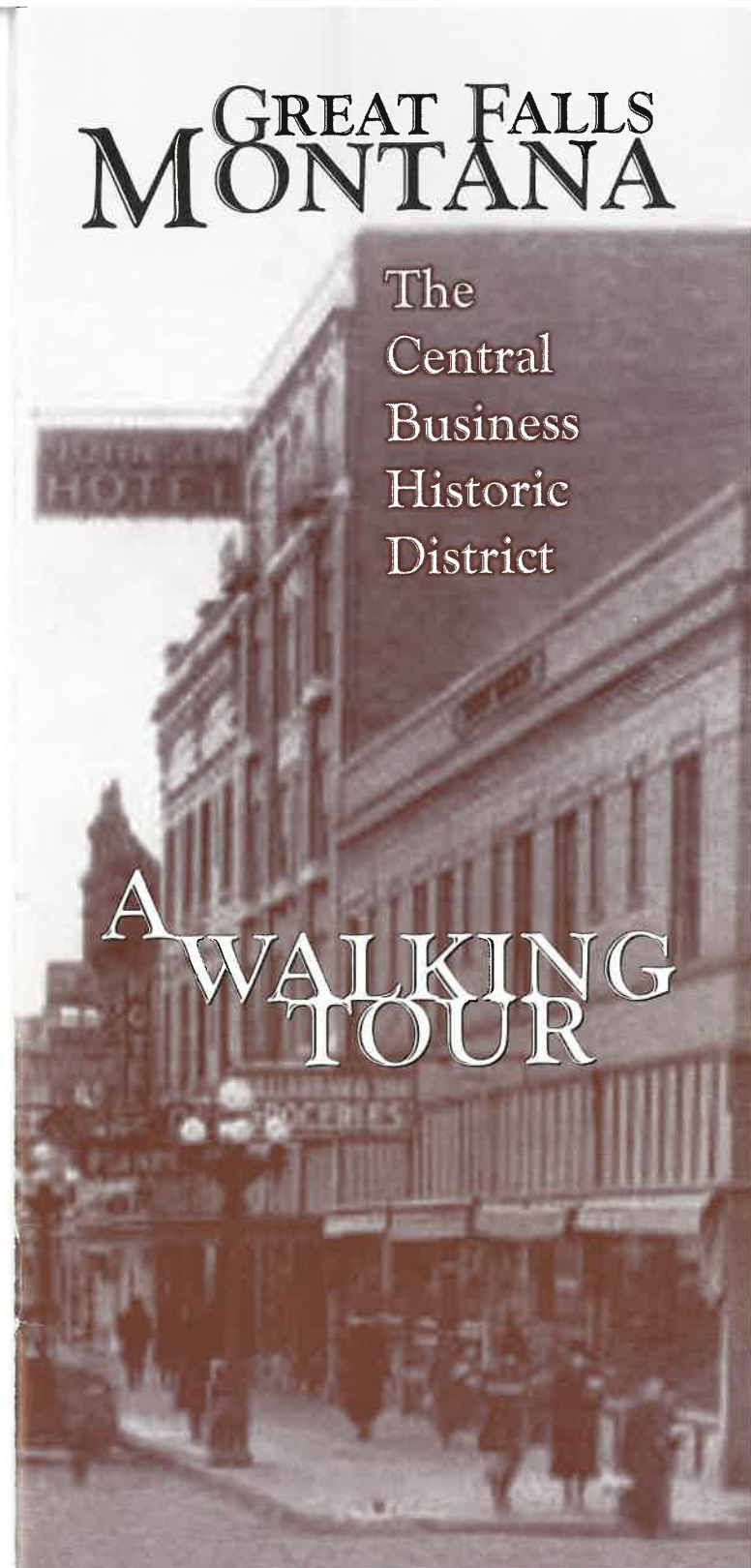


GREAT FALLS MONTANA

The
Central
Business
Historic
District

A
WALKING
TOUR



A BRIEF HISTORY OF GREAT FALLS

Great Falls began with an act of imagination. Inspired by descriptions penned by Lewis & Clark some seventy-five years earlier, Paris Gibson struck out, from his Fort Benton home, to view the great falls of the Missouri. While the falls created an unforgettable impression as a scenic destination, it was not until the following year (1882) that Gibson returned to the area, determined to complete his investigation of the "entire series of falls and rapids of the Missouri River." From a high point in the landscape, he viewed a "plain, unbroken by ravines" nestled between two rivers, that moved him to say, "here I will found a city."

Gibson wasted no time in gathering land and expertise to turn his dream into a reality. He amassed a collection of Soldier's scrip which facilitated land acquisition for his future city and acquired title to land along the river that would be important for water-power. He partnered with railroad magnate, James J. Hill, whom he had known for many years in Minneapolis, and enlisted the services of Herbert P. Rolfe to survey the townsite, in 1883.

Paris Gibson had great depth of experience in the inner workings of cities, and he drew from political, manufacturing and business experience he gained in both Maine and Minneapolis and applied it to the design of his fledgling city. The careful planning and subsequent development is obvious and continues to shape the built environment of Great Falls.

The Townsite plat was filed September 29, 1884, in what was then, Choteau County. Martha Edgerton Rolfe described the actual 1884 townsite from the Rolfe pre-emption claim some two miles south-east of the river, "On the long sweep of land from our shack to the river, grass and sagebrush grew, and nothing indicated that here would rise a city. Piles of rocks were placed at the corners of streets and avenues to show their location."

About 200 souls called Great Falls home by the end of 1884. Initial construction in the community, typical of most fledgling towns, consisted of

tents, shacks and temporary dwellings built from the materials at hand or those available in the area. Materials generally came from Fort Benton, some 42 miles northeast of Great Falls, at the head of Missouri River navigation. The similarity to other towns ended abruptly, however, due mainly to the vigilance of Paris Gibson. He carefully "advanced the interests of his city" by engaging "powerful outsiders" and area capitalists in community building. He also carefully controlled the sale of both commercial and residential lots. Within six years, "permanent" buildings dominated the business district, which provided goods for the 1890 population of nearly 4,000. Large commercial buildings displayed Victorian, Romanesque and Classical Revival styles. Many were executed in locally quarried sandstone. The population rose to nearly 15,000 by 1900 and the central business district continued its rapid expansion.

On a visit to Great Falls in July of 1895, Mark Twain remarked, "Great Falls is one of the prettiest towns in the West, resembling Denver of a few years ago, except that the buildings are finer than those in Denver."

The period between 1910 and 1920, in which Great Falls grew to a population of 24,121, effectively demonstrates the optimism held by downtown businesses. The heavy styles of the 1890's gave way to brick, commercial buildings with eclectic, Renaissance and Beaux Arts details, most often executed in elaborate terra cotta. The majority of the contributing buildings within the Central Business Historic District date from this period. Very few major fires were recorded, and many of the buildings of the past were simply demolished and replaced with stylish new, and often larger, buildings.

Through all the changes wrought by over 120 years of history, the Central Business Historic District has remained a significant commercial core in Great Falls. Visually and functionally distinguished from the surrounding areas, it continues to provide a traditional "Main Street" experience for residents and visitors.

1 300 1st Avenue South

This one-story Victorian era commercial building dates from 1896 in Great Falls' earliest building "boom." A battlemented parapet crowns the building, while buttressed pilasters, reminiscent of Gothic cathedral construction, march down the side of the building, framing the windows. The property gains significance for its association with Victor Ario who arrived in Great Falls in 1891 and began to make a name for himself in the leather business. In the 1890's he and Tom Moreland established a leather shop in this building. He bought out his partner in 1903 and "Victor Ario's Saddlery Company" was born. He was a saddle and harness maker, who diversified with the advent of the automobile by offering services in auto rag-top repair. The Golden Gate Grocery remained in the building for many years when Ario's moved up the avenue and it has been home to Bert & Ernie's since the 1970's.



2 308 1st Avenue South

Richard Graham, co-founder of Graham & Ross, had this three-story brick building constructed in 1913 at a cost of \$39,463. Graham was a Canadian citizen who moved to Great Falls in 1885 to work for Cataract Milling and formed a partnership with J. D. Ross in the feed and provision business. Elaborate terra cotta trim graces the building which originally housed the Belmont Hotel. Victor Ario, who gained a national reputation as a saddle maker, moved his saddlery company into the ground floor retail space and remained there until 1932.

3 326 1st Avenue South

Built on lots once home to stables and carriages, the Intermountain Building illustrates the progress of transportation in the community. Public



transportation has been available in Great Falls since 1887, when a horse-drawn streetcar whisked travelers up Central Avenue to Seventh Street and back, three times a week. By 1891, five routes were available at half-hour intervals, in streetcars powered by electricity from the Black Eagle dam. Stagecoach travel continued well into the twentieth century and most travel of any distance was best accomplished by rail. In 1910 horse-drawn vehicles still outnumbered automobiles on the city streets, but by 1920 the automobile was commonplace. The era of the trolley drew to a close in 1931 when they were replaced with buses. The sleek, streamlined Art Moderne style building was designed by the local architectural firm of McIver & Cohagen. Built in 1947 for the Greyhound Bus Company, the depot was rehabilitated in 2002 for use as the transfer station for the Great Falls Transit District.

4 821 Central Avenue
Masonic Temple

The Masonic Order, an ancient fraternal organization with origins in medieval Europe, formed several chapters in Great Falls that met in buildings scattered throughout the business district. In 1908, the various chapters came together to incorporate a Masonic Temple Association and construct a "Grand Lodge" to accommodate all of the various groups. The building was completed in 1914, at a cost of \$100,000. The Masonic Temple combines architectural elements drawn from exotic styles to promote the message of the secret society. The lofty towers represent the Gothic style, while steep gables and arched doorways reflect the Tudor style. Moorish influences are visible in the unusual and commanding polychromatic design. It was designed by George Bird and Johannes Van Teylingen, known widely for their expertise in designing with brick.



Photo by Minnie Hawthorne



by Karen Leigh

5 608 Central Avenue – **Graham Building**

The Graham Building, constructed in 1928, at the end of the eclectic era, offers a distinct form of the ornate Beaux Arts style in lavish terra cotta detail. Richard Graham (Graham & Ross Company) was the original owner of the business and residential building, which was designed by the architectural firm of McIver & Cohagen. Angus McIver was in charge of the Great Falls branch office and designed many local landmarks, including the Greyhound Bus Depot, the original International Airport Terminal, the Paris Dry Goods and the First Presbyterian Church.

6 601 Central Avenue
Rocky Mountain Fire Insurance Building

This 1913 building is significant because of its association with Great Falls founder Paris Gibson and renowned architect, George H. Shanley. It was originally owned by, and the home office for, the Rocky Mountain Fire Insurance Company, whose president was Paris Gibson. The company was formed by local businessmen in January of 1913 and by July they had amassed nearly half a million dollars to support local enterprise. The building was designed by George H. Shanley and originally housed the Pantages Theatre, as well as the Rocky Mountain offices. Elaborate theatrical masks in terra cotta hint at the buildings former use and gargoyles protect vehicles in the theatre turned parking garage. It has been home to Public Drug since 1935.



by Karen Leigh

7 600 Central Avenue – **Barber Lydiard**

The imposing, Barber-Lydiard Building was designed by George H. Shanley, whose elaborate eclectic designs grace many Great Falls landmarks including: the Park Hotel, Ursuline Centre, Johnson Hotel, Dunn-Brown Block and Rocky Mountain Building, among others. Shanley, who located his offices in the Barber-Lydiard Building, appears to have finally embraced modern architecture



near the end of his career as he applied a subtle Art Moderne style to this 1951 building. Barbers, Inc., with Roy J. Barber President and Robert E. Lydiard Secretary/Treasurer offered "Furnishings, Musical Instruments, Appliances and Interior Decorating."

8 522 Central Avenue
Roberts/Elmore Hotel

William Roberts considered the Roberts Building/Elmore Hotel to be his best attempt at combining retail and hotel accommodations in one building. Before construction started, he made an extensive study of California apartment buildings with architect Henry N. Black. The Elmore opened in 1917 with 99 guest rooms. It provided guests with all the conveniences, including porter and maid service and private phones. There were six retail stores located on the main floor offering drugs, millinery, furniture, ready-to-wear, groceries and music. Classical Revival details dress the parapet and frieze area of the handsome light brick building.



9 500 Central Avenue – **The Grand Hotel**

One of the few 19th century buildings on Central Avenue, the Grand Hotel building exhibits elements of Victorian and Italianate styles. Built in 1890 as the Hotel Grand, the building served for a period as the Cascade County Courthouse. It was remodeled in 1907 and reopened as the Grand Hotel. The retail space has been the site of the Golden Rule Store, Safeway and many others, until it was remodeled in 1957 for the F.W. Woolworth Company. The two upper floors that once bustled with activity have been "mothballed" and the soft brick structure has been painted for protection.



10 421 Central Avenue – **Russell Building**

Strain Realty Company called on the expertise of Henry N. Black, an architect who designed many local business buildings, to design the Russell Building. It was created specifically to accommodate small retail businesses and upper level apartments. Great Falls was growing rapidly in 1915, as a result of a mushrooming homesteading population and the central business district expanded accordingly to meet the needs of the newcomers.



11 417 Central Avenue – **Johnson Hotel**

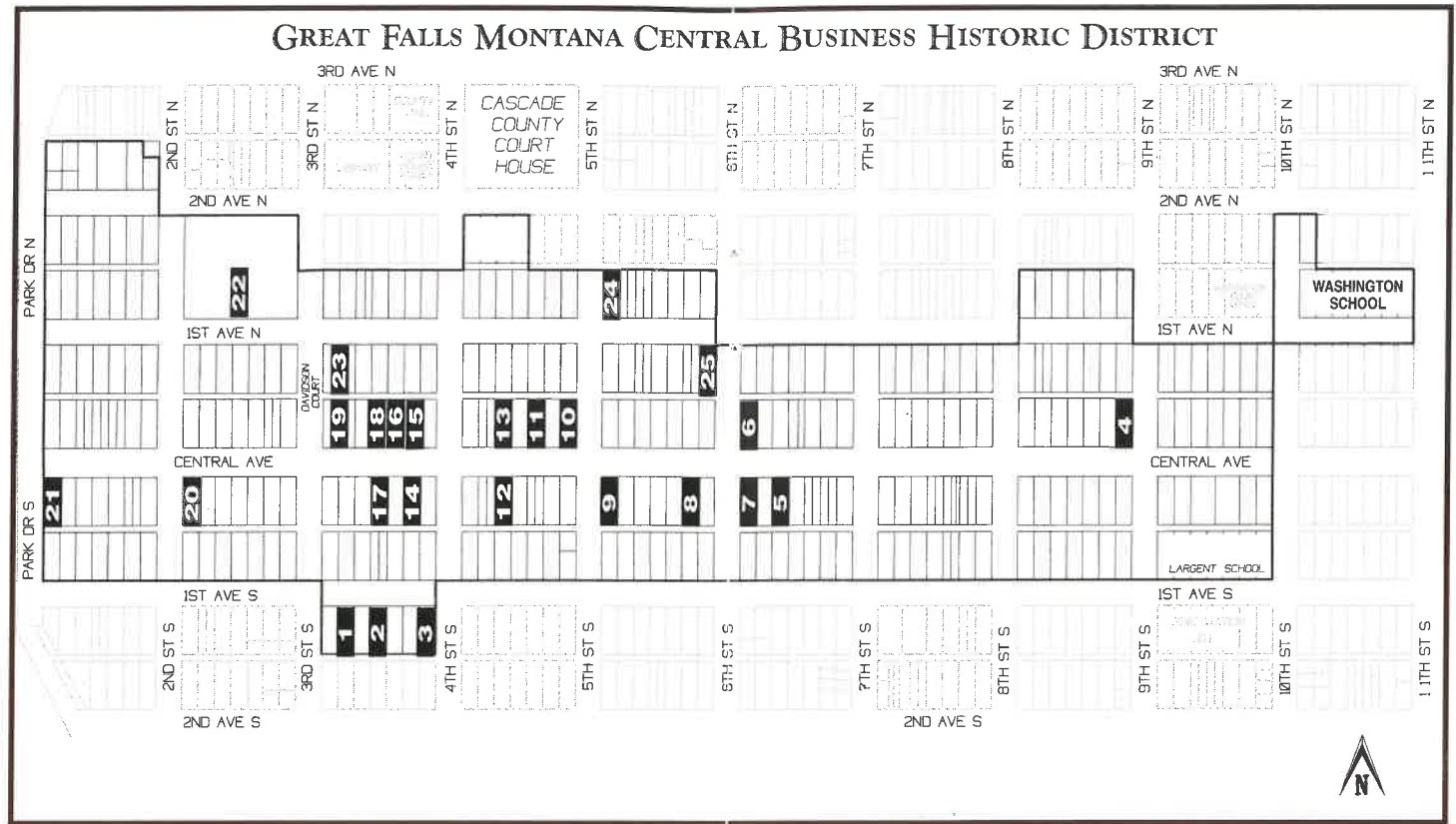
Pete Johnson arrived in Cascade County on foot in 1886 and worked his way up from driving freight wagons, mining and ranching to County Commissioner and major community investor. Johnson wanted his new hotel to be on a par with the Rainbow and Park Hotels, so he hired the same architect, George Shanley, to design the Johnson Hotel. Built in 1920, the five-story Main Street Commercial style building exhibits Classical elements in terra cotta detailing.



12 412 Central Avenue
Northern Hotel

The Northern Hotel, built in 1914, is another in a string of commercial/residential buildings designed by Henry N. Black for William Roberts. Built at the height of the homesteading influx, the Northern Hotel also housed the Northern Clothing Company and later was home to F.W. Woolworth Company. The eclectic building draws from Victorian, Italianate and classical Revival styles.





HISTORIC DOWNTOWN GREAT FALLS SELECTED SITES

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. 300 1st Avenue South - Bert & Ernies | 14. 322 Central Avenue - Thisted Building |
| 2. 308 1st Avenue South - Ferrin's Furniture | 15. 317 Central Avenue - Beehive Store |
| 3. 326 1st Avenue South - Great Falls Transit | 16. 313 Central Avenue Metropolitan |
| 4. 821 Central Avenue - Masonic Temple | 17. 312 Central Avenue - Dunn-Brown Building |
| 5. 608 Central Avenue - Graham Building | 18. 309 Central Avenue - Beckman's |
| 6. 601 Central Avenue - Public Drug | 19. 301 Central Avenue - Liberty Theatre |
| 7. 600 Central Avenue - Barber Lydiard | 20. 200 Central Avenue - Murphy-McClay |
| 8. 522 Central Avenue - Roberts/Elmore | 21. 100 Central Avenue - New Park Hotel |
| 9. 500 Central Avenue - Grand Hotel | 22. 215 1st Avenue North - Federal Building |
| 10. 421 Central Avenue - Russell Building | 23. 21 3rd Street North - Ford Building |
| 11. 417 Central Avenue - Johnson Hotel | 24. 501 1st Avenue North - Montana Building |
| 12. 412 Central Avenue - Northern Hotel | 25. 526 1st Avenue North - Silver State Building |
| 13. 411 Central Avenue - Kaufman's | |

20 200 Central Avenue – Murphy-McClay Building

Identified as one of the oldest extant buildings on Central Avenue, the Murphy-McClay Building has been the subject of numerous additions and changes since 1886. It gains significance from the rubble-stone, west wall that illustrates that period of time when construction in the

fledgling community relied heavily on the materials at hand. Until construction industries were established locally, building materials had to be freighted and were costly. They generally came from Fort Benton, some 42 miles northeast of Great Falls, at the head of Missouri River navigation. The Murphy-McClay Building utilized stone found in nearby quarries for this "permanent" structure. E. G. McClay came to Montana in 1863 and ventured into the freighting business, ultimately taking over the famous Diamond R freight line. With the coming of the railroad, he partnered with J.T. Murphy, an early pioneer merchant, with stores in Fort Benton and Helena, to establish the first dry goods store in Great Falls. Growing with the community, Murphy-McClay expanded with a 60 foot addition in 1888, at a cost of \$750, eventually branching into hardware.



21 100 Central Avenue – New Park Hotel

Architect George Shanley utilized elements of the Mission Revival style to create the "New Park Hotel" in 1915. Ornate terra cotta trim, curvilinear gables, heavy wooden brackets and open arbors decorate the massive brick building that anchors the west end of the Central Business District. The New Park Hotel Company was formed to replace the original 1892 hotel that burned in 1914. Within easy walking distance from the railroad depots, the elegant hotel featured three dining rooms, a women's parlor and, in the basement, a Turkish bath. Special Sunday dinners were one dollar and merchants could take advantage of a daily lunch for only fifty cents. Within the walls of the Park Hotel are stories that span ninety years of Great Falls history. Tales swirl about nationally known entertainers and politicians, of gambling and gamboling, of "young women to help the gentlemen have an enjoyable evening," of possible "mob" ties, but the walls are not talking. In 1970, the building was remodeled for use as a retirement complex.



By Susan Atchison

22 215 1st Avenue North – Federal Building

The Great Falls Federal Building/Post Office is an outstanding example of early twentieth century architecture in the Second Renaissance Revival style. The 1912 building was the city's first federally constructed post office and was built during the most significant growth period of Great Falls. It is a legacy of the federal government's recognition of the city's regional importance. Between 1910 and 1920 Great Falls experienced a significant influx in population as a result of copper refining, electrical power development, railroading and a wave of homesteaders. This period showed significant construction in the city's commercial district during which some of the city's most impressive buildings were erected.



By Minnie Hawthorne

23 21 3rd Street North Great Falls National Bank/Ford Building

This building is significant because of its association with the Great Falls National Bank, founded in 1891 by Robert S. Ford. Ford was one of the earliest settlers in the north-central Montana area. He arrived in the Sun River Valley area in 1871 with a herd of Texas steers. In 1873, he established the Ford Sun River Valley ranch and secured the Army beef contract for the Indian Reservations. By the late 1880's, he had moved into the area of real estate and investment. The



Great Falls National Bank was originally located in the Murphy-McClay Building and R.S. Ford continued as President until 1913 when he was succeeded by Lee Ford, his eldest son. Henry Hall Johnson designed the Beaux Arts style building, constructed in 1914 at a time when banks looked like banks, were locally owned, centrally located, and reflected area optimism and pride of community.

24 501 1st Avenue North – Montana Building

The Montana Building was constructed in 1930 to serve the city's need for a centrally located medical facility. In addition to dental and medical offices, the building housed the Medical Arts Pharmacy, the Glass Art Shop and the Great Falls Sewing and Machine Company. It was designed by Bird & Van Teylingen, a firm well-known for the creative use of brick. Some design similarities can be seen in the Washington School and the Masonic Temple which also display Mediterranean influences.



25 526 1st Avenue North – Silver State Building

L. H. Hamilton, the "Dean of Montana Sheepmen," had the Silver State built in 1910 to address his interest in the automobile. Opened as the Standard Garage, it was the first major garage built in the city. Hamilton sold what had become one of the state's largest sheep ranches, moved to Great Falls and invested in the community. He was one of the first to see a practical application for the new automobile and drove a Franklin car from Boston to Great Falls in 1910, no small feat given the lack of developed roads and bridges in some areas. Hupmobiles, Hudsons and Buick Motor cars were sold, serviced and repaired in the handsome brick building that displays Classical Revival elements in the copper, projecting cornice, full entablature with dentils and geometric capitals. Horse-drawn vehicles were a strong majority on the streets of Great Falls when the Standard Garage opened, but within ten years automobiles were commonplace. Hamilton was by then President of the Commercial National Bank.



In 2001, the Great Falls/Cascade County Historic Preservation Advisory Commission (HPAC) initiated an architectural and historical inventory of the Great Falls Central Business District. In 2004, the district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation's resources considered worthy of preservation.

Material for this brochure was drawn from the inventory and nomination. It presents a sampling of the history and architecture of downtown Great Falls and celebrates a collaboration of business, tourism, history and the arts.

For information on other buildings in this district and other historic resources in Great Falls and Cascade County contact the Historic Preservation Office located in Room Four of the Civic Center or call 406-455-8435.

Sponsors

The project would not have been possible without the support of the following:

GREAT FALLS BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

GREAT FALLS ARTS ASSOCIATION

GREAT FALLS/CASCADE COUNTY HISTORIC
PRESERVATION ADVISORY COMMISSION

MONTANA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
- RUSSELL REGION

Produced with Accommodations Tax funds in cooperation with Travel Montana, Department of Commerce and Russell Country.

Printed in the USA for free distribution.

Alternative accessible formats of this document will be provided upon request.

