

(From far left) Talk about a shotgun wedding: A couple married in 2001 at Bannack Days renews their vows at the 2015 event during the high-noon shootout. Jake the barber gives a customer a make-believe shave and a haircut.

## Bannack's Glory Days

Every July, the site of Montana's first major gold discovery takes a step back in time to celebrate the Old West

article and photos by Dennis Gaub

If you're heading to Yellowstone or Glacier national park in July, consider spending a day or two at an annual celebration of Montana's pioneering past. This year marks the 40th anniversary of Bannack Days, a two-day event that gives visitors to Montana's first territorial capital a chance to envision the town in its gold-rush heyday.

Bannack sprang into existence in 1862. That's when a group of Colorado gold miners, the Pikes Peakers, as they were called, struck pay dirt on the banks of Grasshopper Creek. The first major gold discovery in Montana caused fortune-seekers to swarm into the high-mountain valley. Bannack's population swelled to 3,000 in the spring of 1863, reportedly peaking

at around 10,000, and it became a true town when a post office was built later that year.

Bannack's challenges grew with the arrival of Henry Plummer. A former California prison inmate who served time for manslaughter and escaped the state with the law on his tail, Plummer was elected Bannack's sheriff. People yearning for civility in the lawless locale awarded Plummer a badge, but most didn't know that it cloaked his real occupation: leader of an outlaw gang known as the Innocents that robbed and murdered miners entering and leaving Bannack with their gold bounty.

The Innocents' scourge quickly ended, thanks to formation of the

town's Vigilance Committee. Its members, the Vigilantes, tracked down and hung several members of the Plummer gang. The ringleader's turn for a trip to the gallows came on January 10, 1864.

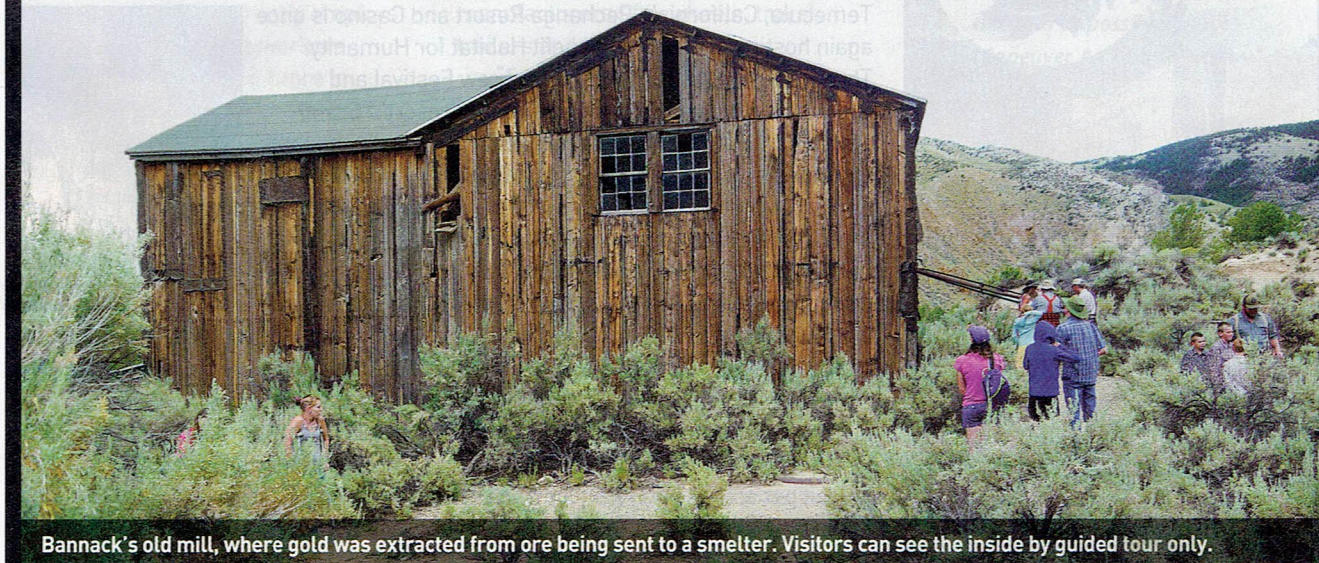
That history of riches and rogues is celebrated the third weekend of July during Bannack Days. The 2016 festivities take place July 16 and 17, and include demonstrations of pioneer skills such as wool spinning and quilting. Visitors can learn how baskets and wagon wheels were made, shoot a black-powder rifle, hand-dip a candle, see a blacksmith in action, take a ride in a horse-drawn wagon and pan for gold. And, of course, watch out for gunfights, as a few staged ones are sure to erupt on Main Street.

### Bannack Days

406-834-3413, [www.bannack.org](http://www.bannack.org)

### Bannack State Park

Two campgrounds in the state park offer dry camping with picnic tables and fire rings. Wi-Fi is available. 855-922-6768 [www.stateparks.mt.gov/bannack](http://www.stateparks.mt.gov/bannack)



Bannack's old mill, where gold was extracted from ore being sent to a smelter. Visitors can see the inside by guided tour only.