Memory Project,

but the building restoration must come first. In our past endeavors we have discovered that people are more willing to be involved, either physically or financially, if their history is going to be part of the future collection. Hence our drive to recruit more historical items this summer and the importance to be able to make copies rather than keeping the original documents. In a way it will be completing an informal "metadata", although perhaps not using all of MSL's guidelines."

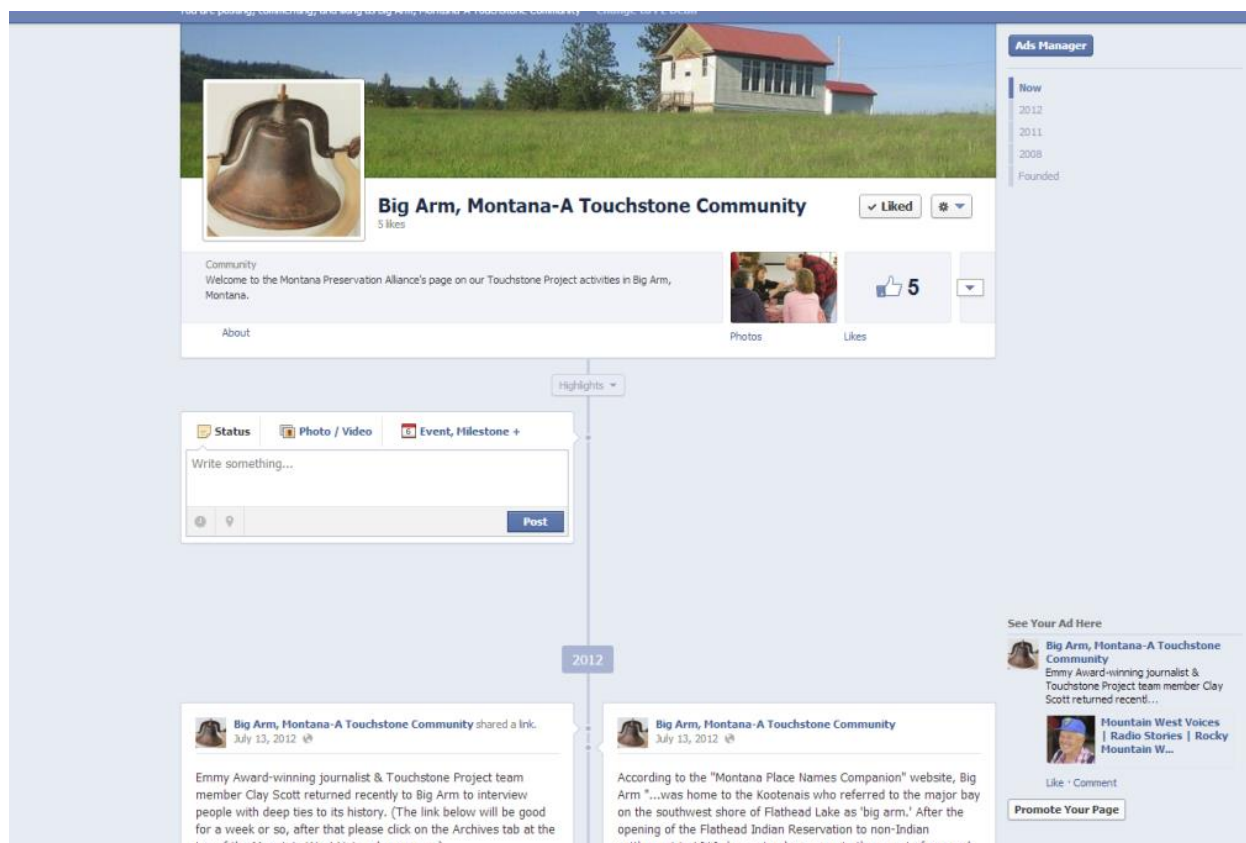
***Broadband capacity:** Many of our workshop partners either lacked or could not afford the broadband capacity necessary to easily access the MMP where their community's history was to reside. Additionally, very few workshop venues had Web or Wi-Fi access so the Touchstone Team made do with print screens of the pertinent site pages in their presentations. It was ironic yet logical that the conditions, i.e. remoteness and older and/or declining population which threatened a community's heritage, were the very factors driving the need to preserve, digitize and disseminate their history on the Web.



Brown areas shows broadband service (wired, fixed and mobile) <http://206.127.112.131/mtservice/mapquery/default.aspx>

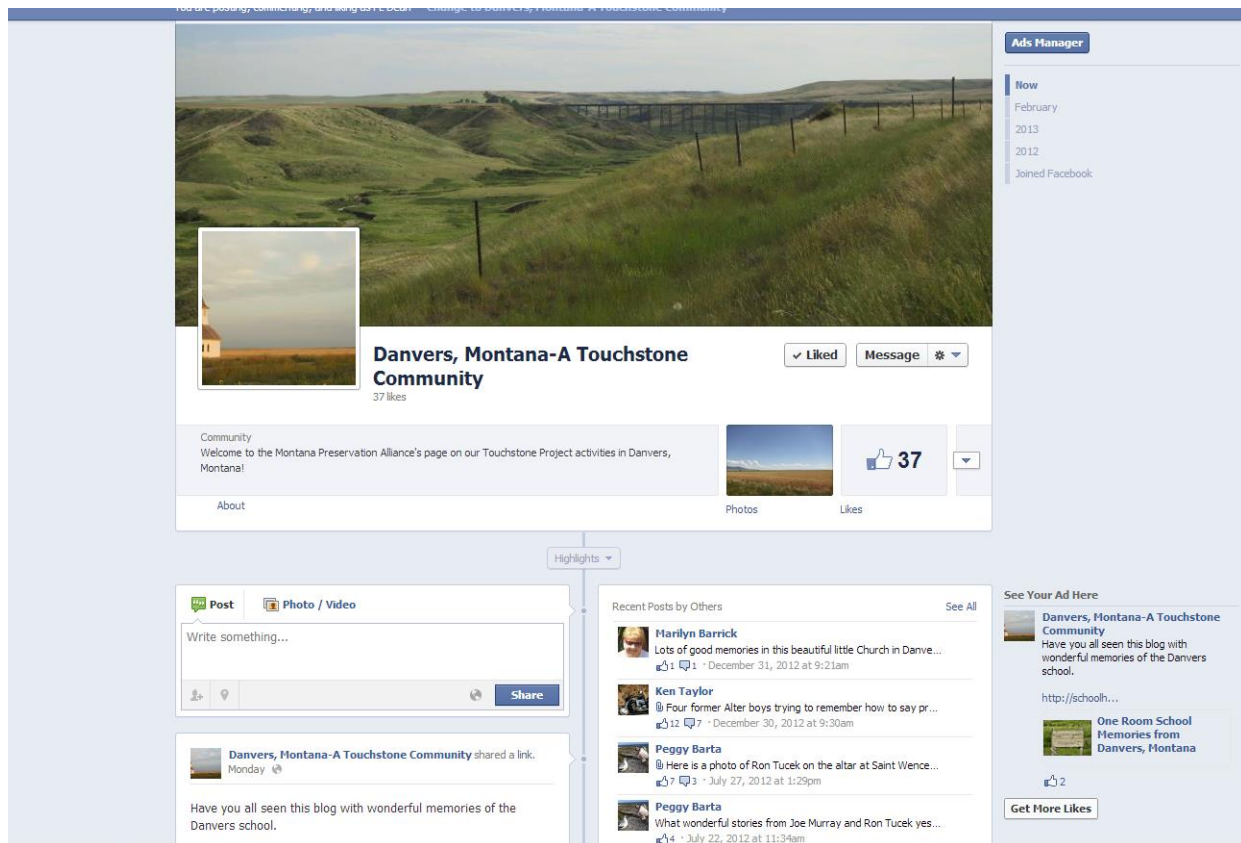
***FB and social media capacity:** Facebook (FB) pages were created for the first two Touchstone workshop locations, Danvers/Lewistown and Big Arm, yielding very different outcomes. To jumpstart both FB pages, Ms. Dean uploaded the photographs she'd taken of the locales on her initial visit as well as links to the radio program interviews of area residents produced by the Touchstone Team oral

historian/journalist. Nearly one year after its creation, the Big Arm FB page had only 5 likes and these were all made by members of the Touchstone Team. Although the Big Arm workshop attendees were advised of the page's creation and that it was theirs to use as they wish, there was no interaction with it.



Big Arm, Montana-A Touchstone Community Facebook page, retrieved 6 March 2013

Happily, the converse was true with the Danvers/Lewistown FB page with 37 “likes”. This page was updated frequently by a museum studies graduate program intern conducting additional oral history interviews with Danvers descendants and researching/writing a National Register nomination for the St. Wenceslaus Church. (See “Adjusted Goals” section.) She also embedded video oral history interview excerpts on the page prompting one person--who had no connection to Danvers—to comment: “What a wonderful page, it makes me want to pack up and move here. Thank you ‘Building in the Past’ [a FB page with 5,500 likes and created by an Oregon artist who is: “...reconstructing the West, one miniature at a time...”] for leading me here.”



Danvers, Montana-A Touchstone Community Facebook page, retrieved 6 March 2013

Given the mixed success of this social media experiment and that several of our local partners already had a web or Facebook presence (sometimes static or out-of-date), these were the only two FB pages created. In the future, it could be productive to insert a Touchstone Community web presence into a community's extant social media.

***Montana Memory Project capacity:** The project encountered two issues with MMP capacity, the first being that the operative model requires posting through local libraries meaning it was not possible for MPA to submit materials directly ourselves. Therefore the project was sometimes hampered by the local library's existing or potential relationship with the MMP and by the struggles of the MMP itself. This first issue was easily addressed by the Touchstone Team MMP/MSL trainer who would meet with a local librarian and encourage him/her to register for the workshop--a vital link as the MMP committee only reviews proposals from repository organizations like libraries/archives or museums. This task, too, had varying degrees of success as some libraries were already contributing to the MMP or were strongly considering it, while the remainder had other priorities.

But an even more critical roadblock proved to be the MMP itself which was experiencing a period of transition during the Touchstone Project. Originally, in September 2010, the MSL planned to issue an RFI for people familiar with digitization and content management systems to serve as on-call trainers and spend two to three days in repositories/communities wishing to participate in the MMP, "...possibly ending up with at least one new MMP collection per community". [2 September 2010 MMP Executive Committee minutes] This strategy would have aligned well with the Touchstone Project but was not realized due to MSL staffing shortages and shifting priorities.

Additionally, each Project Proposal Description (PPD) required MMP Executive Committee approval and was onerous for small repositories to complete easily and quickly. By early 2011, the MMP Executive Committee recognized "that the system needs an overhaul." A new, more accessible PPD to facilitate this was not finalized (due to MSL staffing changes) until November 2012, near the Touchstone Project's end. Further, the MSL had not decided whether the Touchstone collections would be discrete entities or integrated with existing collections from the area.

Continuing issues included vendors' abilities to provide OCR that could be utilized in CONTENTdm, the MMP's digital collections management software. As an internal MSL document noted: "Two vendors have provided OCR as part of the scanning process, but the text search/highlight feature doesn't function in CONTENTdm...an important issue because of the limited number of available OCR licenses for libraries doing scanning in-house and the length of time some of the projects require the license." The MSL has had a contract with CONTENTdm for the past five years but are now considering issuing an RFI to "discover what options are available for the MMP."

Nonetheless, in late 2012, the MMP announced a grant program (funded by IMLS) to offer up to \$1,500 per repository for non-equipment/non-acquisition costs associated with scanning, uploading, documenting and/or uploading a collection to the MMP. Applicants needed to complete the revised PPD form describing the collection and provide a narrative report at the grant period's end. Information on this assistance was forwarded to all of the Touchstone Project local partners and two applied: the Beaverhead County Museum who, as noted above, received \$1,000 to scan and upload the Armstead photos and the Lewistown Public Library who did not receive funding.

ADJUSTED GOALS

Throughout the Touchstone Project, evaluations completed by workshop attendees and meetings with team members and MPA staff informed the directions of and adjustments to the project. An FAQ about the project was prepared and distributed at history conferences, in solicitations and responses to communities and partners. Realizing that it's not possible to determine the quality or quantity of primary sources in a community over a few days' stay, we instituted a "show and tell" session during lunch on the workshop's second day. In press releases and in-person, attendees were invited to bring objects, documents, photographs, etc., from their personal or repository collections to "show and tell". This was an effective way to shift the spotlight to the local history practitioners and to informally relinquish the authority of the Touchstone Team back to the community.

Circling back to communities and reinforcing progress from the workshops emerged as a key strategy. We began by assigning one of our summer graduate school interns, Jeana Ganskop from the Cooperstown Graduate Programs/SUNY, to focus expressly on working with the Danvers Touchstone contacts who had accomplished so much. This proved to be perhaps the most satisfying Touchstone experience as Ms. Ganskop transcribed oral history interviews done by some of the descendants (a necessary step for uploading to the MMP as they presently lack the bandwidth to upload complete digital audio files), conducted/transcribed more interviews on her own, and worked with the Lewistown Public Library staff to complete a PPD. She also immersed herself in the history of the Catholic Church and Bohemian immigrants to Montana, the "Milwaukee Road's" role in settlement, and the Czech language and folkways. Ms. Ganskop completed an excellent draft of an NR nomination for St. Wenceslaus Church that the Montana SHPO is reviewing. It was useful to realize that a constant presence in the community, at least true for this one, could yield greater results more in line with the Project's objectives.

We also proposed digitizing a community collection, the records of the Danvers Women's Club, an endangered primary source housed in an unplugged refrigerator in their clubhouse adjacent to St. Wenceslaus in the middle of the Montana prairie. One of our supporters in the community strove mightily to convince her fellow club members to permit Jeana to scan and archival rehouse their records on-site, and prepare the metadata the MMP would require. It seemed like a win-win situation for all: the Women's Club's records would secure a digital "backup", they would be better-housed in their Clubhouse and their

inclusion in the MMP would offer access to a wide range of researchers, historians, genealogists, etc. Unfortunately, the majority of the Club's members balked at the idea of their records being accessible on the Web, professing concern that someone might actually steal or destroy the originals once word about them was out. Without their consent to propose their records to the MMP, we could not permit their scanning.

FUTURE PROJECT PLANS

The Touchstone Project provided an entrée for us to engage with new communities, as was true with Simms, for example, and grow existing partnerships as we broadened our focus beyond preserving and documenting the built environment to include other types of primary sources. Our local partners and community stakeholders have a better grasp of the possibilities available to them through MPA, MHS and the MSL. Given this success, we shall continue to fundraise for more Touchstone Project workshops and continue to work with the local partners we have in these small towns.

We shall also continue to work with the MSL and its new director, whose digital initiatives are now central to their mission and workplans. The first step in this direction has already occurred as a meeting organized by Humanities Montana (HM) "...to share and coordinate work on digital initiatives...", took place at the MSL on June 21st, 2013. The meeting was called as, in its Executive Director's words: "We recognize the increasing amount of work dedicated to digital humanities in the state...We would encourage organizations to cooperate and coordinate on projects of shared interest...We are often approached about funding for digital projects and it would help us to know the ecology of digital activities in Montana." The meeting was a success with 23 people from across the state in attendance including staff from HM, university libraries and departments, MSL, Montana Office of Tourism, MHS, MPA, two foundations, and a city/county public archives.

In the end, the Touchstone Project has given MPA a seat at the digital humanities table on the state and national levels as well as providing the means for us to forge or renew and strengthen our relationship with a wide range of history-minded communities around Montana.