

## New building models Old West

By ALEX STRICKLAND - Bigfork Eagle

The old Flathead Bank building on Grand Street in Bigfork was, to put it bluntly, "rotting into the hillside."

That's what local architect George Gibson had to work with when the Saddlehorn group wanted to turn it into a sales center.

"We didn't want to just slap some paint on," Gibson said of the building that would be unrecognizable to anyone who last saw it this spring.

Instead, what the old bank got was a full-on overhaul into a showcase piece for Gibson and Saddlehorn. Sticking to a "pioneer architecture" theme, Gibson used a ranger station as inspiration for the remodel and employed materials ranging from reclaimed barn wood to local stone to square hewn logs from St. Ignatius.

Gibson's company, George Gibson Architecture, has been in downtown Bigfork - in one spot or another - since 1993. His work includes the Bridge St. Cottages, the addition to the Osborne Landing building, Branding Iron Station and many other commercial and residential projects around the area.

Gibson Architecture paired with Montana Build Inc. of Whitefish to form the Big Hat Group, an architectural and building combination for the Saddlehorn development who worked together on the sales center project.

The Saddlehorn building on Grand is a perfect example of the kind of design Gibson said should be the norm in the new development.

"This project really turned out superior," he said. "Saddlehorn showed a great commitment to this design."

Perhaps most remarkable is that the complete transformation from dilapidated bank building to old west lookout took only 6 months from conception to completion. Conceptual drawings were done at the end of January and the building was up and running by mid-summer, with construction lasting only 55 days.

The bank provided unique challenges as well, such as working around the vault with its nearly two-foot-thick concrete walls.

"We made entering the vault look like a mine shaft," Gibson said. "And used some of the low ceilings to make it feel like a cabin."

The piece de resistance, however, is the "discovery tower," a feature Gibson said he feels has both practical and aesthetic value.

"The tower gives the building an image and an old west feel," he said.

From the Saddlehorn sales center's perspective, Gibson said it provides a place to take clients to meet privately and to look out over the development from across Bigfork Bay and creates a focal point in the community.

"It gives a good image for Bigfork," he said



**George Gibson designed the new Saddlehorn building on Grand Drive, and the finished product is catching everyone's eye. Mike Richeson - Bigfork Eagle**