

## Historical Narrative of Bozeman, Montana

*Developed in 2023 as a part of the Belonging in Bozeman Equity & Inclusion Plan which includes an abbreviated version of the following narrative.*

### Introduction

The history of Bozeman in its current [official version](#) is a story of economic growth that is largely attributed to vague external forces rather than human choice and agency. The narrative recognizes Lewis & Clark, John Bozeman, Daniel Rouse, and William Beall for their role in the early exploration and settlement of Bozeman. However, in subsequent parts of the narrative, individuals are portrayed as observers of community patterns rather than active shapers of its progress. By downplaying the role of individuals and attributing developments to abstract economic forces, the existing narrative overlooks the diverse and complex interplay of human decisions, innovations, and struggles that have profoundly shaped Bozeman. The following historical account seeks to center human experience, diverse perspectives, and the influence of individual and collective efforts in creating Bozeman. This approach aims to cultivate a deeper connection to Bozeman’s history, and thereby foster a stronger sense of shared identity with this place and its past.

### Methodology

The goal of inclusivity and shared identity shaped the methodology used to craft this historical narrative. The approach centered on roundtable discussions that engaged descendant community members, local equity advocates, and historical experts. These voices shaped the structure of the narrative, guided its questions, and illuminated its focal points. It is important to note that this approach does not yield a comprehensive, linear chronicle of Bozeman’s history; gaps and unanswered questions remain. However, what has emerged serves as a foundational framework – a mosaic of interconnected stories, experiences, and viewpoints that collectively helps readers to reimagine Bozeman’s past and invites us all to reflect, question, and participate in an ongoing dialogue about Bozeman’s multifaceted heritage.

### Historical Narrative

Beavers and bison, flora and fauna, were the original inhabitants of this place we now call Bozeman. Séliš (Bitterroot Salish), Qlispé (Pend d’Oreille), Ktunaxa (Kootenai), Pikuni (Blackfeet), Tsistsis’tas (Northern Cheyenne), Apsáalooke (Crow), Anishinaabe (Chippewa), Nehiyawak (Cree), Metis, Nakoda (Assiniboine), A’aninin (Gros Ventre), Dakota, Lakota, and other indigenous nations who have millennia-long relationships with this land, also had millennia-long relationships with these plant and animal Relatives. Some called this place the “Valley of the Fats” for its abundant flora and fauna. For Indigenous people, this Valley was a gathering place, it provided seasonal game and shared space. Settlers arrived in the 1860s with

a vastly different understanding of land and ownership. Where indigenous people had mapped a network of resources and relationships, settlers saw an unowned place, one they envisioned as terra nullius. These newcomers ascribed their own understandings onto the landscape. Settlers killed the bison, dismantled beaver dams, plowed the land, and built a city on top of the water. Colonization served to sever the relationships that Indigenous people had with their Relatives, profoundly altering the landscape and its inhabitants.

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In 1863, gold seekers bound for Alder Gulch invaded the Gallatin Valley, a region allocated as an intertribal hunting area under the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. In this valley, John Bozeman, a Georgian prospector disillusioned by the depleted gold reserves in Colorado, recognized an opportunity to amass personal wealth. He envisioned guiding emigrants from the Overland Trails to Alder Gulch by offering a shorter and less arduous route, even at the brutal cost of forcefully breaching treaty boundaries. Utilizing Indigenous trails, in 1863 John Bozeman and John Jacobs laid out the Bozeman Trail and led the first wagon train of emigrants through the Gallatin Valley the following year. At the crossing of what we now call Bozeman Creek, John Bozeman, William Beall, and Daniel Rouse platted a town to supply emigrants on the trail. When Indigenous people retaliated, the United States Infantry and Cavalry entered the Valley and built Fort Ellis under the guise of protecting emigrants. From Fort Ellis, soldiers enacted a brutal campaign of violent dispossession. On January 23, 1870, Colonel Eugene Baker led soldiers from Fort Ellis to attack hundreds of Piegan Blackfeet, primarily women, children, and the elderly, who were peacefully camped along the Marias River.

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It was government-sanctioned violent dispossession of Indigenous people that enabled non-Indigenous American settlement in the Gallatin Valley in the 1860s and all subsequent economic growth. Nelson Story became Bozeman's first millionaire in part by supplying flour to Fort Ellis and later to Fort Parker, the first Crow Agency located to the east of Bozeman. For Indigenous people, construction and operation of these Forts marked the beginning of a forced transition from their traditional buffalo hunting lifestyle as they were made refugees from their homelands. For the residents of the small town of Bozeman, they signaled safety and stability. For people like Story, the Forts were the source of a massive accumulation of wealth; it is men in this latter group whose names are now given pride of place in the Gallatin Valley.

According to the federal population census of 1870, there were just over 400 people living in Bozeman, outside of Fort Ellis. Nearly three-quarters of them were male. By 1880, the population had more than doubled. More women had moved to or been born in Bozeman; the male population had fallen slightly to 65% of the total.

These settlers were not exclusively white Americans. Nearly 20% of Bozeman's population in 1870 were immigrants, the majority of whom came from Germanic states. Two of these immigrants were Jacob Speith and Charles Krug, who were born in Germany in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and met in the gold fields at Alder Gulch, Montana. In 1867, they settled in Bozeman and opened the Speith and Krug Bozeman Brewery along Bozeman Creek. The location gave them access to a burgeoning community, fresh mountain water, and the fertile barley producing region around Manhattan, Montana. The Speith and Krug brewery, saloon, and public hall emerged as a focal point for social and civic activity in Bozeman and served as a cornerstone for the town's German community.

By 1880, German immigrants dropped to nearly 20% of the total immigrant population in Bozeman. During this time Chinese immigrants made up at least 16% of Bozeman's immigrant population. Bozeman's Chinese residents lived in lodging rooms in hotels, at their workplaces and businesses, in residential houses, and in the area known as "China Alley" - an alleyway located between East Main Street and East Mendenhall Street, and North Bozeman Avenue and North Rouse Avenue. Chinese businesses were integrated into the fabric of Bozeman's commercial district; Main Street was home to several Chinese-owned laundries and restaurants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These businesses served both Chinese and white customers. One particularly successful Chinese businessman, Chin Ah Ban, owned several restaurants on Main Street over the course of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was well-connected with Bozeman's city officials and prominent business leaders and was known to host lavish feasts for them.

Bozeman was also home to at least thirteen [Black](#) residents in 1870 and twenty-three Black residents in 1880. Most of Bozeman's early Black community came to Montana as refugees from racial violence in the post-Civil War South. Some, like [Lizzie Williams](#), [Samuel Lewis](#), and [Richard and Mary McDonald](#) played pivotal roles in the community's economic and social development through their investment in real estate, businesses, and homes during the early 1870s. Like their Chinese counterparts, businesses like Lizzie Williams's restaurant and Samuel Lewis's barber shop were located on Main Street and were patronized by the entirety of the Bozeman community. By 1910, Bozeman's Black community overwhelmingly owned their own homes; only twelve of thirty-four Black people recorded in the 1910 census, rented their homes. Yet, despite their contributions to the founding of Bozeman, memory of these Black founders has been erased by a city whose streets now bear the names of their white contemporaries – Beall, Story, Black, Cooper.

While people like Chin Ah Ban, Jacob Speith, Charles Krug, Lizzie Williams, and Samuel Lewis, became financially successful, most early Black, Chinese, and other immigrant residents worked in service roles, most predominately in domestic service for Bozeman's middle- and upper-class

families. In its initial decades, Bozeman operated as a small and economically integrated town, a reflection of its modest size. However, as the 20th century approached, a noticeable economic disparity emerged between the neighborhoods situated to the north and south of Main Street. The southern and southwestern areas of the city experienced increasing investment and enhancement, attracting residents of affluence who crossed the dividing line. Consequently, northern Bozeman evolved into a working-class neighborhood.

The domestic labor of the Bozeman's minority and working-class residents afforded middle- and upper-class white residents the time and ability to establish churches, clubs, and voluntary associations. During the era when the government's presence in Bozeman was relatively modest, these organizations helped to shape the civic and social fabric of the community. In this, women played influential roles. One example is the [Bozeman Library](#). Founded in 1872 by the Young Men's Library Association, the town's first library was housed above a drug store on Main Street. Although both women and men could access this library, their use was segregated by gender. This shifted by the mid-1880s when women took charge of collecting books and serving as librarians for the facility. When the City of Bozeman took over the library in 1891, it employed one of these women, Miss Belle Chrisman, as a librarian. Chrisman successfully appealed to Andrew Carnegie for funds to construct a permanent library building on North Bozeman Avenue, which opened in 1903 and served the Bozeman community until 1981.

Women's organizations also pushed for reform in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Bozeman. These groups targeted perceived "vices" such as drinking, gambling, prostitution, and opium use, often associating these issues with immigrant and lower-class communities. In 1884, a group of Bozeman Women founded Bozeman's chapter of the [Women's Christian Temperance Union](#) (WCTU). Within its first year, 84 women joined the WCTU. These were white women of social prominence, including Melinda Rich, Rosa Beall, Sarah Tracy, and Emma Willson. In addition to their fight against vice in Bozeman, these women also advocated for rational dress, equal pay for equal work, and attention to women's health and exercise. After attending the Congress of Women at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, [Mary Alderson](#) returned to Bozeman inspired to fight for Montana women's right to vote. She joined the WCTU, defied the male-dominated newspaper industry by writing a column that championed women's rights, and spearheaded the campaign for women's suffrage, successfully securing this right in Montana in 1914, six years ahead of the nationwide enactment of the 19th Amendment. In doing this advocacy work, these women challenged the traditional idea that a woman's place was in the home and asserted white women's right to participate in the city's and state's civic affairs.

Black women in Montana also came together for social and intellectual connection and civic improvement. Founded in 1921, The [Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs](#) gave voice to Black women throughout the state. In Bozeman, the McDonald sisters – Mollie, Belle, and

Melissa – helped formed a chapter called the Sweet Pea Study Club, with club president Eva Robinson. In addition to participating in traditional women’s club activities, the local clubs and state federation raised money to help Black high school students attend college, advocated for civil rights legislation, and worked to improve racial relations at the state and local level.

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By the turn of the twentieth century, Montana was one of the most ethnically diverse states in the country, and the population in Bozeman reflected this larger trend. Yet today, Montana is among the whitest states in the country. What accounts for this shift? As previously mentioned, Bozeman would not exist without the violent dispossession of Indigenous people. Violence was employed in other ways as well. While our region did not experience the large-scale, overt racial violence characteristic of the post-Civil War South, violence, in its broadest sense, was used in a myriad of other ways. Legislative measures, extralegal exclusion, racism, and deliberate erasure have inflicted enduring historical trauma on marginalized communities.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, City Ordinances that defined “morality” targeted specific groups of people. One of the first ordinances to be adopted after the City of Bozeman was incorporated in 1883 was [Ordinance No. 8](#), “Concerning Offenses Against Good Order and Morals.” This ordinance covered familiar offenses like disturbing the peace and public intoxication, but section five’s prohibition against the use of opium and the keeping of opium dens specifically targeted the city’s Chinese population. Ostensibly passed to protect the business district from the threat of fire, Section 5 allowed Bozeman police to closely monitor the Chinese and conduct raids against supposed opium dens and arrest and fine Chinese residents. Ordinance No. 8 also included gendered definitions of “morality.” Section 7’s prohibition against “in any public place...in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress...” reflects an early attempt to legislate gender expression. At this time, it is unknown if or how this part of the ordinance was enforced.

[State laws](#) also impacted Bozeman residents. In 1909 the Montana State legislature passed an anti-miscegenation law that made interracial marriage illegal, nullified existing unions, and rejected those from other states. This bill had real consequences for Black people living in Bozeman. No interracial marriages were recorded in Bozeman in the 1910 or 1930 censuses. The number of young, single African Americans living in Montana dropped between 1910 and 1930. This bill threatened the Black family structure; with a limited choice of legal spouses in Bozeman, young Black Bozeman residents had to look elsewhere for marriage prospects. Belle Ward, the granddaughter of Richard and Mary McDonald went to Helena to marry a Black man in 1925. Fred Harris Jr. moved with his parents to Tacoma, Washington in 1918. At that time, there was not a single person living in Bozeman that he might legally marry. The adoption of

this anti-miscegenation bill, which remained in law until 1953, shows the shift from a society in Montana that offered a future for a Black community into one that did not.

As noted above, in the 1860s and 1870s many of Bozeman's Black and Chinese businesses were integrated into the community as initial settlement required more labor than the number of available white settlers. However, by the late 1880s, newspapers noted increased frustration with Chinese labor, leading to employment discrimination. Some Bozeman restaurants advertised that their businesses were free of Chinese workers. Newspapers in 1886 expressed frustration with the town's heavy reliance on Chinese laundries and blamed them for taking work away from "worthy white women." In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, trade unions in Montana excluded Black men and this kept many working menial labor and odd jobs.

Bozeman's minority communities also encountered racial discrimination in the form of threats, belittlement, harassment, and exclusion. The Chinese were seen by some as lowly and immoral, Chinese men were seen as less of "men" based upon their clothing. Mocking and finding amusement in Chinese accents or broken English was a common sentiment found in early newspapers. Chinese residents were frequent victims of conflict and assault at their places of business and on the streets of Bozeman; some faced open threats of lynching. Bozeman's Black community faced threat in the form of a resurging Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. In August 1926, 1,000 people attended a Klan picnic and public lecture at the Bozeman Hot Springs. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Black people were increasingly excluded from public space in Bozeman. One example occurred in 1950 when nationally recognized singer Dorothy Maynor came to Bozeman for a concert and the Baxter Hotel refused to let her stay there. Excluded from public space, Conrad Sandvig, Vocal Director at Montana State College's Music Department, welcomed her into his home.

Decades of formal and informal exclusionary practices have created a sense of invisibility among Bozeman's minority residents. For Indigenous people, this goes back to the formal violent exclusion of the 1860s and 1870s. People with disabilities have also been formally excluded, displaced by institutionalization since 1877 when Warm Springs hospital was built in western Montana. In some cases, invisibility is due to outmigration – by the 1930s, half of Montana's Black residents had left, Bozeman's Chinese community precipitously dropped in the same time period. Invisibility is compounded by the rebranding of the land which has erased Indigenous history and the naming of places which celebrates specific aspects and people of our past, while erasing others.

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Despite historical exclusionary policies and practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bozeman residents have worked to hold on to their culture and customs, actively dismantle barriers, and

create inclusive spaces. A key effort in this was and is claiming visible space. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese immigrants visibly practiced their traditional Chinese cultural and religious customs. The annual Chinese New Year celebrations included feasts and grand displays of fireworks. In more modern times, the Montana State University (MSU) Powwow has played a similar role for Indigenous people in the region. Celebrated for over fifty years, the MSU Powwow brings people from all over the state to Bozeman. For Indigenous communities, this powwow represents an ongoing tradition spanning countless generations—stretching back hundreds, even thousands of years—where people gather, revel in each other's company, and reconnect with their origins.

Despite its complicated history, MSU has played a key role in efforts to create community and inclusive spaces. MSU was established in 1893 through the Morrill Act, a piece of legislation that utilized wealth from stolen Indigenous land to fund higher education. Through its democratization of higher education, the land grant, though problematic, provided a path to diversity. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, MSU undertook initiatives to enhance diversity and inclusivity. The Multicultural Resource Center, established in 1999 by the Associated Students of Montana State University with leadership by the Black Student Union, aimed to promote diversity through cross-cultural communication and education. Evolving over the years, it became the Diversity & Inclusion Student Commons in 2017 and continues to serve as a hub for promoting understanding and support for diverse identity groups. The Department of Native American Studies and the American Indian Council were established to advance education for and about American Indians of Montana and to promote community and academic success for MSU's Native students. Over the past five decades, these entities have evolved into a central hub for Indigenous life in Bozeman.

The university serves as a magnet for diverse students and families, contributing to the presence of people of color in the community. However, this influx is often perceived as temporary, with the notion that diverse individuals are primarily students and, consequently, transient residents. The paradox emerges as MSU attracts diversity, albeit temporarily. It functions as a dynamic hub for a variety of perspectives and people, yet a considerable number do not stay in Bozeman, facing challenges in establishing more permanent roots. Notably, the visibility of Native families is predominantly associated with MSU, but many can only afford to reside in Bozeman during their college years, relying on scholarships or loans for support. This dynamic raises important considerations about the sustainability of diversity within the community beyond the confines of academic pursuits.

Beyond MSU, other groups worked to build community. In the 1990s, Stacey Haugland returned to Montana after some time away and realized that she would have to push hard to make space for herself and other lesbians in Bozeman. She hung posters around town advertising a

“Lesbian Community Potluck” to be held at her house. What began as a casual gathering evolved into the formation of Gallatin Area Lesbian Society.

In tandem with these community-building efforts, strikes and protests emerged as alternative avenues for instigating change. In 1930, Montana State College students staged a week-long strike in protest of an unfair night curfew imposed on female students. Collaborating with the faculty social committee and President Atkinson, the students successfully advocated for an extension of the curfew for female students and achieved additional changes addressing social issues within the college community. In 1974, a hunger strike unfolded at the Gallatin County Jail, when eight inmates refused meals for a week. Their demands centered on improvements in the quantity and quality of food provided, they sought enhanced recreation options such as access to television, increased commissary privileges, and a higher limit on the number of allowed visitors. Although the hunger strike did not yield immediate gains, media coverage of the strike helped shed light on the pressing need to replace the aging 1911 jail facility.

Bozeman activists also initiated lawsuits that affected change statewide. In 1997 Bozeman resident Stacey Haugland and others were party to the groundbreaking lawsuit that successfully decriminalized homosexuality in Montana. Meanwhile, another notable legal battle unfolded at Bozeman airport, where a lawsuit addressed accessibility issues. Advocates argued that the airport failed to meet the necessary standards for accommodating individuals with disabilities, violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The lawsuit sought improvements in infrastructure and services to ensure equal access for all travelers, highlighting the importance of inclusive facilities in public spaces.

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The legacy of past efforts for inclusivity and visibility endures in the ongoing advocacy of Bozeman's residents who continue to fight for a community that embraces diversity and ensures equal representation in the 21st century. Bozeman residents continue to create space, support, visibility, and advocacy for its underserved communities. Many of these efforts emerged from the hardship and heartache that 2020 brought with the Covid-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. These efforts include [Bienvenidos a Gallatin Valley](#), an organization that welcomes and support Spanish-speaking immigrants and their families to the Gallatin Valley, Bozeman United for Racial Justice, a BIPOC-led organization committed to creating a Bozeman that is just, free, and welcoming to all, and [Queer Bozeman](#), which connects, strengthens, and advances the 2SLGBTQIA+ community while working to understand and challenge systems of oppression. As of 2023, one of the newer organizations in this work is [Bozeman Tenants United](#), a tenants' union that is building a multi-racial, intergenerational movement of tenants to win safe, dignified, and truly affordable housing. These organizations joined existing organizations like [Ability Montana](#) founded as the Montana Independent Living Project in 1985 to promote independence and advocate for people living with disabilities, [AIDS](#)

[Outreach](#) founded in 2006 to provide support for people living with HIV/AIDs and address a lack of awareness regarding lack of awareness of HIV and AIDS in southwest Montana, and [The Montana Racial Equity Project](#), which had been working since 2015 to build intersectional, antiracist leadership throughout the state. While this list is not comprehensive, the organizations discussed here show the different ways in which people engaged in local, grassroots efforts in Bozeman have united to create space, support, visibility, and advocacy for underserved communities.

These efforts have effected tangible change at the municipal level. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the City of Bozeman has passed several ordinances and resolutions to support and celebrate Bozeman's diverse population. A defining moment occurred in 2014 with the passage of the [Non-Discrimination Ordinance](#). This ordinance provided protection from discriminatory practices based on an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Its adoption stands as a testament to the resilience of citizen organizers who faced heated opposition, even from influential political figures. The City Commission continued its commitment to inclusivity with its endorsement of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2022 along with the official recognition of [Indigenous Peoples' Day](#) and [Juneteenth](#) holidays. These holidays recognize the city's rich multicultural heritage and are marked by celebratory events throughout town and on the MSU campus. These hard-won resolutions, achieved through years of dedicated citizen organizing, attest to the determination of Bozeman residents to build an inclusive community.

The City has also begun the hard work of reforming its civil institutions. In 2020 the Bozeman City Commission directed City staff to review the city's policies and procedures as they pertained to the treatment of minority populations, de-escalation policies, use of force, and the citizen appeal process. This work resulted in the recommendation of 24 action items to be addressed within the city, including the implementation of body worn cameras by officers of the Bozeman Police Department and the work involved in creating and adopting this Belonging in Bozeman Equity and Inclusion Plan.

## Conclusion

Examining Bozeman's history through diverse perspectives reveals narratives of harassment, discrimination, and the struggle for visibility alongside stories of community building, resistance, and resilience. Delving into the past serves as a poignant reminder that Bozeman has always been a diverse locale, with historical factors contributing to the evolving nature of its diversity. As we reflect on Bozeman's history, it is imperative to consider this essay as a preliminary exploration rather than a conclusive narrative. It relies on existing historical research concerning Montana's Indigenous, Black, Chinese, and white middle-class residents. It articulates recurring themes identified through roundtable discussions and illustrates those

themes with examples from Bozeman’s past. In its gaps, it reveals areas that demand further investigation. Efforts should be intensified to understand the historical frequency and impact of insults, harassment, and threats on the Indigenous, Chinese, Black, and other communities in Bozeman. The present research indicates intersections between these groups and the law enforcement system; this warrants additional scrutiny. Areas such as the history of disability in Montana and the experiences of LGBTQ+, Hispanic, and immigrant groups in Bozeman are underdeveloped and this underscores the need for comprehensive research and oral history initiatives. Such endeavors can contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of the challenges confronted by these communities.

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