

Fall 2025

## The Grand Opening of Yellowstone Airport's New Terminal

On June 4, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) hosted the grand opening of the new terminal at the Yellowstone (WYS) Airport. Many gathered to celebrate the hard work and dedication that went into this project. Members of the Federal Aviation Association (FAA), National Park Service, MDT staff, Forest Service, Aeronautics Board and West Yellowstone Mayor Jeff McBirnie, among others attended the event. Deputy Director Larry Flynn, Mayor McBirnie, Tim Conway, Aeronautics Administrator, and Jeff Kadlec, Airport Manager, spoke on the project and the incredible impact the airport has on the aviation community, West Yellowstone, and the Park.

The Yellowstone Airport provides commercial air service through United and Delta, but also serves the community through general aviation, military exercises, search and rescue, aerial surveying, and aerial wildland firefighting. Additionally, the airport serves as the base for the US Forest smoke jumper program. The airport has an economic impact on the town of West Yellowstone, contributing more than \$17 million annually in its short operational season. The old terminal was in dire need of replacement to better serve these needs.

This terminal would not have been possible without the significant investment of the FAA. Their contribution almost fully funded this \$46 million dollar project. MDT is grateful to all those involved in the successful completion of the terminal which will serve generations to come.



*Pictured from left to right: Adam Moulton (WYS Airport Facilities Specialist); Larry Flynn (MDT Deputy Director); Diane Stilson (FAA - retired); Jeff Kadlec (WYS Airport Manager); Tim Conway (MDT Aeronautics); Karen Hallenbeck (MDT Aeronautics); Bron Hansen (WYS Airport Operations Specialist)*



This past July, MDT was honored to host the 2025 Annual Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (WASHTO) Meeting in Missoula. 700 delegates, including representatives from all 18 state DOTs that comprise WASHTO, along with numerous consultants and supporting companies, were in attendance. This collaborative effort provided a space to discuss vital transportation issues, build and strengthen relationships, and share success stories.



*MDT Director Chris Dorrington speaking with Dave Sabey, Chairman and President of Sabey Corporations, during the WASHTO Opening General Session.*



*MDT Employees Lenci Kappes, Jacob Brotzler, and Bodie Henderson presenting on Digital Project Delivery.*



## Federal Surface Transportation Program Status

Funding for most federal agencies happens on an annual basis through an appropriations act, typically following the federal fiscal year of October 1, through September 30. When an appropriations act is not passed before the beginning of the federal fiscal year, the flow of federal funding is halted. When this happens, federal agencies may be directed to begin a shutdown of the affected programs and activities. One of the tools Congress uses to keep government from shutting down is a continuing appropriations act, more commonly known as a continuing resolution (CR). A CR provides temporary funding to continue certain programs and activities, typically at the current or prior year's funding level. The CR provides budget authority for a specific length of time and prohibits new activities not funded in the previous appropriations act. The goal of the CR is to provide Congress more time to pass a regular appropriations act. Nationally, we have been operating under a CR since October 1, 2024.



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## MCS Nationally Honored for UCR Enforcement Efficiency

**M**DT's Motor Carrier Services (MCS) plays a critical role in ensuring the safe, efficient and lawful movement of commercial motor vehicles (CMVs) on Montana's roadways. MCS Officer Brett Hoagland exemplifies the commitment to serve, coming to the department in January 2023, after retiring from the Dawson County Sheriff's Office where he served as Senior Deputy. Prior to that role, he worked for the Glendive Police Department.

In May 2025, Officer Hoagland noted 23 Unified Carrier Registration (UCR) violations on inspections. Subsequently, he was recognized as 3rd in the country for highest UCR enforcement efficiency. In addition to this individual honor, the MCS team received an award for the third highest increase in enforcement efficiency: from 1% in 2023 to 63% in 2024. In May 2025, thanks to the outstanding work of Officer Hoagland and others on the enforcement team, MCS was even more efficient at identifying the violation, noting it about 83% of the time.

UCR is a fee that is charged to interstate commercial carriers based upon the number of vehicles in their fleet. For most carriers, this fee is relatively nominal (fee schedule can be found at: [plan.ucr.gov/fee-brackets/](https://plan.ucr.gov/fee-brackets/)). These fees are then distributed to participating jurisdictions, and the money can be used for several things related to infrastructure and UCR enforcement. There are only 40 participating jurisdictions, so a carrier based in a non-participating jurisdiction that travels into one of the participating jurisdictions must still register.

**Congratulations to Officer Hoagland and the greater MCS team for the well-deserved recognition! Thank you for all that you do to keep Montana moving forward safely and efficiently.**



## See Tracks? Think Train® Week — New Name, Same Purpose!

**T**his year marks the ninth annual safety collaboration between Operation Lifesaver Inc. (OLI), State OLI Programs and rail safety partners across the country. Formerly known as Rail Safety Week, the effort combats railroad crossing trespass incidents across North America by concentrating public attention on the need for rail safety education. The week starts on Monday September 15, when news media, government officials, OLI Partners and the general public concentrate on ending track tragedies. Tuesday's "Operation Clear Track" brings in Law Enforcement and First Responders, followed by a broader focus on Wednesday for "Crossing Safety," which includes the general public, professional drivers, outdoor enthusiasts and more. Thursday's message narrows in on professional drivers and public transit users. Friday's and Saturday's themes zoom back out to a wider audience as the program introduces "Wear Red for Rail Safety" and "Trespass Prevention," respectively. The week wraps up with Sunday's "No Photo/Video/Selfie is Worth the Risk," where photographers and social media influencers take the spotlight.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact John Althof, State Coordinator - Montana Operation Lifesaver, at 406-444-7247 or [jalthof@mt.gov](mailto:jalthof@mt.gov).



After being recognized in 2024, MDT was honored to receive the BNSF Railway's "Tracking to Zero" Award again in 2025. This award was given to five state DOTs with shared commitment to improving grade crossing safety.

Pictured from left to right: Rich Scott, Assistant Director Public Projects - Northern Region, BNSF Railway; Dustin Rouse, Chief Engineer, MDT; John Althof, Manager Rail-Highway Safety Unit, MDT; Mary Ann Monaldi, Manager Public Project MT, WY, ID, BNSF Railway; French Thompson, General Director, Public Infrastructure and Investments, BNSF Railway

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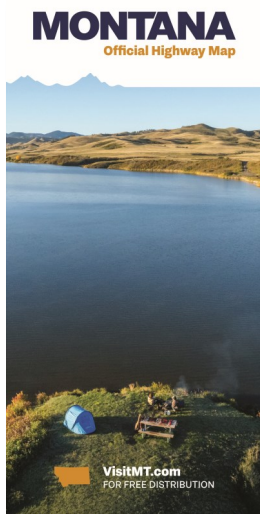


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Montana Department of Transportation





## 2025 Official Highway Map Available

The 2025 edition of the Montana Official Highway Map has been released! The map is available electronically as a PDF at [mdt.mt.gov/publications/maps.aspx](https://mdt.mt.gov/publications/maps.aspx), or look for the printed maps at a Chamber of Commerce near you. You can also request a print copy online at [visitmt.com/order-guidebooks](https://visitmt.com/order-guidebooks), or by calling 800-847-4868.

If you or someone you know owns a business that would like to promote tourism in Montana, contact the Office of Tourism at 406-841-2870 to request a case of maps. It's all free!

## Montana Freight Plan Update

MDT Planning has begun its update to the State's Freight Plan. The Plan is a critical guide for freight-related transportation investments and provides a comprehensive evaluation of freight transportation within the state. The update began in July 2025 and is anticipated to be completed by the fall of 2026. For more information, go to [mdt.mt.gov/freightplan/2026-update.aspx](https://mdt.mt.gov/freightplan/2026-update.aspx).

## MDT Hosts Research Symposium

In May 2025, MDT hosted its first Research Symposium in Helena, bringing together 72 participants from across the department, as well as academic institutions and the research community. This Research Symposium was designed to:

- Build authentic relationships between MDT and the research community
- Create shared awareness of each other's needs and priorities
- Spark new research ideas through open dialogue
- Inspire personal and organizational commitments to advancing transportation research

The event embraced the spirit of collaboration and curiosity, inviting participants to explore where interests align and where innovation could take root. Attendees reported high satisfaction in the event and requested more frequent, low-stakes creative engagement and collaboration. MDT plans to virtually host more creative and idea-provoking events in the future and hopes to host a second Symposium in 2026.

## Non-Metropolitan Local Official Cooperation Process

Local officials are encouraged to review MDT's non-metropolitan transportation planning and programming participation process and submit comments or proposed modifications to the MDT Statewide and Urban Planning Section. The process for coordinating and cooperating with non-metropolitan local officials on transportation planning and programming issues is not only good business, but also a product of multiple federal and state statutes and intergovernmental agreements. This participation process occurs at both the statewide and small urban area levels and includes:



- The ongoing implementation of TranPlanMT, MDT's overall policy goals and direction for the State's transportation programs
- Biennial public and stakeholder surveys on the state-of-transportation in Montana and MDT's public involvement activities. Stakeholder groups include bicycle/pedestrian, economic development, environmental, Tribal planners, cities and towns (Mayors), counties (County Commissioners), intermodal freight, passenger transportation, and state/federal government groups
- MDT support of Small Urban Area plans and coordinating committees
- Cooperation with local officials on the annual Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) development process
- Coordination between MDT and local governments for review of major developments to protect the safety and capacity of state and local roadway systems
- Direct involvement in the selection or nomination of federally funded projects using Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds for the Secondary and Urban Highway Systems
- Many other issue-specific public involvement processes that provide opportunities for consultation with non-metropolitan local officials

**MDT will continue to provide early and continuing public involvement opportunities throughout the planning and programming process as described in the Non-Metropolitan Local Official Participation Process. Local officials are encouraged to review the process located on MDT's website ([mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/manuals/consultation\\_process.pdf](https://mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/manuals/consultation_process.pdf)) and submit comments or any proposed modifications by November 14, 2025.**

## MDT MS4 Program Update

On June 30, 2025, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) announced a public review and comment period for its draft updated Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) Storm Water Management Program (SWMP). The duration of this public comment period was 30- days, closing on July 30, 2025. The intent of this public comment period was to solicit input on the draft final SWMP document to improve the implementation of MDT's program since the public can be an effective partner in improving water quality by building greater environmental awareness, leveraging support in achieving water quality goals, and increasing compliance.

The efforts to complete the 2025 SWMP update continue to demonstrate MDT's commitment to foster and improve its storm water program. MDT recognizes public involvement and public participation as an important component of a successful program. MDT received two comments during the public comment period. The comments, as well as MDT's response to the comments, will be included in the finalized 2025 SWMP.

To learn more, please visit the SWMP website: [mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/stormwater/](https://mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/stormwater/), or email [mdtms4datamanager@mt.gov](mailto:mdtms4datamanager@mt.gov) with any questions or general comments.

# MDT Uses Grant Funding to Enhance Traffic Monitoring in MPO Areas

**M**DT's Traffic Data Collection and Analysis Section recently received a grant from the department's State Highway Traffic Safety Section to acquire and install 10 new traffic monitoring devices in each of Montana's five Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) areas.

These devices feature advanced technology and mark a significant upgrade from the department's older in-road traffic counters. Unlike traditional counters embedded in pavement, the new monitors are non-intrusive and mounted roadside, allowing for safer, faster installation and easier maintenance. Since they're not embedded into the roadway, another advantage is that they remain intact during road resurfacing or other maintenance activities and can be reconfigured to monitor traffic during lane closures and detours.

The new equipment collects comprehensive data, including vehicle volumes, classifications (as defined by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)), and speeds. This dataset will support both MPO planning efforts and MDT's annual reporting requirements as mandated by FHWA. As with all traffic data collected by MDT, the information will be publicly accessible on MDT's traffic data web page: [mdt.mt.gov/publications/datasats/traffic-maps.aspx](https://mdt.mt.gov/publications/datasats/traffic-maps.aspx).

Two devices will be installed in each MPO area at locations, jointly selected by MDT and the respective MPO. Installations began in Bozeman in July, and continue through Fall 2025.



*Pictured top right, bottom left: MDT installing traffic monitoring devices in Missoula.*

# MDT, OPI Partner to Improve Access to Driver's Education

**D**uring 2025, Montana teens had the opportunity to improve their safety and skills behind the wheel at the Montana DRIVE Program in Lewistown. Through National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) grant funding, this project offered at-risk youth the chance to attend Montana DRIVE, a driver's education program offered by the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), with MDT's State Highway Traffic Safety Section assisting with travel expenses. Without this project, the opportunity to attend Montana DRIVE may not have been accessible to the 26 students in attendance this year.

MDT pursued this project because many teens in Montana do not have access to a driver's education program in their community. State law requires that training be provided by a certified teacher, and many communities do not have those resources. While many young drivers in Montana lack access to any formal training, driving remains a transportation necessity in rural areas. Through Montana DRIVE, these teens receive exposure to some driver training, even if not the full driver's education experience.

In addition to the Montana DRIVE Program offered through OPI, the NHTSA grant funded scholarships for Tribal teachers to become certified driver's education instructors through Montana State University (MSU)-Northern. Three scholarships with all expenses paid to attend were awarded to new instructors in Tribal communities.

MDT recently added these driver's education projects after realizing the inconsistencies throughout the state in accessing drivers' education. This is an important piece of a larger, statewide effort to reduce teen crashes, injuries and fatalities throughout Montana.

For more information on this project, contact Sheila Cozzie at 406-444-7301 or [scozzie@mt.gov](mailto:scozzie@mt.gov).



*Teen driver graduates of the 2025 Montana Drive Program, pictured with their certificates of completion.*

## 2025 Legislative Session Successes for Traffic Safety

### Montana Revised Child Passenger Safety Law

Montana Revised Child Passenger Safety Law will go into effect **October 1, 2025**. The focus of the law is to have parents and caregivers keep children in each car seat stage for best practice protection. The law states that starting October 1, children from birth to age 2 need to be in a rear-facing seat. From age 2 until age 4, children should be in a forward-facing seat. Finally, children ages 4 through 9 need to be in a booster seat. All car seats must be installed based on the manufacturer's instructions. The goal of the program is not to fine people, but rather to encourage parents and caregivers to ensure children are properly secured in the vehicle based on the above-mentioned riding ages.

### Bobby's Law

Bobby's Law, also known as House Bill 267, strengthens DUI penalties in Montana, specifically for cases involving fatal DUI crashes. This law was brought to the legislature based on a grassroots movement driven by family and friends of Bobby Dewbre, who was killed by a drunk driver. The law creates the offense of aggravated vehicular homicide while under the influence. If convicted the law mandates a three-year minimum sentence for drivers who cause a death while under the influence and have one of the DUI aggravating factors. These factors include a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.16 or higher, being under an ignition interlock device (IID) order, or having a DUI-related license suspension or revocation.





## Montana Traffic Safety Dates

⇒ **September 15-21, 2025**

See Tracks? Think Train® Week (Operation Lifesaver)

⇒ **September 21-27, 2025**

Child Passenger Safety Week (National Seat Check Saturday is September 27, 2025)

⇒ **October 1-31, 2025**

National Pedestrian Safety Month (National Walk & Roll to School Day is October 8, 2025: [walkbiketoschool.org](http://walkbiketoschool.org))

⇒ **October 19-25, 2025**

National Teen Driver Safety Week

⇒ **October 20-24, 2025**

National School Bus Safety Week

⇒ **October 21, 2025**

Montana Teen Driver Safety Day (Third Tuesday in October: [MCA 1-1-229](http://MCA 1-1-229))

⇒ **October 31, 2025**

Halloween Holiday—Drive Sober, Watch for Pedestrians!

⇒ **November 17-21, 2025**

National Crash Responder Safety Week (CRSW)

⇒ **November 26-30, 2025**

Thanksgiving & Holiday Travel—Impaired Driving & Drug Impaired Driving

⇒ **December 10, 2025—January 1, 2026\***

Winter-Holiday Drive Sober Enforcement

### \*Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) Mobilization Periods

**Note:** There are STEP participating across the state that conduct intensive enforcement of specific traffic safety laws with extensive communication, education, and outreach informing the public about the enforcement activity. For more information, contact Kevin Dusko, MDT State Traffic Safety Section Supervisor, at 406-444-7411 or [kedusko@mt.gov](mailto:kedusko@mt.gov).



## Safe Driving Around School Buses



➔ You should allow a *minimum* of 30 feet between your vehicle and a school bus making a passenger stop. But what might 30 feet look like?

2 Car Lengths



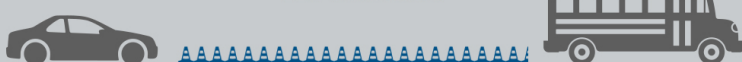
2.5 Snow Plows



3 Bison Lengths



22.5 Road Cones



# Drive Smart This Fall: School's Back in Session!

**B**ackpacks are on, crosswalks are busy, and school buses are hitting the roads again, it's officially back-to-school season! As students return to classrooms this fall, drivers are reminded to be extra cautious during morning and afternoon commutes.

With school back in session, more children will be walking, biking, and riding buses, and the roads around schools and neighborhoods will be more active. Kids, especially younger ones, may be excited or distracted and might not always follow traffic rules perfectly. That's why it's so important for motorists to stay alert and drive with care.

### Smart Driving Tips for the Back-to-School Season:

- Slow down in school zones and be ready to stop at crosswalks.
- Stop for school buses when their lights are flashing and the stop arm is extended. It's the law!
- Watch for children near bus stops, on sidewalks, and at intersections.
- Stay off your phone and avoid all distractions behind the wheel.

A few extra seconds of patience can make all the difference in keeping kids safe. Let's work together—drivers, parents, and the community—to make this school year a safe and successful one for everyone.

As traffic picks up around schools, giving yourself a little extra time in the morning and afternoon can help reduce stress and prevent risky driving behavior. Safety starts with awareness—so keep your eyes up, your speed down, and let's give kids a safe path to a great year ahead.



## October is National Pedestrian Safety Month

**I**n 2020, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) launched National Pedestrian Safety Month in October ([nhtsa.gov/events/national-pedestrian-safety-month-kickoff](http://nhtsa.gov/events/national-pedestrian-safety-month-kickoff)), aiming to draw attention to pedestrian safety. This October marks the sixth annual observance of this essential campaign, reminding us that every day, "we are all pedestrians."

This month, we encourage Montanans to engage with the latest updates and resources on pedestrian safety. Keep an eye on MDT's website and social media for informative content and practical safety tips designed to keep pedestrians safe. For ongoing guidance and resources on nonmotorized travel, visit [mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/bikeped/](http://mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/bikeped/). Let's make our community a safer place for everyone, one step at a time.

## SIAP Success Stories

**M**DT's Systems Impact Action Process (SIAP) Section coordinates reviews for various types of permits including encroachments, approaches and utilities. Coordination and communication between MDT and applicants/developers are key elements to successful Systems Impact coordination.

A notable Systems Impact review that benefited both the states of Montana and North Dakota was the Interstate Highway 94 (I 94) Crossover project, coordinated by SIAP's Transportation Planning Engineer, Jean Riley. With this project, the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT) needed to upgrade the existing pavement on I 94 east of the Montana/North Dakota state line. With the upgrades NDDOT were requiring, there needed to be a crossover installed. During the review, it was determined that a permanent crossover available for use by either state DOT when roadway closures are in place was necessary. After discussion, the crossover was located within MDT right-of-way west of the North Dakota border. NDDOT developed the plans with MDT's input. The two states entered into an agreement that covered construction, maintenance, and use of the crossover. NDDOT has used the crossover constructed since 2023 during their construction projects for the I-94 upgrades. MDT will use the same crossover when needed for construction projects on I 94 within the state of Montana. This project proved to have a successful outcome and positively affects all parties involved, as having the permanent crossover reduces costs for both states and allows for use as needed.

Another SIAP project review concerning the Kalispell North Town Center (KNTC)/Stillwater Bend Subdivision (SB) Signal led by MDT Planner, Mike Tierney, demonstrated the first successful partnership between two independent developers seeking permits with impacts to the same intersection under MDT review in the SIAP. In 2020, SIAP began working with the SB developer for an access permit granting a 4th leg at the Rose Crossing intersection with US Highway 93 (US 93). By that time, MDT had already approved the KNTC to build and operate a three-leg, stop controlled intersection, which included a financial guarantee for signalization when warranted. MDT soon realized that the addition of a fourth leg (SB approach) to the Rose Crossing intersection would trigger the signal warrants for the signal in later phases of the SB development. SIAP and MDT staff met with all stakeholders to lay the groundwork for getting the developers together, the plans updated, and the signal built to a four-leg intersection design. The developers then worked out an equitable arrangement to complete the project under MDT guidance, and the signal was built by the developer's contractors in the spring of 2023. In conclusion, the SIAP process helped to broker the agreement between the developers and led to a successful outcome for all parties.



Pictured above is the four-way signalized intersection at Rose Crossing and US 93 near mile post 117 in Kalispell.

## MDT's TMC: 2024/2025 Winter Season Overview

**A**fter the end of the winter season, MDT reflects on the critical role played by the Transportation Management Center (TMC) in ensuring the safety and efficiency of our roadways. During the 2024/2025 season, the TMC handled a significant volume of calls, demonstrating its importance in managing Montana's transportation network during the harsh winter months.

### Call Volume and Service Requests

Throughout the winter season, the TMC received 18,053 calls from MDT staff, local law enforcement, Montana Highway Patrol, and local EMS. These calls ranged from general inquiries to urgent requests for assistance. Out of these, 6,478 were calls for service, requiring action from our team. The TMC's prompt response to these calls was crucial in mitigating the impact of winter weather on our transportation system.

### Incident Management Corridor: Three Forks to Billings

A key focus area this winter was the incident management corridor between Three Forks and Billings. This corridor is vital for both local and through traffic, and managing incidents here is essential for maintaining traffic flow and safety. Through the use of a strategic management plan and Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) infrastructure like dynamic message signs (DMS) and road closure gates, the TMC is able to support local operations and provide vital information to the traveling public.

### Collaboration with Local Emergency Communication Centers and Montana Highway Patrol

The success of our operations in this corridor was greatly enhanced by our collaboration with local emergency communication centers and the Montana Highway Patrol. We conducted training sessions with first responders on road closure procedures, ensuring they were well-prepared to handle any situation. Additionally, the Montana Highway Patrol and local emergency communication centers partnered closely with the TMC to proactively determine messages for winter conditions, wrong way drivers, and traffic incident management, significantly reducing the risk of incidents.

### 24/7 Operations and Support

The TMC is staffed 24/7, providing continuous support to MDT employees, local law enforcement, highway patrol, and emergency management services. Our team assists with highway information and dispatching, ensuring that all stakeholders have the information they need to respond effectively to any situation.

### Public Access to Information

The public can access real-time data through [511MT.net](https://511mt.net) or by dialing 511 on any phone in Montana. This service provides up-to-date information on road conditions, closures, and other critical updates.

### Year-Round Services

While winter poses unique challenges, the TMC remains active year-round. During the summer months, the center posts load restrictions, construction details, and traffic incidents on MDT's roadways. This continuous flow of information helps keep Montana's transportation network running smoothly throughout the year.

### Looking Ahead

As we look forward to the next winter season, MDT remains committed to improving our response strategies and enhancing our collaboration with local agencies. The lessons learned and the partnerships strengthened this season will undoubtedly contribute to even more effective transportation management in the future. For more information about the TMC, contact:

- Curtis Buckley, at 406-444-6372 or [cbuckley@mt.gov](mailto:cbuckley@mt.gov), or
- Phill Balsley, at 406-444-6305 or [pbalsley@mt.gov](mailto:pbalsley@mt.gov).

For MDT travel information and resources, visit [mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/](https://mdt.mt.gov/travinfo/).

# “A Free and Safe Road Over the Jefferson River”: Parsons’ Bridge

*By Jon Axline, MDT Historian*

In 1867 or 1868, Helena photographer E. H. Train toured southwestern Montana photographing significant places in the territory like Helena, Virginia City, Fort Benton, Diamond City, and the Great Falls of the Missouri River. One of the photos taken by him during his sojourn was of this bridge spanning the Jefferson River on the toll road between Virginia City and Prickly Pear City (now Montana City). The bridge was named for its builder and toll collector, Nelson M. Parsons. The photograph, which Train sold copies of from his studio, is the most well-known image of a territorial toll bridge.



*E. H. Train’s well-known image of the territorial toll bridge spanning the Jefferson River, circa the late 1860’s.*

Train’s photograph shows the bridge a year or so after Parsons refurbished the structure and re-opened it for wagon traffic. The structure was 300 feet in length and built of logs Parsons and his hired hands obtained from the nearby Tobacco Root Mountains. The bridge consisted of three approach spans and two Queen Post pony truss spans. Logs also served as the abutments and piers supporting the structure. The lower part of the photo shows a cable strung across the Jefferson River. On the right side of the photo are five buildings, including a false-fronted structure. They housed a hotel/saloon, general store, stage station, and toll house. One may have served as the living quarters for Parsons’ family – his wife, Aramintha, and five daughters. Aramintha was critical to the bridge’s operation – she collected the tolls and managed the businesses.

Born in the Hudson River valley in southern New York in 1823, Nelson Parsons farmed in New York and Wisconsin before returning to his home state to enlist in the 168th Infantry during the Civil War; he deserted the army eight days after enlisting and had arrived in Montana by August 1864 when his name first appears in the *Montana Post*. He likely worked first as a placer miner in Alder Gulch before he turned his attention to a more lucrative occupation as a toll road keeper. In late 1864, he and his unnamed “legal associates” incorporated the Nevada City and Red Rock Wagon Road Company to build a toll road from Nevada City to the head of

Beaverhead River canyon south of today’s Dillon, where it intersected the Bannack branch of the Montana-Utah Road.

It is not known precisely when Parsons built this bridge. It was in place by early 1865, but it was not on the wagon road he had a license to operate. The cable shown in the lower half of the photograph was for a ferry that Parsons built at the site in June 1866. When Parsons opened his ferry, the *Montana Post* described it as being near the “old Jefferson Bridge.” The newspaper called the ferry “one of the finest and best arranged means of transport in this Territory.” In any case, the bridge in the photograph was in place when Train photographed the structure.

In April 1866, the second territorial legislature granted a license to Elijah Crawford and William Horner to build and maintain a toll bridge over the Jefferson River about five miles above Parsons’ bridge. In an advertisement in the *Montana Post*, the men declared the “Monopoly ... at an end” and charged reduced tolls to attract travelers and undercut Parsons’ business. Unfortunately for Crawford and Horner, high water washed out their bridge a short time after they built it. The partners abandoned their business venture.

In 1865 or 1866, Parsons extended his toll road north to the southern end of what is now known as Montana City. From there a different toll road carried traffic into Helena. Parsons Bridge was a critical link in his toll road empire. By 1866, a small settlement, called Jefferson Bridge, grew up around the river crossing. That same year, the federal government appointed Parsons’ business partner, Charles Flanagan, the postmaster of Jefferson Bridge; Parsons officially took over the post in 1869 (the post office closed in 1870 and moved to nearby Fish Creek). The settlement also served as a voting precinct and, in 1874, sent a delegate to the Madison County Republican convention in Virginia City.

Toll roads and bridges could be a profitable business – if managed correctly and under the terms of the territorial license. Apparently, Parsons was not a good manager. In February 1869, he declared bankruptcy and moved to Nevada City where “fortune’s smiles gladden him with more comfort than when he took the toll by the Jefferson.” Three years later, in 1872, the territorial legislature abolished the toll road system in the territory, making Parsons’ Bridge a “free bridge.” Parsons listed his occupation in the 1870 US census as a farmer. He was still in territory in 1878. Two years later he was living in Modesto, California and working as a stock speculator. Parsons died in Modesto in December 1906.

In May 1871, an arsonist set a fire that destroyed the bridge shown in Train’s photograph. High water wrecked the two replacement bridges in 1876 and 1880. By that time, the bridge was in “perilous condition.” Madison County didn’t replace the bridge until 1883. The commissioners hired farmer Pat Carney, “the Potato King of Waterloo,” to build a new bridge for \$750 (over \$25,000 in 2025 dollars). Madison County constructed a steel through truss at the site in 1899. It was partially destroyed by an earthquake in the winter of 1960. The Montana State Highway Commission replaced the bridge in 1961. That bridge still stands and is known as Parsons Bridge. While Nelson Parsons’ time in Montana was relatively short, his name is indelibly stamped on the Montana landscape and to the history of Big Sky Country.



MDT Wants Your Comments on New Projects

To receive a list of highway projects MDT plans to present to the Transportation Commission, please visit [mdt.mt.gov/other/webdata/external/planning/proposed\\_proj.pdf](http://mdt.mt.gov/other/webdata/external/planning/proposed_proj.pdf), [mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/stip.aspx](http://mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/stip.aspx), or call 800-714-7296. You can mail comments on proposed projects to MDT Project Analysis Manager, PO Box 201001, Helena, MT 59620-1001 or email them to [mdtstip@mt.gov](mailto:mdtstip@mt.gov).

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