

## **A. E. Spriggs**

# **The Townsend Man Who Helped Create Broadwater County & Bought Guatemala**

By Paul M. Putz

Broadwater County was a democratic accomplishment founded with the intent to serve the needs and ambitions of people by improving on the tool that is their government. Due to the vision of its founders a cumbersome, out of date arrangement was reformed into the more efficient entity still in use today. Though not without an eye to personal gain, the citizen fathers of Broadwater County perceived and responded to the needs of the community and did what was right in a substantive way toward that end. One of them, A. E. Spriggs, was a product of that time and a most interesting man.

The area now known as Broadwater County did not exist until 1897, several years after Montana became a state and more than thirty years after territorial status had been achieved for the region. Originally it was part of Jefferson County, a vast area spanning the distance between the divide at Butte on the west and the Missouri River on the east. It nearly equaled that length north to south, stretching from just south of Helena to the Jefferson River north of Sappington. Jefferson County shared Montana Territory with eight other huge counties, all of which were subsequently subdivided.

This early district had a very different population distribution from that of today. The Townsend valley was comparatively empty save for scattered ranches and stage stops along the wagon road to Bozeman. Radersburg, the most active gold camp between Helena and Bozeman, wrested the county seat from then smaller Boulder. In 1869 citizens erected the Jefferson County Courthouse on a hill overlooking Radersburg and settled down to business.

Young Jefferson County prospered but it also quickly changed complexion. Gold camps prominent during early territorial days faded from view, their populations moving on to other camps, into larger towns or onto flatland farms and ranches. The community of Boulder in western Jefferson County ascended while Radersburg's population waned as its gold and silver mines petered out. In 1883 a new influence arrived when the Northern Pacific Railroad ran a line from Logan to Helena using the gradual slope of the Missouri River valley as a platform. According to their ineffable needs, the railroad located towns when and where required. So, with a stroke of the chief engineer's pen, Townsend was planned on a flat spot just south of the Northern Pacific's Missouri River bridge.

By 1889 and statehood, the dynamics of 'old' Jefferson County were not only rearranged, they were looking mighty permanent. Radersburg, mortifyingly isolated in the eyes of then modern railway passengers, was also feeling the heat of Boulder's impatience. Meanwhile, Townsend was flexing its young muscles and planning an ambitious future. Jefferson

County's eastern neighbor, Meagher County, had also changed. Its county seat, White Sulphur Springs, had absorbed what remained of Diamond City and other Big Belt Mountain settlements. No serious visionary believed the railroad lines and agriculture would soon go the way of the rowdy, impermanent gold camps of early days. The pressure was on to match the divisions of the people's business with new realities.

Several new Montana counties were recommended during the years surrounding statehood. As early as 1885 a bill to carve "Valley County" out of either slope of the Missouri River drainage east of Helena was proposed. It was blocked by interests favoring the status quo but the increasingly obvious need for change galvanized strong and determined leaders.

The 1890s saw the development of a team of formidable political allies who adeptly pursued the goal of creating what would become Broadwater County. The task was not an easy one. Despite the awkward distribution of population, development and communications in Jefferson County, many people hung on to the existing system because their applied interests were organized along its lines. Any newly formed county would involve the loss of territory not just in Jefferson but in Meagher, Lewis and Clark and Gallatin counties. The influence of certain elected officials and businesses in these counties would thereby be diminished. Those advocating the formation of a new county would have to convince a majority of voters to accept this major change. The group who took on this difficult task was comprised of A. E. Spriggs, Gordon G. Watt, Peter J. Meloy, E. H. Goodman and W. E. Tierney. Together with a host of enlistees they would become the founding fathers of Broadwater County.

On June 12th, 1900, Archie E. (Archibald Everett) Spriggs was dutifully enumerated by a census taker as a lodger at 108 Pine Street, Townsend, Montana. Along with his neighbors who were miners, ranchers, salesmen, butchers and the like, Spriggs identified his profession: Lieutenant Governor of Montana. It's a humble looking entry, legibly coded to record that Archie was a single white male of 34, born in Wisconsin on December, 1865 (though Archie would say 1866) and able to read and write, as one would hope of a Lieutenant Governor. What is not recorded is that Archie was probably still basking in the afterglow of one of Montana's most outrageous political coups yet attempted; the overt finessing of state law to ensconce Copper King William Clark as a United States Senator. Spriggs was a 'Clark man' and Clark had lured Montana Governor Smith to California on a money deal. In Smith's absence, acting Governor Spriggs accepted Clark's resignation as U. S. Senator in the face of evidence that Clark had bought the position through bribery. Resigning disconnected his former charges. Archie then immediately reinstated Clark, technically predicating the senatorship on a Governor's legal prerogative. Never mind that it didn't work, the pure brass of the try put Archie in the history books forever and helped write a footnote on the political war between Clark and Marcus Daly of Amalgamated Copper. This A. E. Spriggs was no mere anonymous Townsend lodger. In the financial and political tumult of the United States at that time, Archie was a player.

Montana in the Gilded Age was a rough, open battleground, pitting ranchers against settlers, Europeans against Native peoples, Rebels against Unionists, railroads against other railroads, capitalists against competing capitalists and miners against mine owners. All such combat meshed into politics, making every issue an amalgam of heated tangents that rendered decision making agonizing and often impossible. The power fueling these fights came up out of the ground. Unimaginable fortunes from mining gold, silver and, in particular, copper, filled the coffers of people to whom risk was a way of life and whose natures seethed to vie for position. Upon arrival in Montana, whether by crossing the border or being born within it, a freshling was doomed to feel the effect of such passions. And if a person held dreams and ambitions of their own they were presented with a dilemma: they had to choose which rich man's side to be on.

In 1864, when Montana Territory was carved out of the Territory of Idaho, gold and silver, followed quickly by cattle, were where the big money was. Bannack, then Virginia City, then the area around Helena each blossomed as mining communities in their respective times. But it was at Butte, that volcanic slag heap at the Clark Fork River headwaters, where the greatest concentration of wealth was deposited and not in the form of "Oro E Plata" but in the newly appreciated electrical transmitter, copper.

Marcus Daly, an Irish immigrant with experience in western mining, had impressed major investors with his drive and intelligence. Sent to Butte to open a silver mine, he quickly assessed the vast copper potential of 'the hill' and succeeded in having a copper smelter built at Anaconda, the company name of his shared enterprise. He was soon rich, his interests horizontally and vertically expanding into timber, coal, banks and politics, a realm in which he maneuvered to establish absolute rights over Montana's resources for the operation of the Anaconda Company (soon aligned with Standard oil as the Amalgamated Copper Company).

Daly's chief rivals were fellow Butte copper magnates William A. Clark and his viperous ally Augustus Heinze. In short, these men entertained themselves by frustrating one another's ambitions. Clark coveted a U. S. senatorship to influence world mining (he will help 'buy' Guatemala). Heinze coveted other people's copper, Daly's in particular, which he was known to mine under cover of gunfire. These two forces and their successors, wrestling titans shaking the earth, were to corrupt, degenerate and ultimately abandon Montana as they reached ever outward to master the globe. While here, they bribed, threatened, sued, connived, manipulated, propagandized, coerced and generally played dirty to outmaneuver each other, enjoining much of the rest of the state with them. When Daly tried to establish Anaconda as the new state capitol, Clark backed Helena and a campaign of lavish spending ensued throughout Montana to buy votes. When Clark tried to buy a Senate seat, Daly's array of newspapers and cronies fumed against him. It was quite a circus. Multiply the players to include smaller yet still powerful operators like Sam Hauser, Colonel Broadwater and others and it became a true competitive extravaganza.

Enter Archibald Everett Spriggs, a tall, blue eyed youngster with dark hair and a chin square and solid as a bank vault door. In 1887 when he crossed into Montana Spriggs was a fresh graduate of Valparaiso business school known at the time as “the poor man’s Harvard”. He eventually settled in Townsend, a railhead near mining claims he began to acquire in Jefferson County to the west and Diamond City, York, Castle and Neihart to the east. Certainly talented, he exhibited the kind of astonishing breadth demonstrated by men of the frontier. Beginning as a school teacher in Confederate Gulch, ‘Archie’ Spriggs branched out into local merchandising mining, mine ownership and politics. In 1892 he was in business in Townsend, partners with J. C. Stuart in a lumber business and cigar store. For a while thereafter he managed a store in Winston but also entered the political fray, joining the Populists in a race for the legislature.

Following an initial defeat, Spriggs redoubled his efforts to bring together Meagher County Democrats and Populists into a new voting group, or ‘fusion’ party. The central connector was silver and the need for these men to have the government use it as money lest their mines become worthless. In 1895 Archie was elected to the Montana House of Representatives where he gave a good showing but failed to press through his bill to create Broadwater County. The following year he was elected Lieutenant Governor and again he championed the new county, demonstrating a keen ability to formulate political alliances and husband controversial legislation. Largely to his credit, Broadwater County became a Montana political entity in 1897.

During these years Archie must have been constantly on the go. Both business and politics were all-consuming activities and the incredible rate at which he accumulated influence in both realms required constant attention to detail and personal interaction. Much of both were directed toward the interests of his benefactor, William Clark, and his new employer, H. L. Frank.

Spriggs chose sides well. Clark’s mammoth fortune and burning political ambition offered anyone well suited to complementing them a rocket ride upward. Archie chose to be a “Clark Man”, providing support from wherever he operated as proven by Sprigg’s complicity in the Clark resignation and reinstatement scheme of 1900. Henry L. Frank, also in Clark’s orbit, had made a killing buying and selling businesses in Butte and investing in successful mines. At some point in this adventure, Frank chose Archie Spriggs to come along.

Apparently, the schoolteacher from Wisconsin was a winner. Both Clark and Frank were serious about selecting capable, loyal managers and when they engaged Archie Spriggs, they believed it was the best choice money could buy. Spriggs became a trusted ally, responding to major crisis with confidence and ability. In 1902 Spriggs was called to take over operations of the Emma Mine in Butte when significant and tricky expansion was necessary. Spriggs and his foreman did so ably and he went on to preside over several Montana mining properties in succeeding years. It was Frank, however, who introduced the former teacher to international mining and high finance, launching Archie Spriggs into the higher atmospheres of both.

Henry L. Frank was a Butte saloonkeeper with excellent taste in gold mines, oil wells and coal deposits. These he bought and sold to great advantage, amassing a huge capital base in the process. Like Spriggs, he dabbled in politics, becoming Mayor of Butte and a candidate for U. S. Senate along with his occasional business partner, William Clark. Failing in this particular endeavor, Frank took consolation in buying a mountain of Canadian coal where he founded a town bearing his name, the population of which devoted themselves to honeycombing the neighborhood with mining drifts. By this time, Spriggs was running Frank's properties. In April, 1903, the mountain outside of Frank suddenly collapsed, sending 30 million metric yards of debris into the valley below and destroying the town, much of its population and Frank's mine. Spriggs soon arrived on the scene and had the mine running again in a month. Although the disaster was deemed natural in origin the association with mining darkened the story and Henry Frank, devastated by the loss of property and lives, was said never to have entirely recovered from the shock. He died in 1908 at the age of 57.

Meanwhile, Archie Spriggs learned as he went and applied what he knew. The Frank holdings brought Spriggs into contact with foreign capital. In 1904, Archie accompanied Henry Frank on a European business trip during which it is likely they conferred with Parisian bankers. Later, building on his reputation as a politician, mining expert and management whiz, Spriggs (who now accepted the honorable, perhaps tongue-in-cheek title of "Governor") worked connections in New York state, partnering with NY Governor Sulzer and other investors. These links lead to the most fantastic venture of Archie's career, a deal hatched in the jungles of Central America.

The New York Times issue of June 3, 1911 carried the most remarkable story about our man from Townsend. A. E. (Governor) Spriggs had telegraphed an agent of William Clark informing those gentlemen that the National Assembly of Guatemala had signed an agreement with a French-American company for the rights to mine and provide utilities for all public lands, an area comprising over three quarters of Guatemalan territory. The Times suggested Clark was behind it all. Spriggs, as company president, was looking forward the wholesale development that would follow a three year survey to determine where best to begin mining. So broad were the terms of this arrangement that Spriggs' Guatemala Mining and Development Company would virtually run the country. With obvious disgust, a New Zealand newspaper called it the "Purchase of a Republic".

The prospects were overwhelming. Spriggs would oversee the construction of mines, mining equipment, roads, telegraph and telephone lines, ships, bridges, tunnels, power plants and distribution lines to serve both the company and the Guatemalan people. It would be the work of a lifetime, something the able Archie would have looked forward to with relish. Given such triumph, it was a good time to make another unexpected life change. Mr. Spriggs became secretly married.

Her name was Josephine Leighton, a native of Maine and at 29, fifteen years younger than Archibald Spriggs. "Josie" was a common-born yet beautiful woman imbued with her share

of grit. By entering this union Archie demonstrated a certain grit of his own. Five years before, Josie had dispatched her first husband with two pistol shots to the chest. (A gossipy Helena story at the time identified Josie as Spriggs' mistress, telling him that if he did not marry her she would shoot him, too.) The couple married on March 3, 1911 in New York where he had been spending considerable (but evidently not all) time on business. The marriage was not generally announced until 1912 when New York papers picked it up. Despite local tittering, indications are that their relationship had solid foundations of mutual interest. Josephine Spriggs was intelligent and possessed of management capabilities and ambitions that she apparently shared with her new mate. They honeymooned in the Central American sunshine for three years while Archie planned Guatemala, one of many such trips they would take to that place in coming years. Returning to Montana, the couple rented rooms at 343 Clarke Street, Helena. Spriggs' tenure as a Townsend resident came to an end.

The years between 1911 and 1917 kept Archie active with international travel and mine management at home. By serving as president of several holdings in the Helena region, Spriggs was probably continuing his somewhat enigmatic relationship with Clark holdings and perhaps other investors as a manager. His attention to the Hope Mine in Basin indicates a majority interest in that property. Domestically, an orphaned nephew of Josephine joined the Spriggs household. This was Leo Leighton Shibley, whose birth in Manhattan was to strengthen the bonds between New York City and the Montana couple. Problems with the Guatemala project surfaced during this period, too. According to his friend Peter Meloy, World War I interrupted French financial support, scuttling what Meloy called the largest mining deal on earth. Regional instability was also a cause. It must have been a tremendous emotional blow and financial setback but Archie's political connections were to sustain him.

In 1915, Governor S. V. Stewart, responding to Populist pressure, encouraged a statewide workman's compensation program with an oversight commission. Stewart appointed A. E. Spriggs to chair this new "Industrial Accident Board", no doubt with an eye to installing a member sympathetic to the mining industry but with sufficient background to satisfy labor as well. Whatever Spriggs was doing, he seemed to balance things out for he maintained this position for the rest of his life, though under Governor Stewart who was a copper company Democrat through and thorough.

There is no doubt Montana's workman's compensation system and its board operated under the watchful eye and hand of the mining industry. Though an advocate for just treatment of injured workers and the families of workers killed on the job, the Industrial Accident Board was not about to confront major mine operators on significant issues. When over 160 men lost their lives in a fire at the Speculator Mine in Butte, Spriggs's agency refuted claims that the mining company was at fault in the face of evidence to the contrary. Thus absolved of liability, the mine eventually paid out \$800,000 to the victim's families or about \$4000 each. Spriggs asserted that without the 1915 workman's compensation act under which the

mine was self-insured families would have been awarded nothing. Such an aftermath suggests a deal struck to contain the mine's liability while acknowledging and settling for the loss of workmen. Nonetheless, Butte miners with a bellyful of grievances saw the disaster as the last straw. They walked off the job en masse, sparking a brief, bloody period of unrest that called attention to problems but failed to strengthen unionism in Montana. The men returned to work and when injured, were cared for by Archie's board. When killed, they were buried by it and their widows were paid a settlement.

Montana newspapers regularly printed stories about the Industrial Accident Board, stories often presenting A. E. Spriggs as a champion of workmen's rights. The *Anaconda Standard* kept readers updated on Archie's travels and pronouncements such as his claim that the undertakers of Butte would welcome him as a customer because of his insistence they charge fairly for services rendered the families of men killed on the job. Attorney's, too, were a target of his should they attempt to gouge compensation claimants. Even years after his death, Spriggs was favorably mentioned and it was pointed out he took initiative in establishing a program of rehabilitation for injured workmen, a novel proposal that proved to be ahead of its time. Praise from the 'copper collared press', however, requires context. Given the fact that Montana newspapers were largely compromised by mining industry money, there is a whiff of propaganda in such coverage, leaving open questions about what was not reported.

Deeper examination of original records would tell a more comprehensive story about the Industrial Accident Board's dealings, though it's tempting to see Archie Spriggs as a knowing person taking his responsibilities for workers seriously while weaving through the political and economic realities of the day. The board was no small matter. Its staff of eight or so routinely handled a hundred simultaneous cases, saw to the insurance status of thousands of employers statewide, inspected facilities and equipment and issued hundreds of thousands of dollars in claims biennially. The complexity of discerning applicable laws and rulings while providing guidance to and oversight of its vast clientele must have taxed them considerably. Spriggs' position as a high-profile bureaucrat netted him an impressive annual salary of \$8660 in 1917.

As for politics, Spriggs still devoted himself to Democratic issues. He was chairman of Senator Thomas Walsh's second campaign, providing sage advice on Montana developments when Walsh was in Washington. In doing so, Spriggs again revealed his flexibility and breadth. Walsh was no William Clark. A Helena lawyer and political progressive, Walsh supported causes beyond self-interest and would eventually be selected as Franklin Roosevelt's U. S. Attorney General. Men of Walsh's generation were redefining what it meant to be a Democrat by taking up social consciousness as a theme and demanding broader applications of American justice and equality. By supporting Walsh, Archie Spriggs was building on his 'fusion' roots, leaving silver behind to emphasize populist ideals.

Was this change just the way the wind was blowing or did Spriggs recalibrate political objectives according to personal commitment? For someone aligned with the corrupt and money-centered Clark, backing women's suffrage, trust busting and the income tax seems out of character. But by 1912 Clark had left Montana and his sons who remained were less energetic. Spriggs may have shared some disgust at the Clark era with his old Townsend associate Gordon Watt who despised Clark's legacy. It may be telling that Spriggs offered Watt the position of Secretary of the new, progressively inspired Industrial Accident Board, a position Watt left his beloved California to fill. Together these men operated this demanding operation and Watt took it over after Spriggs' death.

Of the two, Watt is much more visible because he wrote a personal history leaving Spriggs' personality, feelings and nature to be derived second-hand. Other than Peter Meloy, Helena newspaperman Charles Diggs Greenfield provided a few paragraphs about Spriggs the man, describing him as a friend of Clark, not just a minion. Clark called upon Archie to straighten out Clark's sons when they fought (as adults) and offered Spriggs assistance when 'sick in New York and down and out'. His Guatemalan adventures were illustrated by an anecdote told to Greenfield by a friend who visited Spriggs there. Offered an audience with the Guatemalan dictator, Spriggs joined the visitor and an official escort on the walk toward the leader's raised chair, a pathway lined with armed soldiers. Instead of walking abreast with his companions, Spriggs took a position behind them and when asked about it later explained that the last time someone took that walk an assassin shot at the official, missed and hit the visitor. A crafty Spriggs was taking no chances.

Greenfield's account also corroborates stories that Archie took protecting workman's rights seriously, telling about a meeting Spriggs called to lay down the law on those gouging Butte undertakers. He is the source of gossip about Josephine and writes that Spriggs would never prevaricate – unless he knew for certain he would never be found out. Less critical, perhaps less objective, are Meloy's recollections emphasizing Spriggs' integrity, friendliness and leadership. But such retrospection after years had passed need not ring hollow. Without a doubt, Spriggs was a leader regardless of circumstances. Spriggs knew men. He knew how to encourage them, how to guide them and how to foster confidence in them. Whether faced with a destroyed mine to repair or a political disaster to patch up, Spriggs proved time and again to be decisive and accurate. The fact that he could maintain connections in Guatemala for over a decade demonstrates his ability to deal with chaos for that was the state of Central American at the time. Archie comes across as a steady hand who was focused on the complexities of business. He was exquisitely gracious in his correspondence and quite articulate but forever to the point. He served as agent to some of the most scurrilous men of the day but pirates at the helm make brigands of the crew. The entire Montana system was corrupt. Allegiance was a choice he had to make or languish. At least A. E. Spriggs could broadly generate trust which seemed to be his greatest strength. On balance, that's not all bad.

In the spring of 1920 Governor Spriggs made one last trip to Central America. Although the vast program of development was now abandoned, there continued to be sufficient mining business for Spriggs' attention. Perhaps he hoisted a final glass with his friend, Presidente Manuel Estrada Cabrera of Guatemala. Returning to Montana and his home on Clarke Street, Spriggs must have reflected deeply on what could have been and what had become of him. He was comfortable but not rich, well known and admired but not powerful. Yet his life proved to be one of adventure, accomplishment and one must think, some fulfillment. Spriggs, a man of modest beginnings, had taken on ambitions that captured the world's attention. Always a part of something big, he challenged himself beyond the dreams most men could muster and saw many of those dreams through. In this, Spriggs owed much to his character. His friend Peter Meloy respected Sprigg's quiet, direct dignity, and recalled him as a handsome man of little presumption. One hopes those traits supported him in disappointment as well as success.

The following summer while home in Helena A. E. Spriggs was taken with a fever, then a painful redness and swelling of the skin. It was erysipelas, a virulent streptococcal infection for which there was no cure. Josie and his family tended his suffering for over a week to no avail. Archibald Everett "Governor" Spriggs died on July 18, 1921. The creator of Broadwater County and near master of a Central American empire had only lived fifty-four years. A grieving Josephine Spriggs donated a granite park bench to the city of Helena in memory of her dead husband with whom she had shared an exciting decade. Its inscription reads:

*My Archie: The wide, wide world cannot enclose thee, Dear,  
for thou art the wide, wide world to me. ~~Josie*

This and the plaque bearing his name on the Broadwater County courthouse are his public monuments.

Very truly yours,  


