



Laurel (Images of America)

Ann Kooistra-Manning

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Early Laurel, like many Montana frontier towns, was shaped by tenacious settlers who struggled to carve a living from a harsh, often unforgiving landscape in the wake of the Indian Wars. Laurel started as little more than a railway station and a handful of businesses serving railroad workers, farmers, and ranchers in the early 1880s. Irrigation projects soon transformed the dry, dusty prairies along the Yellowstone River near Laurel into productive farmlands. Homesteaders flocked to the valley. By 1908, Laurel had grown into a bustling shipping and servicing center for three major railroads and boasted the largest rail yard and roundhouse between Seattle and St. Paul. In the 1920s, it became a jumping-off point for tourists destined for Yellowstone Park. A decade later, Laurel staked its claim in the region's emerging oil industry when the Laurel Leaf refinery was built. This small, unassuming town has played a vital role in the development of the Yellowstone River Valley and beyond.

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