

THE STORY BEHIND SOLDIERS CHAPEL

By Emily Johnsen

In 1954, the people of Gallatin canyon needed a church, but they faced an age-old problem: lack of funding. At the same time, affluent Bozeman residents, Nelson Story III and his wife, Velma, planned to build a memorial in honor of their son, Nelson Story IV, a fallen soldier of World War II. When the Storys joined efforts with residents of Gallatin County, they created something more than a picturesque place of worship. Today, Soldiers Chapel is a well-known cultural landmark, a stone and timber monument to the people of Montana's past, present and future.

The Soldiers Chapel, a modest cruciform structure, is framed by an awe-inspiring view of Lone Mountain. Velma Story donated the chapel's sublime location. This 6.92-acre property has since become the gateway to Big Sky Resort and community. Colonel Nelson Story III, who served in the 163rd Infantry Regiment with his son, designed the chapel's basic structure and donated most of the building funds. Construction of the chapel began in the spring of 1955 and was completed by October of that same year.

Sergeant Jack C. Gunter, also of the 163rd Infantry, drafted the trademark rose window above the chapel's entrance. The ornate, stained glass window portrays a wounded soldier reaching toward the outstretched hand of God.

Lieutenant Colonel Harold M. Siqueland, Chaplain of the 163rd, dedicated the memorial chapel to the fallen soldiers of his regiment on October 2, 1955. A plaque just outside the chapel entrance reads, "In tribute to those immortal soldiers of the 163rd Infantry who, with courage and devotion, died in pain defending their country and the cause of freedom for all men."

The 163rd Infantry Regiment

The story of Soldiers Chapel began with Lieutenant Nelson Story IV of the 163rd Infantry, a regiment of the Montana National Guard that fought in the Pacific during World War II. When the Japanese military established strongholds in New Guinea, as part of a movement to overtake Australia, the men of the Montana National Guard helped reclaim this strategically vital region.

As the fighting dragged on in the sweltering, insect-infested jungles of New Guinea, deadly illnesses such as malaria, typhus and dysentery



Nelson Story Sr. with his sons, Walter Perry Story and Thomas Byron Story, and grandson, Malcom Story.

took their toll. At one point during the Pacific campaign, disease caused as many as two-thirds of war casualties. Eighty heroic men of the 163rd Infantry, 41st Division of Montana, lost their lives in New Guinea. Among them: Lieutenant Nelson Story IV, great-grandson to one of Montana's most renowned frontiersmen.

The First Nelson Story: Frontiersman, Entrepreneur, Millionaire

If you have ever read the book or seen the movie "Lonesome Dove," you may already be familiar with the first Nelson Story. Larry McMurtry's

Pulitzer Prize winning novel is based on Story's epic journey from Texas to Montana with more than 1000 head of longhorn cattle.

In the years following the Civil War, northbound routes out of Texas were fraught with danger. In 1866, due to escalating, violent conflicts with Indians and bandits, the U.S. Army often blocked civilian attempts to cross into northern territories. Despite military blockades, Indian attacks, and marauding cattle thieves, Nelson Story successfully drove his cattle from Texas to Montana. In December of 1866, Story and his team arrived in the area east of the Gallatin Range, now known as Paradise Valley. Story and his crew were the first to accomplish this remarkable feat, and the only for many years afterward.

With this original herd of longhorns, Nelson Story established the prosperous Story Cattle Company and Ranch—still owned and operated by his great-great grandson, Mike Story. Then, in 1882, Nelson built the highly profitable Story Flour Mill. Nelson Story's shrewd business decisions soon made him the area's first millionaire. He used his fortune

and influence to shape Bozeman, which was little more than a trading post at the time, into the thriving community it is today.

Story's flour and cattle industries, combined with several mercantile stores, provided numerous employment opportunities and generated revenue for the area's new populace. He helped launch Gallatin Valley National Bank, one of the first banks in the area, and in 1893, donated 160 acres of land to start an agricultural college, which has since become Montana State University.

Story Heritage

In modern-day Gallatin County, evidence of the Story family's impact is everywhere. A statue of Nelson Story on his famous cattle drive stands in Lindley Park. Nelson's wife, Ellen, was the inspiration for the still operating Ellen Theatre on Main Street. The current "Story Mansion," a gift from Nelson Sr. to his son, Thomas Byron, now functions as a community special occasion venue. Of course, there is also the Soldiers Chapel, a memorial to Nelson Story the IV and gift to the people of Gallatin County.

The land directly behind Soldiers Chapel is still owned by the Story family. Mikel Kallestad, grandson to Colonel Nelson Story III and current owner of the property, vows that his family will never develop this prime real estate. In a recent interview, Kallestad reaffirmed his former sentiment, saying, "It's our responsibility in perpetuity to maintain that view corridor to Lone Mountain...or else a bolt of lightning will strike us down."

Kallestad's own history is closely entwined with the Chapels: in 1956, he was the first baby ever baptized there. He has since exchanged wedding vows and baptized his daughter at Soldier's Chapel. He also serves as president of the Soldiers Chapel Corporation, a non-profit organization that operates the chapel.

Many people share Kallestad's high regard for the church. Soldiers Chapel is a popular location for weddings, baptisms and holiday functions. Memorial services draw crowds of veterans, active military members, families and friends. Whether for celebration or quiet contemplation, the chapel welcomes visitors of various Christian denominations. "It has no membership roll. It is instead a fellowship of believers, a fellowship composed of varied beliefs, but one faith...many viewpoints but one Christ."

