

# Rifle Heritage Center

Volume 1



Winter 2024

## What's Up

The museum has been under wraps during the winter months as we do not have heat in the building but the Board of Directors have been busy with plans for new exhibits and events to bring history alive for our community.

This edition of our newsletter will highlight some past events so that you can make plans to participate in them this coming year.

We also want to make you aware of our opening date and our annual free admission day at the museum so

you can mark them on your calendar.

**May 15  
Opening Day**

**May 18  
Free Admission**

Last but not least, we would like to ask you to consider volunteering with us to keep this venue open and active. There are many ways to volunteer and we would love to share them with you one on one. Stop by and chat with us.

Below we have three young volunteers, Joe Roe, Wyatt Brandt & Gabe Roe, portraying a newsboy from the 1800s, "Whitey" Hutton (a local businessman who was a boxer in his youth) & Edward Tenney Jr (the great-grandfather of Gabe who was in the 10th Mountain Division in WWII). They were part of Voices in the Dark which is a series of short character sketches that is hosted by the museum each October.

## Rifle's Midland Building by Alan Lambert

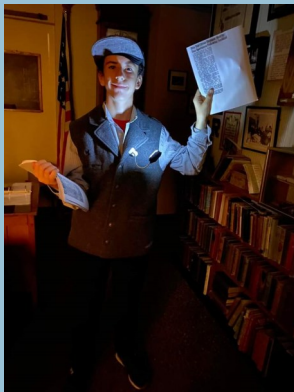
"Do Not Hitch."

If one looks closely at the prominent green and white, cast-iron columns holding up the roof in front of the arched entryway of the Midland Building in downtown Rifle you will see these

words. They harken from a time before Rifle's streets were paved and automobiles are parked along them.

Those were the days when horses were the primary form of personal transportation. Unlike automobiles, you couldn't turn a

horse "off." You had to tie it to something or it would head home without you. As anyone who has dealt with horses knows, a 1,000 pound animal can do considerable damage to whatever it's tied to if it gets spooked and pulls back.



## Rifle's Midland Building (cont)



Hitching rails were installed along Rifle's streets for this purpose. The columns at the Midland were not to be used for hitching horses! The property on the south side of the 100 block of East Third Street, where the Midland Building now resides, was first occupied by Claussin's Livery and Cato's Blacksmith Shop. Built in the 1890s, this wooden structure was an important part of the early commerce of Rifle. These businesses were short lived as the building burned to the ground the night of May 3, 1902 during Rifle's Great Fire.

That fire destroyed over half of Rifle's downtown. The property stayed vacant for several years until it was purchased in 1904 by Dr. Noah Dymenberg, one of Rifle's first medical doctors. Dymenberg was born in Austria, attended school there and immigrated to America where he continued his education at the University of St. Paul in Minnesota where he earned a degree in medicine. He did his graduate work at Chicago's Polyclinic Hospital. In 1897 he arrived in Rifle and set up his practice. While in Rifle he became known for his civic involvement and served for a time as President of the Rifle Board of Education. By all accounts he had a very busy practice and began to see the need for a hospital.

In 1904 after purchasing the property, Dr. Dymenberg began building Rifle's first hospital. Named the Rifle Sanitarium, it was a two story, brick structure, 42 feet by 60 feet, that had 10 beds with a large operating room, two baths, a sleeping porch, a hot water plant, and an adjoining garage for buggies and wagons. Before the hospital was completed, Dr. Dymenberg sold it to Dr. J.T. Beal, who operated it as a hospital for the next 13 years. Back then, medical facilities did not have taxpayer funds to back them up. Hard times forced Dr. Beal to sell the hospital in 1917 to a man named A.D. Raynard, who converted it to the Midland Hotel. For the next 60 years the Midland Hotel was a fixture of downtown Rifle. Under various owners, it hosted hunters, fishermen, tourists, speculators, businessmen, train crews, and many a rowdy cowboy looking for a place to take a bath and hang his hat after a long ride bringing in cattle herds to the Rifle Stockyards. By the 1970s the hotel had become an extended stay facility, renting rooms to elderly folks who could no longer keep up their homes, allowing them to stay independent. The hotel was also where the Greyhound bus would pick up and drop off passengers in the days before I-70. May 2, 1982, known throughout the western slope as Black Sunday, was the day the huge oil company, Exxon-Mobile, locked the gates to the oil shale research facility near Rifle after the federal government pulled funds for oil shale research. Hundreds of Rifle residents were without jobs, businesses closed, and real estate prices plummeted. It would take 20 years for the economy to recover. The Midland Hotel was

one of the businesses that did not survive, and the building sat vacant for much of the next 20 years. By 2001 the roof had sprung numerous leaks, and it was questionable whether the building was structurally sound. Bums found it an attractive place to spend the night and it was a concern that they would start a fire that could once again destroy the downtown. The building was owned by a land speculator out of Basalt, who brought the property for next to nothing and was sitting on it until land prices went back up and he could make a tidy profit. To him the building was expendable and not worth putting any money into trying to save. To the people of Rifle, it was an iconic part of Rifle's downtown and an effort to save it was begun. In 2001 I was president of the Rifle Area Chamber of Commerce. During many meetings with local business owners I often heard about the Midland building and how its dilapidated facade was hindering efforts to revitalize the town's downtown core. Private efforts weren't getting anywhere, and it soon became apparent that it would take the muscle of the city government to make a change. It was with this in mind that I ran for Rifle City Council and was elected to that position in September 2001. It definitely wasn't a day to celebrate. Also elected that day was a well-known, local, school teacher by the name of Kieth Lambert. Although we shared the same last name, we were not related and did not even meet each other until we ran for council.



**Top— Cato's Blacksmith Shop**

**Second— Rifle Sanitarium**

**Third— Hoback Flour Mill**

**Bottom— Rifle Mercantile**



common bond in the revitalization of Rifle's downtown, starting with the Midland Hotel.

At the time, Rifle had several large vacant buildings that were teetering on collapse. Each had a historic value, but we knew not all could be saved. One of the worst was the Hoback Flour Mill, a two story, false front, wooden structure that was leaning considerably east. The building started life as the Rifle Plumbing Company. It was built in 1901 on the 100 block of East 2nd Street where the city parking garage is currently located. In 1924 it was purchased by O.M. Hoback who turned it into Rifle's first flour mill. Years later the building housed a laundry and then became a storage area for East Avenue Carpet.

By the spring of 2002 the Hoback building became the City Council's "sacrificial lamb". Using ordinance 7-2-140- Dangerous or Vacant Structure- the building was ordered demolished. Although Members of the local historical society were not happy, the buildings demise established two things: 1) the council had the wherewithal to enforce the ordinance 2) it gave notice to land speculators that they could no longer sit on empty, derelict buildings in the City of Rifle. Shortly after the mill building came down, Rifle's Planning Department invited the owner of the Midland building to a meeting at City Hall. Before this meeting took place, I met with a number of the folks dedicated to preserving the old building. I explained to them that this was a high stakes game we were playing with the

goal being the preservation of the building. However, we were taking a chance that if the owner did not cooperate, we would be forced to have it demolished for safety reasons. We knew that if a large public backlash took place due to its possible destruction, the owner could continue sitting on the property without doing anything and that was what we hoped to avoid.

On the day of the meeting, the Midland's owner arrived at the city hall and was led into the council's meeting room by the city's young, newly hired head planner, Matt Sturgeon. The room was packed with Rifle's movers and shakers of the time, the mayor, members of the City Council, board members of the Chamber of Commerce, the Fire Chief, members of the Downtown Development Authority, and members of the Historical Society who were actively trying to save the building. It was standing room only! A seat was reserved at the front of the room and the owner sat in it. One by one the people in the room expressed their concerns for the building and for the future of the downtown. When it came to those who were actively trying to preserve the Midland, they said they were very concerned about the safety of the downtown and if the building was to burn, it could wipe out the other historic buildings in the downtown! With that, the Midland's owner knew he had no chance and sunk lower in his seat. Mr. Sturgeon then explained his options: 1) Preserve the building or tear it down or 2) Sell it to someone who would. If this did not take

place within 4 months, the city would come in, demolish it, and charge the owner for the cost. Sturgeon requested and received permission to send in a team of experts to determine if the building was structurally able to be preserved and what issues were to be faced if the building was to be demolished. Weeks later, it was determined the building was preservable but it was full of asbestos. Almost immediately, the building was sold for a much-reduced price. Fortunately for Rifle there was a man waiting in the wings who had the drive, the money, and the knowledge to restore the building. Israel Shapiro and his wife had just moved to the Roaring Fork Valley from New York where he was instrumental in preserving historic buildings with his last project being the complete refurbishment of the Statue of Liberty.. Not yet ready to retire, Israel bought the Midland and immediately began its restoration. While digging in the basement he came across many rusty horseshoes, plow parts, and blacksmith tools- remains of Cato's Blacksmith Shop and the 1902 fire. By August of 2004, the restoration work was complete. The Chamber held a large celebration to commemorate the event. The building today hosts two restaurants with the old hotel rooms being converted to offices. Mr. Shapiro is not done preserving Rifle's downtown. Even before the Midland was completed, he purchased the empty lots across the street where the Rifle Mercantile once stood. That building had burned to the ground on July 6, 1986. Israel not only rebuilt the two

story building with modern materials and features, but he also made sure the brick facade exactly matched the original building. These two projects ignited a rebirth in Rifle's downtown with other entrepreneurs investing in and restoring downtown buildings.

Matt Sturgeon was Rifle's Planning Director for over 10 years before moving into the position of City Manager. He shared this memory of his first project as planner. "Even today, that project is one of the most gratifying of my career. I learned so much about the council, the community in those few months; it was priceless to a new planning director. The mill building showed Council had the gumption to go the distance, and the asbestos report provided the ammunition. It was a gamble, but the payoff made the bet worth it. It was also helpful having someone we could believe in and trust, Israel. Wal-Mart, City Market, and the Midland Building are why Rifle is where it is today. It showed we were savvy, committed, creative, and all in on the community. Once those fell in place then came the confidence and money to go further." The columns say "Do Not Hitch" but it didn't stop the community from hitching on to a dream and following it through!





