A History of Montana

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Montana, often called the "Treasure State," possesses a rich and complex history shaped by its dramatic landscapes, abundant natural resources, and the diverse peoples who have called it home. From the deep geological past to the modern era, Montana's story is a compelling narrative of ancient civilizations, daring exploration, resource booms, cultural clashes, and evolving identity.

The land that constitutes present-day Montana has a history stretching back billions of years, evidenced by its varied geological formations and significant fossil discoveries. Dinosaurs once roamed this region, leaving behind a wealth of fossils, including important finds of duck-billed dinosaurs and tyrannosaurs. This ancient past set the stage for the diverse ecosystems and resource-rich lands that would later attract both native peoples and newcomers.

Human habitation in Montana is traced back over 12,000 years. Archaeological evidence, such as the findings at the Anzick site, points to some of the earliest human presence in North America within Montana's borders. These early inhabitants were nomadic hunters, skillfully adapting to the environment and primarily subsisting on large game like the bison. Over millennia, distinct Native American tribes established themselves across the vast territory. By the 18th century, major tribes included the Crow (Apsáalooke) in the south-central plains, the Cheyenne in the southeast, the Blackfeet, Assiniboine, and Gros Ventres in the central and northern regions, and the Kootenai and Salish in the western mountains. The Pend d'Oreille lived around Flathead Lake, and the Kalispel inhabited the western mountainous areas. These tribes developed rich oral traditions, intricate social structures, and deep spiritual connections to the land, often following the seasonal movements of the bison herds that were central to their economies and cultures.

The era of European exploration in Montana began cautiously. While French Canadian explorers like the La Vérendrye brothers may have ventured into the area in the mid-18th century, their impact was limited. The trajectory of Montana's history shifted significantly with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which brought most of the land under United States sovereignty. This monumental acquisition paved the way for the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806), a transformative journey that provided the first detailed American accounts of the region's geography, flora, fauna, and indigenous inhabitants. Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with the Corps of Discovery, spent a considerable amount of time traversing what is now Montana, navigating the Missouri River, documenting new species, and interacting with various tribes. Their exploration, guided in part by Sacagawea, a Shoshone woman, opened the door for subsequent American activity in the area. Notable sites

visited by the expedition within Montana include the Three Forks of the Missouri, the Great Falls, Pompeys Pillar, and Camp Disappointment.

Following closely behind the explorers came the fur traders and trappers, ushering in a significant, albeit relatively brief, economic era from roughly 1800 to the 1850s. Drawn by the promise of lucrative beaver pelts, both American and British/Canadian fur companies established trading posts throughout the territory. Manuel Lisa's establishment of Fort Raymond in 1807 at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers is considered the first American fur trading post in present-day Montana. The fur trade facilitated cultural exchange but also introduced disruptive elements like disease and alcohol to Native American communities and contributed to the decline of fur-bearing animal populations, eventually leading to a shift towards the bison robe trade. This exploitation of natural resources for distant markets set a pattern that would repeat throughout Montana's history.

While scattered discoveries were made earlier, the discovery of significant gold deposits in the early 1860s triggered a rush of prospectors and fundamentally altered the demographic and political landscape of Montana. Placer gold discoveries in areas like Grasshopper Creek (leading to Bannack) and Alder Gulch (giving rise to Virginia City) attracted thousands seeking their fortune. Last Chance Gulch, another rich discovery, quickly grew into the settlement that would become Helena, the future state capital. This rapid influx of non-native population created an urgent need for governance and infrastructure.

In response to the population boom and the desire to secure the region's mineral wealth, the U.S. Congress established the Montana Territory on May 26, 1864, carved out of the existing Idaho Territory. Bannack served as the first territorial capital, followed by Virginia City and finally Helena. The territorial period was marked by continued conflicts between Native American tribes and the encroaching settlers, often fueled by disputes over land and resources. Major confrontations included engagements during the Great Sioux War and the Nez Perce War, with notable battles such as the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Battle of the Big Hole. Despite instances of Native American victories, the overall pressure from the U.S. military and settler expansion led to the confinement of tribes onto reservations, significantly disrupting their traditional ways of life.

Simultaneously with the gold rush, the foundations of Montana's agricultural industry were being laid. Cattle ranching emerged in the western valleys to supply food to the mining camps, and open-range cattle operations expanded across the eastern plains. The harsh winter of 1886-1887 proved devastating to the open-range cattle industry, leading to a shift towards fenced pastures and more sustainable agricultural practices. Sheep ranching also gained importance, and by the turn of the 20th century, Montana had become one of the leading sheep-producing states.

As Montana progressed through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the region experienced further change and modernization: the arrival of the transcontinental railroads, the rise of copper and coal industries, waves of homesteaders seeking opportunity, the impacts of the World Wars, environmental challenges, and cultural transformations. Despite the boom-and-bust cycles, the people of Montana have forged a resilient identity shaped by both adversity and opportunity. This book will explore the long arc of Montana's history, illuminating the remarkable narrative of a land and its people in the heart of the American West.

CHAPTER ONE: The Ancient Land: Montana’s Prehistoric Past

Before the arrival of any human, before even the appearance of familiar mammals, the land that would one day be called Montana was already ancient, shaped by forces that dwarf our everyday understanding of time. Its history is etched in the very rocks beneath our feet, a saga of continental collisions, inland seas, volcanic eruptions, and the slow, persistent work of erosion and deposition spanning billions of years. This deep geological past created the diverse landscapes we see today, from the rugged peaks of the Rockies to the rolling plains of the east, and laid the foundation for the life that would eventually flourish here.

The oldest rocks in Montana are incredibly ancient, part of the Archean Wyoming Craton, dating back over 3 billion years. These crystalline basement rocks, found in areas like the Beartooth Mountains, represent the earliest stable crustal blocks that began to form the core of the North American continent. Imagine a world utterly alien, without complex life or even a recognizable atmosphere, where immense geological pressures were at work, forging the very bones of the land.

Moving forward through the Precambrian Era, which accounts for roughly 80% of Earth's history, significant changes continued. In western Montana, particularly around what is now Glacier National Park, thick sequences of sedimentary rocks, known as the Belt Supergroup, accumulated in a vast, shallow sea starting around 1.5 billion years ago. These rocks, thousands of feet thick, contain some of the oldest evidence of life in Montana – fossilized mats of blue-green algae called stromatolites, and trace fossils left by simple, bottom-dwelling organisms. While simple life was present, the land itself remained barren and unpopulated.

The Paleozoic Era, spanning from approximately 544 to 251 million years ago, saw seas repeatedly wash over much of the Montana region. These warm, shallow marine environments were teeming with early forms of life. Fossils found in Montana from this era include primitive fish, hard-shelled creatures like clams and snails, brachiopods, trilobites, and crinoids. Layers of sediment deposited by these ancient seas built up over millions of years, forming the basis of many rock units seen today in mountain ranges like the Big Belt and Bighorn Mountains. On land, early plants and forests began to appear, though the landscape was still vastly different from modern forests.

The transition to the Mesozoic Era, from about 251 to 66 million years ago, marked the dawn of the "Age of Dinosaurs." This was a dynamic period geologically, with forces beneath the Earth's surface causing significant uplift and subsidence. Shallow seas

and swamps persisted in parts of the state, while other areas featured coastal plains and eventually the beginnings of mountain building to the west. The climate was generally warmer than today, supporting lush vegetation, including conifers, cycads, ferns, ginkgoes, and later, flowering plants.

Montana is world-renowned for its incredible wealth of dinosaur fossils, offering a vivid window into these ancient ecosystems. Over 75 different species of dinosaurs have been discovered within the state's borders. During the Late Jurassic period, around 155 million years ago, Montana was home to impressive creatures like the massive, long-necked sauropods *Apatosaurus* and *Diplodocus*, the armored *Stegosaurus*, and the fearsome carnivorous *Allosaurus*. These animals roamed lowlands near a warm, inland sea that covered much of northern and eastern Montana.

As the Mesozoic moved into the Cretaceous period (about 145 to 66 million years ago), the environment continued to evolve. The Western Interior Seaway, a vast inland sea, came to cover significant portions of North America, including much of eastern and central Montana, effectively dividing the continent. This seaway was home to marine reptiles like mosasaurs and plesiosaurs, as well as ammonites and other marine life.

The coastal plains bordering this seaway in Montana were exceptionally rich in dinosaur life. Formations like the Judith River and Hell Creek formations in eastern Montana are particularly famous for yielding abundant fossils from this time. Here, paleontologists have unearthed a stunning array of dinosaurs.

The duck-billed dinosaurs, or hadrosaurs, were particularly common inhabitants of these coastal plains. One of the most significant discoveries was that of *Maiasaura* ("good mother lizard") near Choteau, which provided the first strong evidence that some dinosaurs cared for their young and nested in colonies. These nesting grounds offer a glimpse into the social behavior of these fascinating animals.

Other inhabitants of Cretaceous Montana included horned dinosaurs like *Triceratops* and *Einiosaurus*, armored dinosaurs such as *Ankylosaurus* and *Sauropelta*, and a variety of carnivorous theropods. Among the most famous predators was *Tyrannosaurus rex*, whose fossilized remains, including some of the most complete specimens ever found, have been discovered in the Hell Creek Formation. The discovery of *Deinonychus* in Montana in the 1960s was also pivotal, suggesting a closer link between dinosaurs and birds than previously thought.

Volcanic activity was also a feature of the Mesozoic in Montana. Layers of ash from eruptions are interbedded within the sedimentary rocks, and some isolated mountain ranges in central Montana are remnants of ancient volcanoes. The Laramide orogeny, a major mountain-building event, began during the Cretaceous, starting to uplift the Rocky Mountains in the west and influencing the deposition of sediments across the

state.

The Mesozoic Era ended dramatically about 66 million years ago with the K-Pg extinction event, likely caused by an asteroid impact, which led to the demise of the non-avian dinosaurs and many other life forms worldwide. Evidence of this event can be found in the geological record in Montana.

Following this mass extinction, the Cenozoic Era (66 million years ago to the present) began, often called the "Age of Mammals." While the seas largely withdrew from Montana early in this era, geological activity continued to shape the landscape. The Rocky Mountains continued to rise due to ongoing tectonic forces. Volcanic activity persisted in some areas, contributing to the formation of ranges like the Absarokas.

Erosion, driven by rivers and later glaciers, began carving the mountains and depositing vast amounts of sediment in intermontane valleys and across the eastern plains. These Cenozoic deposits preserve a different suite of fossils, reflecting the rise and diversification of mammals. Ancient streams flowed across the landscape, and environments shifted over millions of years.

During the Cenozoic, Montana was home to mammals that might seem surprising today, such as camels and titanotheres. Fossils from this era provide a record of evolving ecosystems and the emergence of mammal groups that would eventually lead to modern species. The climate cooled significantly over the Cenozoic, leading to the Ice Ages in the later part of the era.

Glaciers became a powerful force of landscape sculpting during the Pleistocene epoch, advancing and retreating multiple times across parts of Montana. These massive ice sheets carved valleys, reshaped mountains, and deposited vast amounts of rock and sediment, leaving behind features like moraines and glacial lakes. Even areas not directly covered by glaciers were impacted by the changing climate and meltwater.

The cumulative effect of these immense geological and biological processes over eons created the physical stage upon which the subsequent chapters of Montana's history would unfold. The mineral wealth that would later draw prospectors was forged deep within the Earth during periods of intense geological activity. The sedimentary basins that held ancient seas and housed dinosaurs would become the sources of fossil fuels. The mountains and plains, shaped by uplift, erosion, and ice, would define the routes of explorers and the settlements of newcomers. The ancient land of Montana, with its deep past etched in stone and bone, was ready for its next inhabitants.

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