

FRITH, HENRY



Henry Frith was a soldier, miner, rancher, trader and lawyer during his many years in Montana, and was often referred to as the first settler in Yellowstone County. He was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1847. He emigrated to the United States as a young man, and eventually decided to enlist in the US Army, landing in the 11th Infantry. His company was sent to Texas to keep order in the years of Reconstruction after the Civil War. When his enlistment was up, he started teaching in a Black school in Texas. He encountered a great deal of hostility from the white residents, to the point where he decided in 1873 he would be safer if he rejoined the Army.

In the wake of the loss at the Little Big Horn, the Army sent his regiment north. They landed in Montana where they worked to establish Fort Keogh near the confluence of the Yellowstone and Tongue rivers, and Fort Custer, near the confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers. Once again, Frith left the Army at the end of his enlistment in 1877.

He settled on a homestead near present-day Huntley, and also operated a general store for travelers. Two years later, he took on serving as a deputy recorder for the Yogo mine district, and started trading with tribes along the Musselshell River as well.

Frith determined that he wanted to study law, and went to Chicago. There he enrolled at the Kent College of Law and graduated in 1896. Soon afterward, he set up a practice in Billings. He also became the US referee in the bankruptcy court for the 5th Judicial District, which covered most of eastern Montana. He also served a term on the City Council from 1909-1911. Frith was instrumental in establishing the Association of Pioneers of Eastern Montana, preserving the memories and stories of early white settlers of the state. He also established the local post of the United Indian War Veterans of America.

At the age of 58 in 1905, Frith married Helen Miller, a former Billings teacher. He told all his friends he was heading for a court meeting in Helena, but instead went to her brother's home in Anaconda for the wedding. They remained in Billings until 1927, fifty years after settling in the area, retiring then to California. Even then, Frith made frequent trips back to Billings, including his final trip home after his death in 1943.