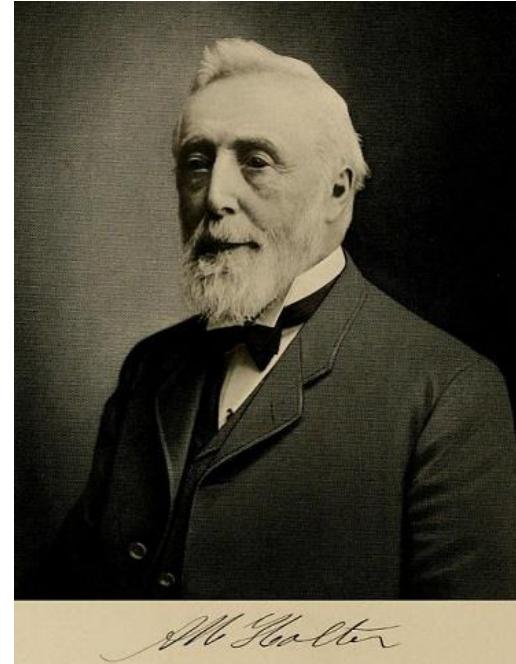


The Holter Heritage in Helena: Part I – Anton Holter & Norman B. Holter

For three generations, the Holter family was active and influential in Montana history. This is the first in a two-part series profiling the Holters of Helena.

Anton M. Holter

Anton Holter was born in Norway in 1831. At the age of eight, his father was lost at sea, and he was sent to live with an uncle to apprentice as a carpenter. At age 23, he decided to come to America. He endured a tumultuous sail to Quebec, rode in a boxcar to Chicago, and settled in Iowa. Even then, he ventured up and down the Mississippi River to explore the land. After contracting a fever, a doctor recommended a change of location, and Anton joined an ox-drawn wagon train for Colorado, arriving there in 1860. He worked as a carpenter, but got caught up in the excitement around a gold strike, and took up prospecting. He had no success, and briefly returned to Iowa before deciding there were more opportunities in the West, and headed back to Denver.



There he partnered with a millwright named Alex Evinson. They heard about the gold strikes near Virginia City, and decided it was the right place to set up a sawmill. Despite several setbacks with equipment, they established their mill and lumber yard in a place where demand was huge and supply low. Anton bought out Evinson and continued in the lumber business, expanding operations near several other mining camps. He started a sawmill near Helena in April of 1866.

On a trip to Chicago to purchase new equipment, Anton met and married his wife Pauline. He thought it safer to send his new wife up the Missouri by steamboat to Fort Benton, while he took the faster route by stage. During the separation, Anton heard that the steamboat had been attacked, with passengers taken captive. Meanwhile, Pauline heard the same rumor about his stagecoach. After he arrived in Helena, he rode hard for Fort Benton, and ran into Pauline at a stage stop along the way for a happy reunion.

In 1867, Anton built a store building on Main Street (now Last Chance Gulch), and the A.M. Holter Hardware Company supplied the growing town of Helena with hardware, mining supplies, machinery and gift items. His son Norman was born in the back room of the store that served as the family home the next year. The business eventually became one of the largest in the Northwest, and stayed in business until 1958, when it was sold. In 1868, Anton built a large house for the family, large enough that some wondered if he was building a hotel.

Anton diversified his business interests, leaving the sawmills behind for mining, banking, manufacturing, ranching, utilities and hydroelectric power. This last notably took the form of the construction of the Holter Dam, and the reservoir it created, Holter Lake, near Helena, and ultimately to the partnership of several regional power companies that became Montana Power. At the time it was completed in 1917, Holter Dam was the tallest on the Missouri River.

He had a number of civic involvements as well. He served as a member of the Helena City Council, as president of the Helena Board of Trade, served in the Territorial legislature. He served in the new state's legislature in the First and Second Sessions. He was a school trustee, and assisted in the building of the first school in Helena.

Two decades after his death in 1921, Anton was honored by becoming the namesake of a Liberty Ship, the SS Anton M. Holter. The Liberty Ships were cargo vessels that were commissioned to move war materiel to Europe after the decimation of the British merchant fleet by U-boats. The ship was built in the Portland shipyards during just three weeks in July 1943.

Norman B. Holter

Norman Holter grew up in the rough and raw mining town. He saw the arrival of the railroads, the wagon trains with prospectors, the ox teams from Fort Benton bearing goods from the east. He grew up with Helena and the Holter Hardware Company. He graduated as a mining engineer from Columbia University in 1891, and went to work with his father in the family businesses.

Norman took the helm as president of the Holter Companies in 1921 and served in that capacity for the rest of his life. Norman also took over the reins of the other businesses, including the family-owned investment company, which invested heavily in mining ventures, California real estate and in petroleum production, along with the a company that handled rentals of business properties in the Helena area. His brothers supported the efforts: Aubrey focused on the hardware business, Edwin assisted with Wall Street investments and Albert managed one of the family ranches.

During World War I, war bonds called Liberty Loans were sold in the United States to support the allied cause, which became a symbol of patriotic duty. Norman served as state director for Montana. He also was involved in the business community outside of the Holter companies. Norman served as a director of the Federal Reserve Bank's Minneapolis office. He was a founder of the largest flour mill in the state. He served on the boards of the Montana Power Company, and the Western States Taxpayers Association, and was on the Helena Chamber of Commerce board for 20 years, also serving part of that time as president.

Norman Holter died in Helena on his 89th birthday in 1957. With his passing, so to passed the Holter Hardware Company, which closed its doors the following year.

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