



William H. Houston (1853-1937)

He was the 17th and 29th Missoula County Sheriff. A friend of Wild Bill Hickok and a railroad conductor, Houston became one of Missoula's most colorful and controversial sheriffs. He was known for capturing renegade Indians (sometimes in very nonconventional ways), hanging the murderer of young Maurice Higgins, trimming the City Police Department budget down 60% due to lack of criminals, which, ultimately could have led to his being kicked out of office for supplementing his budget through the making of moonshine.

- **1853-Birth.** May 17, 1853 in Logansport, Cass County, Indiana.
- **1880-Marriage.** Married Mary Quigley on April 8, 1880 in Omaha, Nebraska. They had one child, Harvey A Houston.
- William received a very limited education. Experience served as his education. When he was a young lad four of his brothers were called to fight in the Civil War, leaving William to tend to business at

home.

- In his early years, William was a guard on a stage coach from Cheyenne, Wyoming to Deadwood, South Dakota. He obtained this job on the reference of Wild Bill Hickok. Years later it was said that William pistol-whipped Wild Bill after an altercation in town and ran him out of Missoula.
- **1878.** His first job was with the railroad as a brakeman on the Panhandle. He traveled west with the railroad working his way up until he was promoted to conductor of passenger trains.
- **1883.** When the Northern Pacific railroad was built, he followed it to Missoula. At that time, he ventured into the hotel business by purchasing the Grand Central Hotel.
- **1885.** Northern Pacific offered him the conductor position, so he ended his hotel business and served in that position until 1889.
- **1889.** William was elected as the 17th Missoula County Sheriff. He was known for capturing the many renegade Indians in the area. The unfortunate criminals who shot at the Sheriff received a direct hit with each bullet that left his gun.
- **1892.** Sheriff Houston was responsible for the arrest and hanging of John Burns. Burns murdered Maurice Higgins. On the night of August 14, 1892, one of Missoula's worst fires broke out in the main area of downtown off Front Street. At that time, all the wooden buildings were lined with boardwalks which added fuel to the fire. Building after building was destroyed. Practically the entire male population turned out to battle the blaze. One of the volunteers was Maurice Higgins, the son of Missoula's co-founder, C. P. Higgins. In the early morning after the fires had been squelched, the men were gathered on a corner surveying the remains. Meanwhile, John Burns was outside the local saloon down the street from this gathering. Burns and his partner had recently robbed a jewelry store in Spokane, Washington. The loot was not being distributed as Burns wished so he came downtown expecting to be able to easily shoot his partner in the crowd during the fire and take the loot for himself. Unfortunately, he didn't find the man he was searching for until after the fire and the crowds were gone. Needless to say, Burns shot the man, hitting him in the side. Burns immediately shot again. This time, however he hit young Maurice Higgins in the forehead. Burns fled but Sheriff Houston caught him a short time later. Maurice died early the next day. Burns was tried, found guilty, and hung on December 16, 1892. Case closed. Or was it? The Missoulian reported on December 31, 1892: "The Body of Burns is Not in the Grave". The story goes on to say that his body stands in the 'mystic chamber



of the Hijis at their hall on the Eastside.’ The reporter alone, supposedly, entered the strange place to find what he described as ‘Burns’ body embalmed and fastened to a steel rod to hold it upright. Scalpel marks were clearly evident,’ stated the reporter. This report was never verified according to another article by Deane Jones which ran in the Missoulian on January 31, 1971. Mr. Jones ran a follow up article on May 21, 1971 when a man from Cummings, North Dakota claimed to have a pair of moccasins made from the skin of this same John Burns. Interesting...

- **Indian hangings.** A group of four Kootenai tribal Indians committed numerous infamous murders in the region during 1887 - 1889. They were all captured by Sheriff Houston and hung at the same time on the same gallows. This was the only recorded multiple hanging of its kind. Those gallows now sit at the Fort Missoula Historic Museum.

*(Left to Right: Pierre Paul, Pascale, Lala See, Antley)
Each Indian declared their innocence right to the end.*



- When a man named Lamb robbed the Northern Pacific of \$5,000 and escaped to Mexico, Sheriff Houston trailed him. He then hired a Mexican to chase Lamb across the International Bridge right into Sheriff Houston’s hands. The man was brought back to Missoula for trial.
- **1894–1920.** He served with the United States Land Office and as City Commissioner. He was applauded for reducing taxpayer burden by trimming expenses in these offices. William claimed to have cut the \$20,000 per year cost of running the City Police Dept. down to a trim \$9,000 per year and simultaneously collected \$9,400 in fines for the same year.



- **1920.** William was elected as the 29th Missoula County Sheriff. This term lasted only eleven months. William was removed from office and charged with incompetency, connivance with bootleggers, and his deputies were accused of making moonshine.
 - Upon retirement, William was instrumental in the continued development of Missoula. He partnered with C. P. Higgins and T. L. Greenough to build the Union Block.
 - William was one of wealthiest men in Missoula. He invested heavily in real estate throughout the Missoula area.
 - Politically, William was a progressive Republican. Socially, he was a member of the Masonic Lodge.



- A few days before his death, William Houston was quoted as telling an old friend, “I made the greatest cleanup the West ever had. I hanged five men, shot one on the street, and sent more than one hundred men over the road to the penitentiary for different crimes.”
- **1937-Death.** April 14, 1937 of prostate disease in Missoula, Montana.

William H. Houston was buried in the Houston family plots alongside his wife Mary, his son Harvey, and his brother John Allen.