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# D. Right Place, Right Time

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## Right Place, Right Time

After my wife, Marian, retired from her position at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library at the University of Montana, she continued to volunteer one day per week at the library and would still send requests to me for metadata edits for various photos in the Montana Memory Project ([MMP](#)) collection. In the holiday season of late 2017, Marian referred me to [umt012633](#) and asked, “what is (was) the H & N Railroad?”

The metadata indicated an 1890’s date. The photo was from the William A. Hoblitzell collection. According to [Archives West](#) (2018a), Hoblitzell was the chief clerk for the Northern Pacific Railroad from 1890 to 1894, and he lived in Missoula during that time. His collection includes several photos with railroad themes.

In many of the requests regarding train locomotives or rolling stock, questions are generally triggered by something painted on the locomotive and/or the tender, in the cases of steam locomotives, or on a railcar. In this case, the original photograph was in an album and had a hand written note that referenced the H & N Railroad steam locomotive and tender in the photo. The photo is not clear enough to read H & N or any other markings. However, the locomotive appears to have a wheel arrangement of 2-6-0, a style called Mogul.

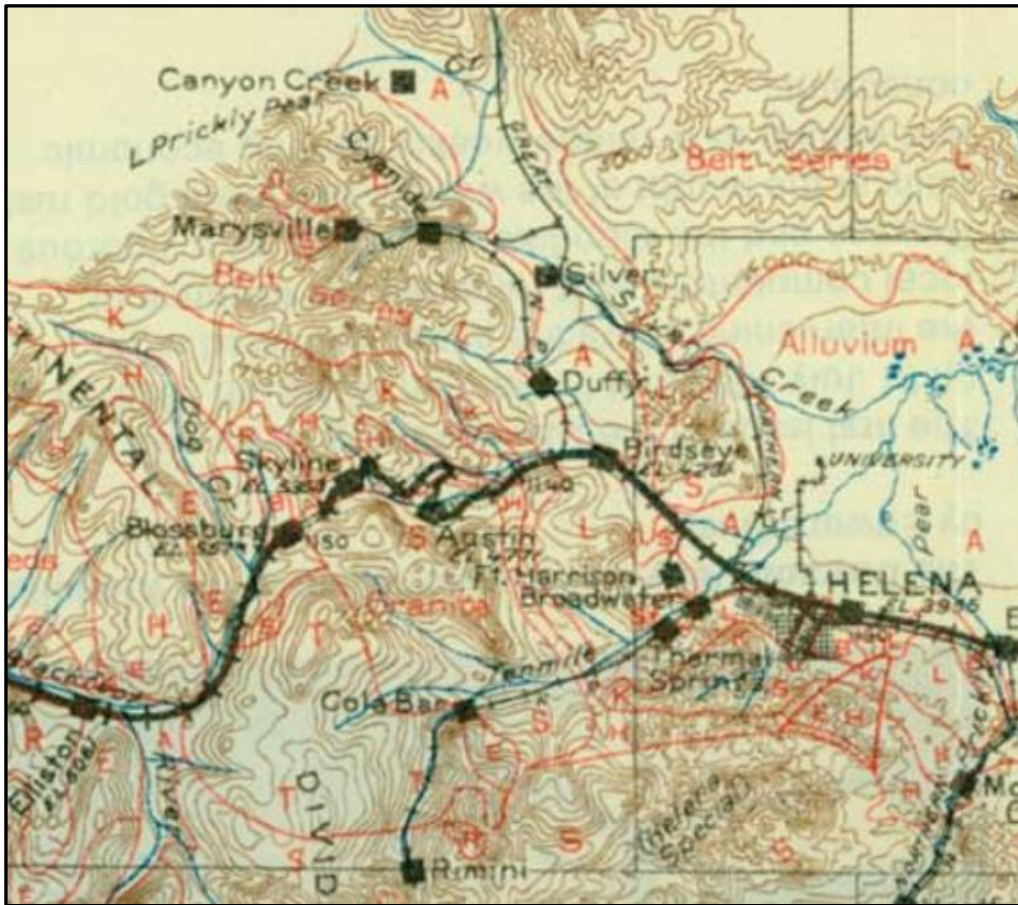
Because the hand written caption indicated the location was Helena (MT), my shoot from the hip guess in my initial reply to Marian was that, maybe, the railroad was the Helena and Northern. Helena came from the captioned location of the photo, and Northern came from the initial N. Railroads of the day commonly used a direction for the last word in the railway company’s name. Upon reading more of the metadata for the photo, I realized that Helena and Northern was already noted in the Subject field.

My work would seem to have been done. However, I wondered where the H & N Railroad actually ran, i.e., just what did the Northern part of the name indicate. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, western Montana had many short line railroads. Each line had a name and served a specific market, i.e., mining, in this case. Some short lines were built to support the logging industry, and the economic driver for others revolved around agriculture. Most of these short lines went out of business as the mines played out, the economic timber was cut, or trucks became more economical for transportation. Many of the short lines, however, were absorbed by the major railroads of the day, i.e., the Northern Pacific in the case at hand.

[Archives West](#) (2018b) indicates that the H & N Railroad Company, the Bitterroot Branch Line between Missoula and Hamilton, and some other short lines, were absorbed by the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1888. Archives West (2018b) lists many other Northern Pacific acquisitions that connected to the main Northern Pacific line to complete the Northern Pacific rail system across Montana.

These acquisitions may seem like a strange business strategy. The reason, however, was related to the company’s charter from the US Congress. The company was precluded from building branch lines to feed into its main line. Therefore, the company would invest with regional entrepreneurs to build the branch lines. Once the branches and spurs were built and operational, the Northern Pacific could purchase the completed short line.

The [Railroads of Montana](#) website (Jones, 2018) indicates that the H & N Railroad operated from Clough Junction, about eight railway miles northwest of Helena, to Marysville, MT, from



**Figure 1. Portion of Sheet No. 17 (US Geological Survey, 1915).** The railroads are indicated by black lines with cross ticks. The mainline of the Northern Pacific is the bold black line. Spurs and the Great Northern branch between Helena and Havre are in a finer black line. The original map indicates that the cross ticks are spaced at one mile intervals, which allows the distances between the towns to be estimated. If Clough Junction was at the intersection of the Northern Pacific and the H & N as mapped, then Clough Junction was about one mile west of Birdseye. The H & N Railroad ran northward from Clough Junction past Duffy and Cyanide to Marysville.

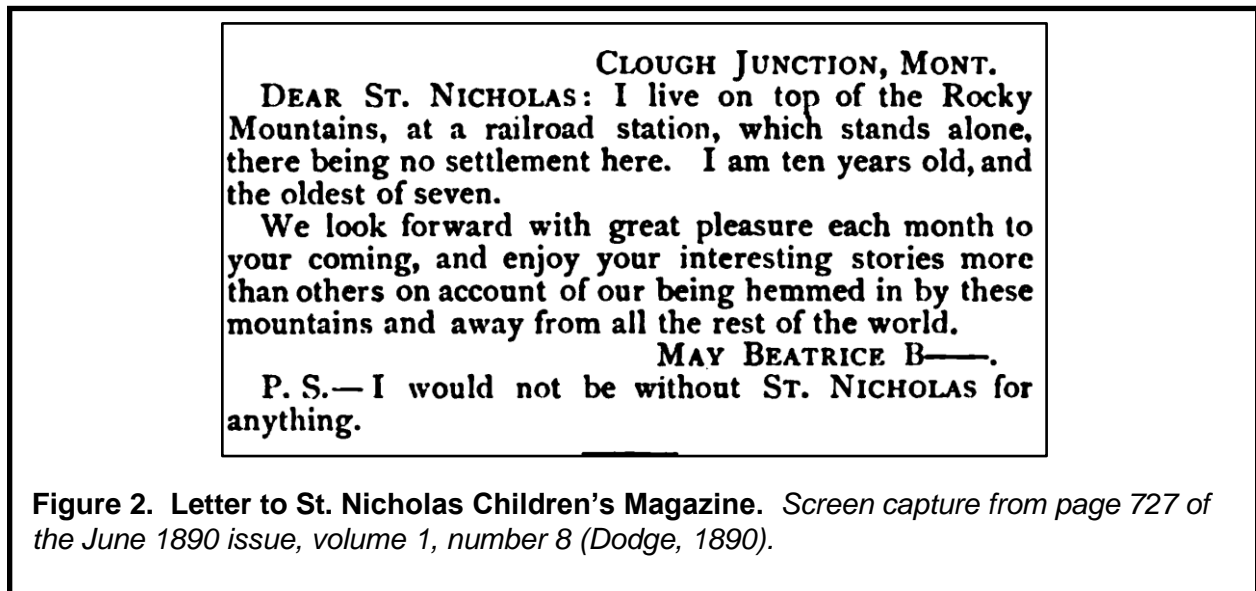
November 1887 to September 1888, i.e., until the Northern Pacific takeover. The [Genealogy Trails](#) (2018) website for Lewis and Clark County, MT, indicates that Clough Junction had a US Post Office for about four years from 1894 to 1898 with one Mary Brien being in charge. The Genealogy Trails website mentions that a post office opened in 1898 in the nearby settlement of Birdseye, i.e., postal operations moved from Clough Junction to Birdseye.

A US Geological Survey [report](#) (1915) shows a detailed map of the Northern Pacific route from Townsend, MT, to Elliston, MT (Figure 1). The map, which was published long after the Northern Pacific acquisition of the H & N Railroad in 1888, also shows spurs off of the mainline. The H & N spur is mapped, and it is labeled N. P.

From Clough Junction, the line ran north approximately 6 miles and then westward approximately 6 miles into Marysville, a booming mining town in the 1890's. While Clough is not

labeled on the map in Figure 1, the junction at Clough was about one mile west of the Birdseye settlement.

In researching Clough Junction, I came across “St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks, v17, part 2” (Dodge, 1890), which is available through Google Books. The letter from the 10 year old child (Figure 2) would suggest that in 1890, Clough Junction comprised just the train station. The vicinity of the junction might have had a station and a section house as depicted in photos of 1905 Birdseye on the [Helena History](#) (2018) site.



**Figure 2. Letter to St. Nicholas Children’s Magazine.** *Screen capture from page 727 of the June 1890 issue, volume 1, number 8 (Dodge, 1890).*

Sometimes, old topographic maps in the USGS historical topographic maps collection will show the locations of railroads that are now abandoned. Unfortunately, old maps are not always available for an area of interest. That is the case here.

More modern maps of an area of interest might show the location of an abandoned railroad grade. The 1950 15' x 15' Helena quadrangle, which is available through the USGS historical maps website, shows a “jeep” trail branching from the county road, which runs close to the Northern Pacific tracks, approximately one mile west of Birdseye. The “jeep” trail was probably on the railroad grade. The more recent 1985 Mt. Austin 7.5' x 7.5' topographic map does not show the “jeep” trail.

The Google Earth view of Birdseye and vicinity (Figure 3) clearly shows the abandoned railroad grade. The aerial view suggests that a turning wye and stub siding were in place about one half mile northeast of the junction.

With the help of the historical USGS topographic map collection, one can fly the Virtual Airplane (Google Earth satellite views) from the Clough Junction area to Marysville. Some segments are obscured by cultivation and roads, but much of the path of the abandoned railroad can be easily traced.

The map in Figure 1 shows the branch of the Great Northern Railroad that extended from Havre to Helena. A spur from the Great Northern line ran westward toward Marysville. An article on





**Figure 3. Google Earth View of Birdseye and Clough Junction Area.** The 1890's Birdseye settlement was near the red marker labeled Birdseye near the right edge of this view. The abandoned H & N railroad grade is the arcuate feature that trends from the southwest corner of the view (lower left) to the top of the view near the center of the frame. The turning wye with stub siding is visible on the east (right) side of the grade somewhat above the center of the frame. The Birdseye station referenced in the Helena History (2018) website is out of the frame, southeast of the Birdseye marker approximately one third of a mile. *Image © 2018 Google.*

the [Montana Moments](#) website (Baumler, 2013) indicates that Marysville was served by the Northern Pacific (the H & N spur) and the Montana Central, which was the spur off of the Great Northern branch between Havre and Helena. The H & N route, however, seems to have been the favored route between Marysville and Helena.

The 1915 USGS report is an amazing document in that the map sheet (Figure 1) shows topography and geology in addition to the railways. The geologic contacts in Figure 1 are red lines, and the geologic unit names are in red print. South of Marysville, the rocks are labeled as "Belt Series". However, Marysville itself sits at the edge of a granitic stock ("G" on the map), the source of the gold that was initially mined in the creeks and later underground.

Figure 4 is a pair of letters printed in the St. Nicholas magazine. The letter in Figure 4 from the child, dated 12-19-1889, the holiday season of that year, actually predates the letter in Figure 2. The letters in Figure 2 and in Figure 4 were most likely written by the same girl, Mary (or May) Beatrice Brien.

One might wonder whether the letter writing girl of 1889-90 was the person in charge of the Clough Junction post office from 1894 to 1898.. Mary would have been 14 in 1894 and 18 four years later when the post office closed. Indeed, Mary Beatrice was born in 1890 and was 3

HERE are two interesting letters received several months ago at the publication office of ST. NICHOLAS.

UNION CLUB, BOSTON, Jan. 16, 1890.

THE CENTURY CO. :

DEAR SIR: The inclosed note speaks for itself. I threw off the train, last August, a copy of ST. NICHOLAS, and asked the finder, if a child, to send to you and order the magazine for one year. To-day this reply is received, and I write to ask you to send ST. NICHOLAS for one year to MARY BEATRICE BRIEN, CLOUGH JUNCTION STATION, MONTANA.

Kindly send bill to me and I will remit.

Yours truly, EDWARDS ROBERTS.

CLOUGH JUNCTION STATION, MONTANA,  
12 — 19, 1889.

EDWARDS ROBERTS, Esq. :

DEAR SIR: Whilst looking over the ST. NICHOLAS *which you so kindly threw off the train a few miles west of Helena, a few months ago*, I discovered on the fly-leaf a note desiring that the little one who found that magazine might benefit by it for a year, and send the bill to you. As it is near Christmas, I will be very happy to accept it as a Christmas gift.

Wishing you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, Very truly yours, MARY BEATRICE BRIEN,  
Nine years old.

**Figure 4. Letter from Mary Beatrice Brien to Edwards Roberts in Response to Finding a Copy of the St. Nicholas Magazine.** Ms Brien evidently did receive a subscription to the children's magazine as suggested by the letter in Figure 2. *Screen capture from page 640 of the May 1890 issue (Dodge, 1890).*

months old at the time of the 1890 census (June 8) (US Census, 1890). According to the census card, Mary's father, Mortimer, was a telegrapher, presumably at the Clough Junction station, and her mother, Bertha, was a home maker. The Mary Brien mentioned above (Genealogy Trails, 2018) as the Clough Junction postmaster would seem to have been this Mary (Beatrice) Brien. A teenager in that setting may well have had the skills and maturity to handle the responsibilities of a postal clerk, which might have entailed little more than selling stamps and sorting mail for a few local patrons in that remote setting.

Taken together, the letters in Figures 2 and 4 tell the story of a young girl who seems to have been at the right place at the right time in order to receive a magazine subscription that she valued and that helped to connect her to the mainstream of late 19<sup>th</sup> century society.

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