
The Whisper of Gold

When dreams of instant wealth inspired thousands to rush headlong across America's Great Plains to the vast Rocky Mountain region, settlements around promising gold discoveries sprang up quickly. Most of these settlements were complete with the trappings of the legendary West, including hopeful prospectors, saloons, brothels, assay offices, gambling halls, and gun-slinging sheriffs. Initially, Denver had all the characteristics of one of these short-lived boomtowns. It was, however, to become far more than simply another mining bonanza. Through astute leadership, planning, geography, political maneuvering, and blind luck, Denver outlived its sister boomtowns to become the Queen City of the Plains and the regional metropolis of the Rocky Mountain West.

For centuries before gold seekers flooded the area that was to become Denver, it was the homeland of a succession of tribal nations. Although there is much evidence of the prehistoric animals that thrived in the area, including mammoth, bison, camel, and horses, little remains to document the earliest Native Americans, believed to have hunted there as many as 15,000 years ago. Evidence of a number of later tribes does exist, and experts have confirmed that, by 1500, the Apaches lived there, hunting buffalo on foot and planting crops in its fertile river bottoms. By the early 1700s, Comanches attacked and forced the Apaches south. Before long, the Kiowas arrived, at first fighting with the Comanches and, later, allying with them and joining their migration to the plains south of the Arkansas River.

By the early 1800s, the Arapahos and their allies, the Cheyennes, arrived. Together, they drove their enemies, the Utes, into the mountains and soon wandered freely over most of eastern Colorado. Since they were expert mounted hunters, the region's plentiful herds of shaggy bison provided much of their food and clothing, as well as their tipis.

By the early 1800s, trappers had also recognized the region's wealth, and mountain men, like **Jim Bridger**, had begun to harvest its rich bounty of pelts. Most were respected and welcomed by the tribes. This genial relationship is evidenced by many rendezvous, one of which was held in 1815 near the future site of Littleton and attended by French trappers and members of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Kiowa tribes.

Despite all those who flourished in the area, few Americans could see any value to the vast, unwelcoming land. Early explorers had already documented its impenetrability and barrenness. **Zebulon Pike**, who saw Pikes Peak in 1806, stated, "No man could possibly reach its summit," while **Major Stephen Long** named the area the "Great American Desert" during his 1820 expedition. When California was taken from Mexico in 1846, settlers began to journey West seeking inexpensive land. The westward movement swelled to a flood when gold was found in California in 1849, and prospectors rushed headlong to the goldfields. Fueled by different dreams, settlers and prospectors shared a dread of the dry, barren stretch of land that became Colorado and sighed with relief when it had been successfully traversed. When valueless land was sought for displaced tribes, these plains were cheerfully given away in the 1851 Treaty of Laramie.

Eventually, some began to suspect that the Rocky Mountain region was more than a vast wasteland. Despite a widely-shared dislike of the area, a few of the most astute prospectors heading to California in the Gold Rush of 1849 had noted outcroppings that hinted of gold. Although they did not pause to explore further, when the excitement in California had died, some remembered those promising rock formations. Still driven by dreams of golden wealth, they began to talk of their observations while sitting around the fire during long winter nights. From those quiet discussions grew a new set of dreams. Slowly, attention turned to the Rocky Mountain region, and, during the winter of 1857-58, several prospecting parties, fueled by dreams of finally striking it rich, prepared to make the journey at first thaw.

In the early summer of 1858, the first prospecting party reached the area that became Denver. Led by **William Green Russell**, a

Georgian who had heard stories of gold from his wife's Cherokee relatives, it consisted of 104 Georgians, Cherokees, and Missourians. On June 24, 1858, the hopeful prospectors arrived at the confluence of Cherry Creek and South Platte River, the future site of Denver, and immediately began to pan the streams. A trace of gold was found, but quantities were so small that, by July 2, a mere nine days later, eagerness had died, and wagons were readied for the long trip home. Although most left, Russell and 13 others persevered and continued to pan. By October, after panning for almost four months, they had found \$500 worth of gold.

The second group of optimistic gold-seekers that trekked west during the early summer of 1858 was comprised of 49 men, two women, and one child. Led by **John Easter**, a butcher, they left the town of Lawrence, in the Kansas Territory, on May 24. Initially they went farther south and began prospecting at the foot of Pike's Peak and in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Finding nothing, they journeyed north, settled across Cherry Creek from the Russell Party and began panning for gold.

Auraria and Denver City

Russell and his group named their settlement Auraria, meaning gold, after Russell's hometown in Georgia. Easter's group named their settlement on the other side of the Cherry Creek St. Charles. While Russell and his 13 prospectors panned the creek, the members of Easter's party focused their energies on planning. Before long, they had drawn a rather impressive town on paper and had staked out some streets. As soon as these plans had been completed, Easter and his hopeful prospectors hurried to Kansas to get an official charter for their proposed town, leaving **Charles Nichols** to protect their claim.

While they were gone, a third group arrived, led by **General William Larimer**, a forceful, astute, and experienced leader. Larimer's party decided to settle on the land claimed by Easter and simply declared that the town had been abandoned, despite Charles Nichols' adamant protests to the contrary. According to legend,

Nichols stopped protesting when Larimer's group threatened to hang him from one of the plentiful cottonwood trees by the creek.

When Easter and his party arrived with their official charter in hand, they found Larimer and his prospectors comfortably settled on their land. Although they had acquired a legal charter for their settlement, they discovered, to their dismay, that there was no legal system to support their claim. Unwilling to engage Larimer and his group in a battle, they decided to forfeit their useless charter. They were rewarded for their decision with \$250, plus shares in Larimer's new town. Having dispatched the threat posed by Easter's party, Larimer's group immediately began establishing their town and erecting rough buildings. Cognizant of the importance of political favor, they called their settlement Denver City, after **James W. Denver**, the Governor of Kansas Territory. Unfortunately, their timing was poor. Embroiled in a scandal, Denver was forced to resign his office before he could use his power to support the new town bearing his name.

Competition between Auraria and Denver City began immediately, as each tried to outdo the other in panning the most gold from the streams and building the most structures. When large numbers of prospectors began to arrive the following year, the bitter rivalry between the two settlements intensified as the founders of each hopeful town schemed to entice businesses and settlers to their side of Cherry Creek.

Tales of Instant Wealth

During the summer and fall of 1858, although both Auraria and Denver City built rough structures, and the residents of each rival settlement dreamed of wealth, very little gold was found. If the national economy had been healthy, it is possible that the small amount of gold that was panned from Cherry Creek would have gone unnoticed. As it was, a widespread recession was raging, bringing gloom and despair. People needed hope. As whispers of gold in the Rocky Mountain region drifted east, thousands of young men listened with awe. Tired of struggling with their grim economic

realities, they envisioned a gold rush to equal the one they had missed in California a decade earlier. Instead of worrying about starvation and financial ruin, they dreamed of finding wealth and glory in the new, promising goldfields. During the long winter of 1858, their dreams solidified into firm plans, and many young men made preparations to leave at the first sign of thaw.

Flamboyant books describing the gold-rich region fueled these dreams with the promise of easy wealth. During the winter of 1858 alone, 15 guidebooks were published, only a few of which were written by men who had actually been west of the Missouri River. Fantastic accounts, written by armchair entrepreneurs, described a glittering fantasy world. Readers were told that Pike's Peak was solid gold and that one could simply scrape a fortune off the mountain in a matter of hours. They were advised not to take pack mules on the journey because they would never be strong enough to haul all the gold home. One of the favorite "true" accounts of instant wealth was that of the Wheelbarrow Man. He reportedly ran the wheel of his wheelbarrow into the rich Cherry Creek and, before long, his wheel was encrusted with pure gold. As these fantastic stories were shared (and embellished) throughout Midwest towns, gold fever spread.

Tales of wealth were made even more compelling by the enticing promise of freedom that gold-seeking offered to impoverished young men from stolid Midwestern families. This anticipation of liberation and excitement was intensified by cautions such as these by **William N. Byers**, the founding editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*:

Your ruffled shirts, standing collars and all kinds of fine clothing had better be left in your trunk, or wardrobe at home, discard all cotton or linen clothing, adapt yourself at once to woolens and leather; provide yourself with woolen underclothes; woolen overshirts, thick and strong; woolen pants. . . . You may also leave your razor, for you won't use it. (Instead) . . . carry your principles with you; leave not your character at home, nor your Bible; you will need them both, and even grace from above, to protect you in a community whose god is Mammon, who are wild with excitement, and free from family restraints.

Stampede West

Soon, thousands, comprised of both seasoned prospectors and impoverished young men, were readying supplies and waiting for spring. By the first thaw of 1859, the floodgates broke, and the stampede to the Rocky Mountain region began. Thousands came by foot, horseback, buggy, and wagons drawn by a wide variety of creatures, including oxen, mules, horses, dogs, and even men. They faced late snows, mushy roads, icy rain, floods, and the threat of starvation. Some, on the verge of starvation, were aided by passing wagon trains, and friendly tribes fed others. Some, like the Blue brothers, were not as lucky, according to a May 14, 1859 *Rocky Mountain News* report:

Mr. Williams, Conductor of the Express, informs us that he picked up on the plains a man in the last stages of exhaustion, who had subsisted upon the remains of his two brothers who had died of starvation.

The Russell and Larimer parties spent the winter of 1858-59 preparing for the expected onslaught by building rough structures and establishing businesses. They were successful, and, by the time spring arrived, Denver City had 25 buildings and Auraria had twice as many. Essential businesses, including a grocery, laundry, barber-shop, bakery, carpenter shop, ferry, blacksmith, and numerous saloons, had been established. Even a hangman and a marshal had been hired to try to keep order. Both young settlements were ready to welcome the flood of gold-seekers.

Despite this progress, the weary, ragged, and unkempt prospectors who arrived during the spring of 1859 were disappointed by the desolate, ugly cluster of cabins and tents huddled on the prairie. The crowded, dirty streets, filled with men dashing to and fro, shouting, cursing, and bragging, shocked and overwhelmed many. Oxen bawled. Whips cracked. Gunshots echoed, and wagon wheels creaked while Arapahos stoically viewed the pandemonium. This was certainly not what their guidebooks had led these greenhorns to expect! Despite the unexpected chaos, new arrivals joined the melee and immediately began panning the nearby streams. Most were disappointed, for gold was scarce. Few found enough to buy minimal

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Camp near Cherry Creek, c. 1865

food supplies, consisting of coffee, beans, pork, bread, and whiskey, for, due to phenomenal freight costs, severe supply shortages, and profit-conscious merchants, basic food needs cost \$1 a day.

Soon discouragement, desperation, and anger consumed many. Instant wealth seemed nowhere to be found, and living conditions were frightful. Mere days after their arrival, a considerable number were leaving for the long journey home. On April 16, 1859, 75 men left Denver City en masse. Along the trail, they greeted all those heading west with extravagant tales of the disaster, lawlessness, and poverty awaiting them. They convinced many, some within sight of Denver City and Auraria, to turn back. Before long, there was an angry throng dashing east. To lighten the load for their weary oxen, they discarded their supplies and, for hundreds of miles, the trail was strewn with abandoned provisions.

Gold!

By May, when hopes were at their lowest and many had judged the entire gold rush to be a hoax, word of two large gold discoveries in the mountains reached the discouraged prospectors. **George A. Jackson** made the first of these discoveries. On New Year's Day 1859, he had discovered the warm mineral springs at today's Idaho

Springs. He camped there, attracted by both the spring and the easy food source provided by the mountain sheep lingering nearby. Jackson began prospecting and, by January 8, he had found some promising samples. He left but came back at first thaw with a party of prospectors. They dismantled their wagons to build sluice boxes and began working the streams. By April 17, they established the first mining district in Colorado and, in seven days, they had found \$1900 worth of gold.

News of this discovery reached Denver by early May. Immediately, the parade of discouraged prospectors heading home dwindled and prospectors crowded the rough trails in their dash to the new mining district, soon called Idaho Springs. By the time the *Rocky Mountain News*' William Byers arrived on May 14, 1859 to report on the activities and stake his own claim, over 300 prospectors had beaten him there.

John Gregory, a Georgian, made the second exciting discovery. In February 1859, he found a small amount of gold about 10 miles from Jackson's claim. Despite that discovery, he was discouraged and left to reprovision. While reprovisioning, he told a group from Indiana about his findings, and they convinced him to lead them to the location at first thaw. Throughout the spring, they quietly made plans, and, by May 6, they had reached the gulch where Gregory had found his samples. They immediately discovered promising traces of gold and, in a week, had found \$975 worth of pay dirt. Rumors flew, fueled by gold fever, and within a few weeks, word of this second gold discovery had also reached Denver.

Thrilled with the exciting news, prospectors no longer thought of heading home; instead they faced a dilemma: to which promising discovery should they dash? Soon, both areas were swarming with prospectors, claiming all available land and feverishly seeking gold. Almost immediately, some of the lucky ones were taking as much as \$4000 a day from their claims.

As soon as the news of the two amazing discoveries spread, not only did the stream of angry homeward-bound gold-seekers cease entire-



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Placer Mining in Gregory Gulch, c. 1865

ly, but thousands of new hopefuls left their homes in the East and the Midwest to join the throngs. Almost overnight, prospectors were again flooding into Denver City and Auraria. This time, though, they had no intention of staying. The 500 who arrived each day left for the mountains the next day, stopping only to replenish supplies and to ask questions.

The Building of a Town

Life during Denver's first decade was characterized not by adventure and glamour, but by illness, hardship, and lawlessness. Although much has been written about the excitement of the early gold days, it is likely that early Denver historian, **Jerome Smiley**, characterized them aptly:

There were gamblers and other criminals a-plenty; but as to loafers, this country was probably the most uninviting region in the world for them. The truth is that while many had been bankrupt and many others impoverished by the collapse in 1857, in the main the men who came here in the pioneer times were of average honesty, and of more than average enthusiasm and heedlessness. They were inspired by no worse motive than one to better their worldly condition and to do it in one or two summer seasons.

Entrepreneurs in the two rival towns clearly understood that enthusiastic gold-seekers were the key to Denver's future. They immediately focused their attention on transforming their towns into central supply centers—the place prospectors came to spend their money. To do that, they knew that they needed to establish a wide range of businesses and transform their settlements into vibrant, but safe, places for prospectors to buy, rest, and play. As a result, businesses to serve, supply, and entertain prospectors were established quickly. As early as the summer of 1859, hardware stores, photographers, sawmills, more than 30 saloons, and a brewery were open for business.

Despite their efforts, illness and scarcity characterized Denver's early years. Although Denver advertised itself as the region's premier supply and service center, many new arrivals were shocked at the scarcities and lawlessness that dominated the towns. Rodents and other animals roamed the streets at will, and sanitation systems were crude at best. As there were no physicians, and medicines were almost impossible to obtain, illnesses raged virtually unchecked. As late as 1870, Denver had no hospital. Unprepared for the squalid offerings in a city infused with gold, many who arrived with hope and enthusiasm were overcome with despair as soon as they saw the crude, forlorn cluster of buildings huddled on the dry plains.

Obtaining the food the hungry prospectors needed was a constant challenge. The large quantities of meat they wanted were simply not available. Although certain meats, such as venison, rabbit, prairie hen, and turkey, were obtainable, prospectors did not particularly like local meat and craved the food they had left at home. They also needed fresh fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, they were either



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Vigilante Hanging, 1868

unobtainable or extremely expensive, for freight charges from Missouri or Santa Fe were enormous, and local farmers, plagued with drought, hail, and grasshopper invasions, could not be counted on to supply the town.

Although service and supply issues continued to plague Denver throughout the 1860s, attempts to enforce law and order were more successful. As early as 1860, a vigilante Committee of Safety was organized, complete with a judge, two associates, and both a prose-

cuting and a defending attorney. Juries were chosen from bystanders. Unfortunately, despite the Committee of Safety and their occasional hangings, violence continued to dominate the young, largely transient community for the next few years. By 1862, an improved government was established and a full-time sheriff hired. Soon, city leaders began to note that the dangerous high spirits and criminal activities of the unruly boomtown had ceased to dominate everyday life. They breathed a collective sigh of relief that unchecked crime was finally on the decline.

Most gold-seekers did not stay in Denver long. When they were there, they wanted to play. Although saloons and brothels were constantly busy, sporting events also gained an early popularity. Both wrestling and boxing matches were held frequently and drew large crowds. In August 1861, a prizefight for a \$500 purse drew 2000 spectators. The 109-round fight lasted one hour and 40 minutes. It left the fighters battered and the crowd shaken up, for, during the fight, the newly erected bleachers had collapsed! Horseracing was also a favorite source of entertainment. Everything from guns to gold dust and town lots to mining claims were gambled on the races. Unfortunately, unhappy losers and jubilant winners often clashed, resulting in brawls that generated bitterness in the rowdy young town. In addition to sporting events, theaters sprang up quickly. The first, Apollo Hall, on Larimer Street, between 14th and 15th Streets, opened on October 6, 1859. Located on the second floor over a saloon and billiard parlor, it used 12 candles as footlights. Admission was \$1 and, despite the rather pricey admission, it was an instant success. On many evenings more than 350 cheered and jeered these performances.

Although most dashed to the mountains as soon as they had provisioned and played, some were convinced that they could make more money supplying the prospectors than digging for gold. They came to stay. Their hard work and tenacity were rewarded when refinements left at home, such as churches, libraries, schools, and newspapers, began to improve life in the young settlements. As early as the summer of 1860, there were regular Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Jewish services in addition to a library, a newspaper, and a school:

- * **A. E. Pierce** opened the first circulating library with \$10 worth of books.
- * Denver's first newspaper, *The Rocky Mountain News*, was founded by William Byers on April 23, 1859, and still provides Denver with its news.
- * The first schoolmaster, **Owen J. Goldrick**, arrived during the summer of 1859. According to legend, he arrived in a glossy plug hat, a broadcloth Prince Albert, a boiled shirt, and lavender kid gloves. He sported mutton chop whiskers and a bushy mustache and is said to have entered Denver loudly cursing his oxen in Latin. By October, he had raised enough money to open Denver's first school, with an enrollment of 43 students.

By 1870, just over a decade after the first settlers had arrived, Denver had made great progress toward becoming not only the dominant supply center of the region, but also a vibrant home for the growing numbers of residents.

Gaining Regional Dominance

While gold bullion (worth \$27 million in the first decade) flowed through Denver City and Auraria, city leaders focused on transforming the rough settlements into the central distribution and service center of the region. Recognizing the daunting challenges awaiting the isolated, unorganized, and poorly supplied towns, they campaigned feverishly to dominate the region.

First, they knew they had to unify Denver City and Auraria and achieve political independence from Kansas. They were successful. Unification was achieved when, in April 1860, the two rival settlements became one town, Denver. Independence was achieved soon afterward when, on February 28, 1861, the Rocky Mountain region was recognized as a new and separate territory, the Colorado Territory.

Despite competition from other hopeful new Colorado towns, astute leaders were extremely successful in establishing Denver as the dominant regional supply center. Although in 1870 there were only



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Panning for Gold

4759 permanent residents, a mere 10 more than in 1860, few would have recognized the thriving town that had sprung from the ugly cluster of tents and cabins in a mere decade. During those formative years, farsighted leaders and entrepreneurs instilled a sense of direction and destiny into the residents of the gutsy boomtown. Despite fire, flood, war, and isolation, the dirty little settlement, many miles of hard travel from the gold fields, emerged as the major town in the Rocky Mountain region, well on its way toward earning its title as Queen City of the Plains.

Time of Trial

Denver's first decade was a difficult one. Although city leaders remained focused on becoming the dominant supply center and the money from the gold fields continued to flow in, disaster haunted the young town. A series of misfortunes, including a fire, a flood, and the threat of attack, hindered Denver's progress in the race to become the key town in the Rocky Mountain region. In addition to those disasters, businesses faced overwhelming transportation challenges, and Denver's streets were populated by rowdy, transient fortune-seekers. In the face of such daunting challenges, many feared that Denver would become another ghost town. Visionaries were convinced they were wrong and focused their considerable energy and vision on establishing a town that would dominate the region. They were successful.

Civil War

Denver's isolation from the East was intensified by the Civil War. The newly-established Colorado Territory was virtually forgotten by Washington. It was left to adapt to the hostile land with a makeshift government, a nearly non-existent budget, and inadequate military protection from both uneasy tribes and gold-hungry Confederates. Desperately-needed supplies became almost impossible to obtain. As the Civil War intensified, Denver's population also dwindled, as few gold-seekers arrived, and many went home to join the battle.

Although sympathies of Denver residents were divided between the North and the South, **William Gilpin**, Colorado's first Territorial Governor, worked feverishly to turn Denver into a well-fortified Union town. Using unauthorized drafts on the floundering United States Treasury, Gilpin began to raise an army and build a military base. By October 1861, he had succeeded in organizing an army and

completing a number of military buildings, including a headquarters, barracks, mess hall, and guardhouse.

Men were quick to enlist, but once in uniform, found themselves bored and nervous. Discipline was poor. Volunteers deserted at will, cursed officers, plundered the countryside, and terrorized Denver citizens. Their evening bugle call served as the signal for most to dash to Denver's saloons and brothels. Nightly brawls broke out throughout the town. When the newly-appointed sheriff tried to impose order and lock up the perpetrators, angry enlistees simply battered down the jail door to release their imprisoned comrades.

Despite local disapproval of the rambunctious militia, it soon became evident that Colorado gold fields, producing \$7 million in 1861 alone, offered a strong temptation to the Confederacy and that Denver would need all the protection it could muster. Early in 1862, 3700 Texas Confederates, under the command of **General H. H. Sibley**, marched north and occupied Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Union volunteers, led by **Major John Chivington**, a fanatic Methodist minister, hurried south to protect Colorado's borders. The two forces met, and Chivington soundly defeated the Texans at the Battle of Pigeon's Ranch. In a second battle at La Glorietta Pass, Colorado forces were again victorious. Under Chivington's orders, 80 wagons were burned, prisoners were taken, and 500 horses and mules were bayoneted. While Chivington was lauded as a hero, a defeated Sibley retreated to Texas, and Southern hopes for a Western Confederacy died.

Fire!

Denver's early buildings were extremely flammable. Aware of their vulnerability, citizens organized a volunteer Fire Department on July 15, 1862. Unfortunately, almost a year later, carts and buckets were still on order, and firemen were untrained and untried. On April 19, 1863, a fire broke out in the center of downtown Denver when a careless drinker kicked over a lamp. High winds fed the sparks and, in a few hours, the heart of Denver, from 16th Street to Cherry Creek, and from Market to Wazee, was a charred ruin.

Losses totaled over \$350,000, little of which was covered by insurance. Although the rough buildings were of minimal worth, the loss of precious inventory was devastating to many new businesses. The day after the fire, the price of the supplies that had survived the inferno was doubled. Luckily, as bricks were plentiful, and local loans were available at the rate of 25% per year, rebuilding began almost as soon as the ruins had cooled. One positive result of the fire was that laws were passed to prohibit using wood and other flammable materials to construct downtown buildings. As a result, Denver's new buildings were sturdier, larger, and more attractive. As the rebuilding progressed, Denver began to look like a town rather than a temporary campground.

Flood!

On May 19, 1864, only a year after the fire, the spring melt and heavy rains transformed Cherry Creek into an angry torrent that engulfed much of downtown Denver. Professor Goldrick, the eccentric educator/journalist who had opened Denver's first school,



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Flood-Swollen Cherry Creek

wrote a long, famous account of this devastating flood, including these excerpts:

Presently the great noise of mighty waters, like the roaring of the Niagara, or the rumbling of an enraged Etna, burst upon us, distinctly and regularly in its sounding steps as the approach of a tremendous train of locomotives. There was soon a hurrying to and fro in terror, trying to wake up one's relatives and neighbors. . . . Alas, and wonderful to behold! It was the water engine of death dragging its destroying train of maddened waves. . . .

Now the torrent, swelled and thickened, showed itself in sight, sweeping tremendous trees and dwelling houses before it . . . as it rolled with maddened momentum directly toward the Larimer street bridge and gorged, afterwards rebounding with impetuous rage and striking that large Methodist church and the adjoining buildings, all of which were wrested from their foundations and engulfed.



Denver, 1864

Courtesy, Colorado Historical Society
CHS-X-4775

In a few hours, the stream had swept away buildings, people, and livestock. When the waters receded, Auraria was knee-deep in silty water. Gone were the *Rocky Mountain News* building; the Methodist Church; City Hall, with all its irreplaceable land deeds and records; numerous offices; warehouses; stables; and outbuildings. Eight Denver residents had been killed, and enormous numbers of livestock were drowned, including 4000 sheep from one ranch, alone. Financial losses from this flood totaled approximately \$250,000 and left many homeless. The water was so badly contaminated that the threat of a major epidemic loomed. Despite overwhelming losses, rebuilding, once again, began almost immediately. Forgetting the latent power of Cherry Creek, many rebuilt well within its flood-swollen reach. Floodwaters continued to engulf downtown Denver in 1875, 1878, 1912, and 1933. It was not until the 1950s, when the Army Corps of Engineers completed Cherry Creek Dam, that the fickle creek was tamed.

Threat of Attack

Most Denverites were far more terrified of the local tribes, whose homeland they had taken, than they were of fires and floods. For years, animosity and fear had fueled violence between the settlers and the tribes that had remained in the region. The flood of prospectors and entrepreneurs attracted by the discovery of gold further fanned the flames. By the spring of 1864, animosities had reached a fever pitch, and all awaited the outbreak of a full-fledged conflict.

The spark that ignited the prairie was the murder and mutilation of a tenant farmer, **Nathan Hungate**, his wife, and two young daughters. When the four corpses were paraded through the streets of Denver and exhibited in a local theater, shocked and terrified citizens blamed all Native Americans and vowed to punish every one of them remaining in Colorado. Warfare broke out, and tribes cut all communication lines between Denver and the East. Martial law was declared, and a Colorado regiment of volunteers was raised to defend Denver. Despite those protective measures, citizens, feeling totally isolated, awaited massacre.



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Seven Great Chiefs Prepare to Meet with Governor Gilpin

The expected onslaught never came. Instead, a settlement of peaceable Cheyennes and Arapahos under American protection was attacked at Sand Creek. The fanatical leader of the Civil War battles, Major John Chivington, led volunteers in the horrible mass murder of about 170 women, children, and old men, cold-bloodedly killing them despite their repeated attempts to surrender. Although some initially lauded Chivington as a hero, his attack was soon condemned as an atrocious massacre. For several months, panic engulfed the prairie, as residents waited for the deadly retaliation that never came. When the Civil War ended, federal troops arrived to protect Colorado Territory, and the few remaining defeated and impoverished tribes were forced to move to reservations in Oklahoma and Wyoming. Gone forever were the once-proud tribal nations that had flourished in the area that became Denver.

Progress and Problems

Despite those tragedies, Denver was blessed during the early years with visionary and committed leaders. Although there were many noteworthy pioneers, William N. Byers, founder of the *Rocky*



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William N. Byers, Founder of the *Rocky Mountain News*

Mountain News, epitomizes the unique entrepreneurial leadership that characterized early Denver. Savvy, tenacious, and focused, Byers arrived in Denver in April 1859, planning to establish the town's newspaper.

He was surprised to discover that a competing newspaperman, **John L. Merrick**, had arrived four days earlier. They immediately engaged in a contest to see who could get their presses delivered, set them up, and publish the first paper. As their presses were being dragged across the plains, the prospectors waited, cheered, and bet gold dust on the outcome. Byers' press arrived the evening of April 20, 1859 and, after a few tense moments when it got stuck in the soft sand of Cherry Creek, it was lugged to the second floor of "**Uncle Dick**" **Wootton's** building. By the next morning, the presses had been assembled. Despite a wet spring snowstorm that overburdened the roof, causing drips that threatened to soak everything, Byers produced the first edition of the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 23. The next day, Merrick conceded. He traded his presses for the supplies he needed to begin prospecting and headed for the hills.

After celebrating, Byers set to work establishing his paper. For the next two decades, he and the *Rocky Mountain News* were practically synonymous. During those years, Byers became both the voice of Denver and one of its most powerful citizens. He is credited with



Byers' *Rocky Mountain News* Building

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helping to achieve Colorado statehood, founding the Republican Party, and establishing the dominant newspaper that cheered, chastised, guided, and exposed the rough young town as it struggled to transform itself into the Queen City of the Plains.

Leaders like Byers led resilient, hard-working citizens in their quest to achieve dominance for their young town. They focused their considerable energies and resources to transform Denver from an isolated outpost to the most powerful town in the region. They cheered the end of the Civil War and defeat of the tribes and prepared to welcome newcomers, eager to escape the blood-soaked East. The welcome intensified when some investors, rich with war profits, saw the promise of wealth in the region and brought much-needed capital. Before long, the joyous duet of "Prosperity!" and "Dominance!" rang throughout Denver.

Despite that enthusiasm, astute citizens recognized that they still had many challenges ahead before Denver would become a pleasant community. The arrival of new residents, capital from investors, and prospectors with pockets full of gold did little to dispel rough conditions such as those described by English cleric, **William Dixon**, in 1866:



Larimer Street, 1868

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[Men are] swearing, fighting, drinking like old Norse gods. . . . As you wander about these hot and dirty streets you seem to be walking in a city of demons. Every fifth house appears to be a bar, a whiskey-shop, a lager-beer saloon; every tenth house appears to be either a brothel or a gambling house; very often both in one. In these horrible dens a man's life is of no more worth than a dog's.

Eventually, residents were forced to admit that, despite their contagious optimism and success establishing churches, a library, school, and newspaper, Denver was still little more than a rough frontier town. Its streets remained so muddy that, during bad weather, according to the *Rocky Mountain News*, "the streets of Denver were reported to be navigable for the largest type of flatboats." Candles provided most of Denver's light. There was no public water system, and most of the city was parched, dusty, and uninviting.

In the face of these challenges, Denver's population fell during the early 1860s, and grew slowly, reaching 3000 by 1864 and 3500 by 1866.

Nevertheless, relentlessly optimistic and proud of its thriving school and newspaper, impressive number of new brick buildings, and streets full of gold-rich prospectors, citizens continued to anticipate the rich future they knew awaited them.

Transportation Woes

Most agreed that the dearth of amenities and lagging population could be easily conquered. They knew that the only thing stopping Denver from prosperity beyond anyone's wildest dreams was its transportation challenges. Initially, many believed that the answer to those challenges was to produce most of what was needed locally. The plan was repeatedly thwarted when grasshoppers invaded and ate most of the local produce in 1864, in 1865, and again in 1866. After those three disastrous years, Denver citizens realized that they would be dependent on products from the Midwest for many years.

While leaders proclaimed that Denver would surely be selected as a major stop for the transcontinental railroad—until it arrived, more efficient ways of transporting people and goods across the plains simply had to be found. Although stagecoach service was regular, it was far too expensive: The charge to transport letters from Fort Laramie by stagecoach, a mere 220 miles away, was a whopping 25 cents each. Wagon trains, pulled by plodding oxen, brought larger items West. They were generally comprised of 26 wagons; 25 of which carried three to four tons of cargo each, with the last wagon reserved for camping equipment and supplies for the teamsters. Each wagon required five to six yoke of oxen and made the trip from Missouri to Denver in 40 to 60 days. A well-organized and remarkably dependable option, it was an expensive one. Designed to make a profit, rates varied from a low of 6 to 10 cents a pound to as much as 40 cents a pound.

Unhappy with expensive stagecoach and wagon train solutions, citizens looked for other, more creative options. For awhile, there was some excitement about the potential of teams of camels, but the 30 camels that left San Francisco in 1860 never made it to Denver. Hopes turned to the promise of boats, for some believed that the



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Wagon Train on Market Street, 1868

Platte River could be converted to a navigable stream, transforming Denver into an important river port. Byers, of the *Rocky Mountain News*, strongly supported this option and, for awhile, even published a daily "Shipping News" section in his paper. His enthusiastic reports of boat dockings and arrivals were so convincing that many began to believe that the South Platte was on its way to becoming Denver's transportation artery. Although few boats ever navigated the Platte and those that did were very small, a *Rocky Mountain News* article by Byers proclaimed:

Should the spring and summer of 1860 prove as favorable for navigation on the Platte as has been in the past, we shall expect to see, not only the Colona but a half a dozen other steamboats as high up on the Platte as this city.

Soon, transportation hopes had turned from navigating the Platte to the promise of steam machines. A giant engine, weighing 12 tons with 10-foot high wheels, and costing \$12,000, was built to haul wagons across the plains. Called the "Prairie Motor," it left in July 1862 and broke down nine miles later.

With hopes dashed for local production and a viable transportation alternative, Denver citizens were forced to depend on wagon trains for supplies, paying as much as \$2 a dozen for eggs, 90 cents a pound for coffee, and 75 cents a quart for beans. They knew that, unless an inexpensive transportation system was established soon, their town would lose its dominance as the region's supply center. Clearly, their only solution was the railroad. As the transcontinental railroad inched its way across America, Denver citizens were confident that their town would be on the route of this great transportation link. Unfortunately, they were wrong.