

Athlete's challenge becomes Queen City tradition

NUGGETS FROM HELENA

DAVID CURD

For the Independent Record

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Runners start the long climb up Mount Helena in 2018 during the Mount Helena Classic race. BMGPHOTOS.COM

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For this article of the Nugget, we go back 107 years to April 29, 1916, in downtown Helena.

You are standing on the sidewalk at 51 N. Main (now called Last Chance Gulch) and are looking across the street at the Gold Block building (today you will see the Rialto).

There are eight men wearing running shoes, and they are standing in front of Moore's Book and Stationery store at 50 N. Main St. One man, E.S. Thomas, wears a suit with a tie. He is the athletic director at Helena High School (Helena's only public high school at the time) and he will start the runners on their race to the top of Mount Helena and back to Moore's.

Please do not cross the street without looking carefully both ways, as the electric trolleys frequently travel between 6th Avenue and Broadway. In the past 10 years people are buying and driving this new thing, an automobile, which doesn't look safe. Oh, it is Saturday, so the farmers are in town with their horse-drawn wagons to do the weekly shopping.

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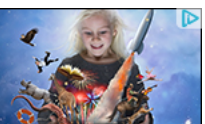
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But look to your left, up Main Street, and find the Weiss Café at 20 N. Main. The Bullwhacker statue that we know today, with his whip in action, is whipping toward the Weiss. There are a few people standing on the sidewalk and street outside the cafe.

Vic Norman works at the Weiss as a waiter and is termed a "coast athlete" by the newspaper. Those people standing in front of the Weiss Café are his friends, and customers; they will cheer him on. It was Vic's idea to put an advertisement in the newspaper challenging all comers to a run up the mountain. The reward? Medals for the first-, second and third place finishers.

Welcome to the first Mt. Helena Handicap, later to be known as the Mt. Helena Run.

Vic is one of the runners. We know the names of three others: Ben Burgess, Harvey "Speed" Yates, and Gross.

A few doors up Main from the Weiss is the Atlas Building, still endearing on the Gulch. It is here the runners will turn right onto Edwards Street and run up Edwards till they reached Ming Street, and from there, who knows where or how. There is no known course.

It is 3 p.m. and E.S. Thomas shouts, "to your marks, get set, go!" And the eight runners are off, past whomever was in their way, turning right at the Atlas and running with all their might. Thirty minutes and 58 seconds later, 20-year old Ben Burgess flashed past the finish line, slowing to a stop when he reached Sixth and Main.

When all the runners returned, the medals were handed out: first place to Ben, second to "Speed" Yates, third to Vic Norman. But Vic protested, "How could I be third when Gross was led off course and ran farther than I? I want Gross to have the medal, and let him be listed as the third place finisher." Ben took his medal home.

Ben's full name was Starrat John Burgess, the same as his father's. Ben's son was an owner in the funeral home on Sixth Avenue, Retz, Burgess, and Twichell. Ben was not related to the late Dr. Burgess, but they were neighbors. Ben kept the medal until he died in 1970 at age 74. His wife, Hazel, kept it thereafter.

In 1975, Rick Reese, a member of the Save Mount Helena Committee, had a meeting with Hazel and she surprised him with Ben's story and the history of the medal. After their visit, Rick and Wayne Philips, Tom Kotynski and Bill Schneider, along with others, decided to re-enact the 1916 race and formed the Mount Helena Race Committee.

The inaugural race, sponsored by Downtown Shoppers Inc., and assisted by the City of Helena Recreation Department, was held on Sept. 20, 1975. The run is ongoing, being held continuously since 1975, canceled only for wildfires and smoke. It is the sixth oldest footrace in Montana. The run is about 5.3 miles long with 1,368 vertical gains.

Sept. 23 will be the 48th anniversary of the Mt. Helena Run. The race has been continuous for all those years except when wildfire smoke caused it to be canceled. Visit

vigilanterunning.org

Maybe you will be the next Ben Burgess.

David Curd was a carpenter/ contractor for nearly 46 years before retiring two years ago. He's been a member of the Vigilante Running Club since 2019. Dave enjoys Helena, and Montana history. He is writing a book about Montana's oldest marathons. The Lewis and Clark County