

Praise and Recognition

The National Register in Montana

Marcella Sherfy

The National Register of Historic Places fits Montana resources and Montana predilections. By imposing no regulatory requirements and promising no magic money or cures, it strikes exactly the balance it needs to serve and survive here in “don’t fence me in” territory. And, in offering recognition, acknowledgement, honor, and visibility, National Register listing remains a much desired accomplishment. It provides, as well, the foundation for a host of modest but effective and persistent local preservation programs. The young historians and advocates who crafted the National Register program in that post-1966 era likely did not think about abandoned rail lines and mine adits and the plainest of western small-town bungalows. But the framework they created couldn’t have been better for our resources and our passions.

The National Register succeeds here in Montana in large measure because it does not impose requirements on National Register property owners, *per se*. Long before the property rights debates of this decade, Westerners held government regulation at bay. If, for the 10 times a day we are asked “what must I do if my property is listed in the Register,” we answered “you must get our permission before you hammer,” we would have few Register listings. Instead, when we answer, “nothing, this program recognizes the historic value of your building or site and recognizes your efforts in preserving it,” we gain astonished and delighted converts.

If, on the other hand, we answered that question by assuring our callers that National Register listing would automatically bring cash or visitors or enormous visibility, we’d again be in trouble. Notwithstanding jeopardized properties needing grant assistance, Montanans are leery of the strings that come with government money. And we want to be in charge of when and how we make our buildings and land available for public appreciation.

The National Register’s understated but clear recognition for a broad range of locally significant resources delights Montanans who love their history. The process

of listing itself deepens and broadens public support for preservation. Individuals and communities honestly warm to the challenge of gathering the information needed for a National Register nomination or a community survey project. They do indeed find patterns and tidbits that challenge or expand standard community lore.

When owners and governments and local historical societies stay involved in gathering National Register information, they remain in contact with us. They emerge from the process of research, public meetings, and State Review Board meetings with confidence in their own accomplishments—usually, in fact, lavished with praise by our State Review Board for the good care they’ve given historic properties.

And, when a property is listed, the subsequent menu of “benefits” again offers encouragement, reward, praise, and recognition: the availability of press releases about the listed property, state-designed interpretive signs (funded substantially by our state bed-tax monies), tax credits, technical assistance, walking tours brochures, overlay zones and ordinances, public and school programs, local recognition ceremonies or TV shows, some foundation for speaking with McDonalds and Hardees, the right words to use in a tourism promotion, the basis to approach City Council to be a Certified Local Government (CLG), etc. These options and possibilities give communities and property owners the latitude to be on their best behavior, rather than an obligation to be a rebellious partner.

So, to the question of whether National Register listing in Montana has spurred economic development, tourism,

or better planning, I believe the answer is an unqualified “yes.” In a state of 800,000 citizens, we claim 13 CLGs, almost 700 National Register listed properties, 400 National Register interpretive markers in place, \$4,000,000 of federal rehabilitation tax act generated work this year alone, and a host of vocal, confident preservation activists. But I believe that the National Register’s role in Montana’s impressive preservation community is subtle. The National Register works because it rewards and honors and

involves real people, rather than because it promises or threatens any particular outcome. It works because it includes the real stuff of our history—the properties close to our practical, resource-based past.

Every two years, in conjunction with our biennial legislature, the Montana Historical Society Preservation Office hosts a Preservation Awards Ceremony. The Governor usually speaks. We honor two or three individuals or organizations whose preservation efforts have been especially outstanding. We recognize State Review Board

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The Outlook Depot, Sheridan County, MT, illustrates the state’s transportation heritage. Photo courtesy Montana Historical Society.

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locate properties associated with black Minnesotans in the Twin Cities and Duluth.

An initiative to identify and protect historic shipwrecks in the Minnesota waters of Lake Superior, funded by the Minnesota Legislature in response to the federal Abandoned Shipwrecks Act, concluded in 1993 with production of a draft management plan. Once again, the National Register program brought direction to the project—the first step involved completing a multiple property documentation form as the framework for establishing the historic context in which to evaluate the properties. Underwater surveys, several nominations, and a complement of educational materials were also produced.

Since 1989, the office has conducted over 15 studies to examine potential uses for threatened National Register properties in cooperation with a range of communities and organizations. The reuse study format, sometimes characterized as a “swat team” approach for at-risk buildings, brings together a team of architects, historians, and other specialists for an intensive on-site consultation. The most recent success following one such study helped to identify a new owner who is restoring the Thorstein Veblen Farmstead in rural Rice County, a National Historic Landmark endangered for over a decade.

Local preservation programs have replaced the county survey as the department’s primary vehicle for creating a network of preservation partnerships. While the number of National Register listings increases at a slower rate today, the number of local programs is growing rapidly, more than doubling since 1991. A greater emphasis on education and training has accompanied the growth in local programs.

What is ahead for Minnesota’s National Register program? The work to identify, evaluate, register, and protect the state’s historic resources is never done. Major gaps still exist— archeological sites, for example, are seriously under-represented, an imbalance being addressed in planning future survey initiatives. Another priority is to form and strengthen partnerships with the state’s culturally diverse populations. Revisions to state law enacted by the 1993 Minnesota Legislature provide better protection for National Register properties at the state level. Partnerships and education are key. The plate is full, but the responsibility is shared with a growing number of players who also are catching the vision to preserve history where it happened in Minnesota.

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The Jesse R. Green Homestead in Gallatin County, MT, illustrates the state’s rural heritage. Photo courtesy Montana Historical Society.

members whose terms have ended. But mainly, we present certificates to owners whose property has been listed in the National Register during the previous two years. Mind you, these are literally just certificates, signed by the Governor with the calligraphic property name at the top. And every time, the turnout of owners is breathtaking. Four hundred miles of icy roads do not daunt ministers, school board members, local businessmen, Forest Service rangers, elderly homeowners, and city officials. Every time, we are amazed, delighted, and humbled by the enthusiastic, joyful attendance.

For me, that National Register certificate ceremony confirms that the National Register offers Montanans just what its authors intended: not regulation, not money, not public intrusion, but the extraordinary gift of praise and recognition. It tells me, as well, that recognition remains an especially powerful incentive.

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