

Thomas McGirl

Yellowstone County's first white resident was Thomas McGirl. He was born in County Leitrim in Ireland in 1845, the youngest of ten children. His father died a year later. This was the height of the great famine in Ireland, when people were desperate and starving. Somehow his mother was able to immigrate with her eight sons to America, settling at first in Rhode Island. There he received his scant schooling, but he left at age nine when the family moved to a farm in Missouri in 1855.

When the Civil War came, McGirl and four of his brothers joined the Union Army. He served in Missouri, seeing only minor skirmishes. While still in the Army, his first experience on the frontier came on the job, hauling freight from Leavenworth, Kansas to Santa Fe, New Mexico, while the wagon teams were harried with raids on their stock. After his military service, McGirl returned to the family farm.



In 1873, McGirl began working for the railroads as they expanded westward. Two years later, this landed him in Wyoming, building a railroad bridge at Rock Springs. From there, he made his way to Butte, where he worked in the mines, but also did construction work, working on the first brick building in what was then a glorified mining camp.

Most settlers at the time arrived in Montana territory via the Bozeman Trail, and when Fort Keogh was established near present-day Miles City in the wake of the Little Bighorn battle, it was obvious that there would need to be a stage line between the two locations. McGirl and his partner Omar Hoskins decided to establish a station along that line. They settled on a location on the Yellowstone about halfway between the two, near the site of the 1873 Baker's Battle, later to become the town of Huntley. McGirl opened the station in May 1877, the first settlement between the Stillwater and the Tongue River, with the arrival of a steamboat hauling mail.

In September of that year, the Nez Perce camped nearby, unbeknownst to McGirl. The Nez Perce had moved into the area hoping for assistance from the Crow that went unrealized. Instead, there was a battle at Canyon Creek (north of present-day Laurel) with the Army under Colonel Sturgis. Soldiers wounded there recovered at McGirl's station.

The station and the accompanying river ferry were the center for the new Yellowstone River country. Huntley was the last stop for riverboats, and soldiers and settlers could

get food, a bed and supplies there before setting out again. Fur trappers sold their hides there. In 1880, McGirl filled half of a steamboat's hold with furs and hides. He and Hoskins saw the railroad heading their direction, and sold the station in 1881. They went into cattle ranching in a big way on Twelve Mile Creek, supplying railroad crews from a ranch with a radius of forty miles. Their nearest competitor was in Big Timber. He opened a butcher shop in Billings after it was established, and also moved into farming on a place near Huntley, producing alfalfa for feed.

The first bank in Billings was established in 1882, and McGirl was its first depositor. He was a big man and was wearing guns as he walked in and demanded to see the banker. They feared it was a hold-up until McGirl handed over \$10,000 worth of cash and gold.

McGirt was active with a number of organizations in the Billings and Huntley communities. He was a Mason, a Shriner, and a member of the GAR, the organization for Union Army veterans. He had had very little formal schooling himself, but was a great supporter of education, serving on the local school board for years.

In 1905, he sold his properties and moved into Billings, living at the YMCA, and spending the cold winters in warmer climes. In later years, he spent most of the year in California, but made annual trips back to Billings. In his 80s, he suffered a stroke and was paralyzed. McGirt had never married and had no children, but his niece in Long Beach took him into her home. He died there in 1930 at the age of 85. His funeral was held in the Masonic Temple in Billings

Sources:

Billings Gazette, "Came to County in 1877; Among First Settlers", October 5, 1930

Billings Gazette, "Founder of Famous Stage Station of 'Seventies Recalls Picturesque Characters of Early Days", June 30, 1927

Billings Gazette, "Who is Who in Billings: Thomas McGirt", March 18, 1918

Sanders, Helen Fitzgerald, *A History of Montana*, Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago, New York, 1913, p 1061

Photo Credit:

Billings Public Library collection