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## CHAPTER 4

### *A Spiderweb of Steel*

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A railway system [took] the energies of a generation, for it required all the new machinery to be created — capital, banks, mines, furnaces, shops, power-houses, technical knowledge, mechanical population, together with a steady remodeling of social and political habits, ideas and institutions to fit the new scale and suit the new conditions.

Henry Adams

*The Education of Henry Adams*, 1918<sup>1</sup>

Town builders knew that Denver's fate rode on rails. While harbors and river ports nourished other cities, railroads were the lifelines of settlements in the inland West. If Rocky Mountain pay dirt were to pay off, Colorado needed cheap, fast, and efficient transportation. To survive, Denver needed a railroad; to prosper it needed a spiderweb of steel.

Some 600 miles of prairie, much of it devoid of white settlers, separated Denver from the Missouri River towns of Kansas City, Leavenworth, Atchison, and Omaha. The '58ers and '59ers had come pushing wheelbarrows and handcarts, riding in farm wagons and prairie schooners. After the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express Company made Denver its Rocky Mountain depot, Auraria's post office and some of its hotels and saloons relocated near the stage stop at Fifteenth and Blake on the Denver side of Cherry Creek. The stage presaged the railroad in confirming Denver's dominance over rival towns, but even after regular service started, high freight rates and passenger fares in the 1860s made it difficult to supply miners and attract settlers.

Ox-drawn freight wagons, pictured at the Blake Street wholesale houses, sustained Denver during the 1860s, when cottonwoods still lined the South Platte River. (Colorado Historical Society.)



The Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express spent \$250,000 on 52 Concord stages, 1,000 mules, a 687-mile network of stations, and salaries for "sober, discreet and experienced" drivers.<sup>2</sup> On May 7, 1859, the first coaches — they traveled in pairs for protection — reached Denver, bringing passengers, mail, and express freight. They took out passengers, mail, and gold, sometimes returning to the States with as much as \$40,000 in bullion — and a guard riding shotgun. Cherry Creekers and the mountain towns depended on wagon trains for vital supplies. In 1860, 10,000 tons of freight lumbered across the plains in three-ton wagons pulled by 10 to 12 oxen. A single wet-goods shipment to Denver, 1,600 barrels of liquor and 2,700 cases of champagne, required 80 wagons.<sup>3</sup>

The stage's arrival became the high point of daily life in Denver. At the sound of the rumbling vehicles drawn by four horses or mules — a ruckus that could be heard a mile away, townspeople rushed to the depot. Only high rollers — politicians, journalists, gamblers, fancy ladies, and financiers — could afford the ride, but everyone could enjoy the spectacle as passengers tumbled out and dusted themselves off. Mail was quickly taken to the post office where homesick folk waited in long lines. The stage company charged 25¢ per letter in addition to federal postage, inspiring some to read their mail, then return it as someone else's and demand a refund.

Frequent accidents, Indian raids, robberies, and heavy expenses bankrupted the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak in less than a year. Its successor, the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express, shortened the Leavenworth to Denver trip to six days, reduced the



round-trip fare from \$200 to \$75, and extended service up Clear Creek Canyon. The overextended COC&PP also ran out of money, prompting employees to dub it the "Clean out of Cash and Poor Pay." It was sold at auction in 1863 to the Western stagecoach king, Ben Holladay, who put his cousin Bela Hughes in charge at Denver.

Holladay and Hughes shortened the South Platte route and expanded service to mountain towns. In Denver they established a new depot at Fifteenth and McGaa. Happy with Holladay, Denverites honored him by renaming McGaa Street, Holladay Street. Two decades later, when that street became a notorious red light district, the name was changed again, at the Holladay family's request, to Market Street.<sup>4</sup> By then Holladay was a fading memory, although Wells Fargo, which bought him out in 1867, served railroadless parts of Colorado into the twentieth century.

Increasingly, however, stage lines faced competition. Ever since 1848 when explorer John Charles Fremont botched his attempt to chart a rail route through Colorado, surveyors had been trying to demonstrate "that neither the snow of winter nor the mountain ranges were obstacles in the way of a [rail]road."<sup>5</sup> William Byers assured the Union Pacific (UP) that the "hilly" land west of Denver could be crossed by rail.

Grenville M. Dodge, the chief engineer, reached a different conclusion after a surveying party encountered a September 1866 blizzard on Berthoud Pass. Heeding Dodge's advice, the UP ran its tracks across southern Wyoming where the hills were tamer, laying out Cheyenne in 1867 as the road's Rocky Mountain headquarters. Hundreds of Denverites, including Barney Ford, an ex-slave who had become a prominent innkeeper, and Edward Chase, the ace of Denver's gamblers, moved to the instant Wyoming city. It boomed as Denver dwindled, prompting the *Cheyenne Daily Leader* to crow that "Denver is too near Cheyenne to ever amount to much."<sup>6</sup>

Worried businessmen, including John Evans and William Byers, called a public meeting for November 13, 1867, to organize a Board of Trade. The board, a predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce, resolved



During Denver's first decade, stage lines brought passengers, mail, and express goods from the States — the Missouri River frontier towns 600 miles to the east.



Evans, second governor of Colorado Territory, used Chicago and Washington, D.C., connections to put Denver on the railroad map. (Tom Noel Collection.)



that if the railroads would not build to Denver, then Denver would build to the railroads. Six days later Evans, Walter Cheesman, David Moffat, and others created the Denver Pacific Railway with Bela Hughes as president. Byers warned that unless the road were built, "everybody would move away. We could not afford to pay our enormous freights. . . . We should break ground tomorrow."<sup>7</sup> Within three days the Denver Pacific sold \$300,000 in stock, some shares being exchanged for promises

to work on the roadbed or supply ties.

Denver declared a holiday for the ground breaking on May 18, 1868. Almost a quarter of the town's population gathered on the South Platte as kegs of beer were tapped and a band struck up "The Railroad Gallop." Two ladies guided the plow that first broke the virgin prairie, then men and mules went to work to grade a roadbed.<sup>8</sup> Denverites worked feverishly, knowing that Golden, 15 miles west, had already incorporated a railroad, the Colorado Central, which, like the Denver Pacific, aimed to connect with the UP's main line at Cheyenne.

Golden's chief booster, the merchant William Austin Hamilton Loveland, hoped to make his town Colorado's rail hub. Allied with the Central City lawyer Henry Moore Teller, Loveland and his Golden Crowd capitalized on the animosity to Denver shared by many smaller towns. "There is little of the Denver egotism about the Golden City folks," declared the Central City *Colorado Times*. "We can hope for advantages from Golden City that Denver in her exclusiveness would never grant."<sup>9</sup>

Ignoring such carping, Evans and the Denver Crowd outjockeyed Golden in the iron horse race. Working with UP allies, Evans persuaded Congress to give the Denver Pacific a land grant consisting of a 40-mile strip of alternating square-mile sections along the road's 106-mile right of way.<sup>10</sup> This enabled the Denver Pacific to secure loans and raise capital through land sales. Through deals with the UP, Evans got that company to lay the tracks and provide rolling stock for the Denver Pacific, but the price of outside help came high — by 1880 Evans and other local capitalists had lost control to the UP.





Evans presided over the completion of the new road on June 22, 1870. A silver spike, symbolic of railroad prosperity, also became symbolic of the improvisations that brought the iron horse to Denver. Evans had to wrap an ordinary iron spike in white paper and pretend it was silver, because the miners bringing the genuine spike from Georgetown had lingered in a saloon and pawned the precious nail to pay their bar bill.<sup>11</sup>

Two months after the arrival of the Denver Pacific, the Kansas Pacific became the second road to reach Denver. On August 15, 1870, a large barrel of whisky was placed on the prairie at what is now Strasburg. Five miles to the east a construction crew at Byers began laying track westward; five miles west another crew began working eastward from Bennett. The two gangs of gandy dancers set a record that day, completing 10.25 miles of track by 3:00 P.M. The workers got free drinks; Denver got a direct connection with Kansas City and St. Louis.<sup>12</sup>

Late in 1870 the Colorado Central finished the first stretch of its road, a narrow gauge spur connecting Golden with the standard-gauge Denver Pacific four miles north of Denver. The sulky Golden Crowd did

Denver's bonanza days began with the 1870 arrival of the Denver Pacific and the Kansas Pacific. Locomotives steamed up at the original passenger depot at Twenty-second and Wynkoop streets. (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)



not build into Denver, hoping that their town still might become Colorado's rail hub. The financially feeble Colorado Central slowly inched north through Boulder, Berthoud, Longmont, and Fort Collins, not tying into the UP until 1877. By then Denver, with three railroads, had clearly won the soot and cinders competition. Golden did, however, win the race to the mining towns up Clear Creek Canyon. Boston capitalists financing the Colorado Central decided to save construction time and money by using three-foot-wide narrow-gauge track instead of the standard four feet, eight and a half inches. The Colorado Central's backers bought small, narrow-gauge steam locomotives previously used for filling in Boston's Back Bay, reconditioned them, and shipped them west to tackle the Rockies.

By 1872 the Colorado Central had reached Black Hawk and the mines around Central City. In 1877 the baby road puffed into Georgetown, Colorado's first silver city, 50 miles west of Denver. Seven years later, the road completed its last and most fantastic link, the Georgetown Loop. This engineering marvel used 4.7 miles of track, making three and a half complete loops to climb from Georgetown to Silver Plume. Daredevils celebrated by bicycling over the highest bridge, the Devil's Gate. Later, tourists came from all over the world to get dizzy on the Georgetown Loop.<sup>13</sup>

Evans, Moffat, and Cheesman also wanted to share in the mountains' wealth. They incorporated their own narrow gauge road, the Denver, South Park & Pacific Railway, in 1872. Two years and 15 miles later it reached the red sandstone outcroppings in the foothills surrounding the home and gypsum mill of a Scotsman named George M. Morrison. There, Evans established the Morrison Stone, Lime and Townsite Company, and built a hotel.<sup>14</sup>

The South Park line crawled on up the South Platte Canyon and over Kenosha Pass to tap South Park's goldfields before striking northwest to Breckenridge, Dillon, and Keystone. The main line ran through Fairplay and down Trout Creek to the Arkansas River, which it followed north to Leadville. In its quixotic quest for the Pacific, the South Park built the Alpine Tunnel, the first transportation bore under the Continental Divide. In 1883 the South Park ran out of steam, dying in a mountain valley north of Gunnison, 200 miles southwest of Denver.<sup>15</sup> Like so many of Colorado's "Pacific" railroads, the Denver, South Park & Pacific never reached the ocean. Nevertheless, it served Denver well. To feed the city's building boom, it brought Platte Valley lumber, Morrison



sandstone and lime, and Gunnison County granite and coal. The South Park line also hauled Park and Summit county gold ores and Leadville's mineral riches into Denver.

Another Evans enterprise, the Denver & New Orleans Railroad, provided an outlet to the Gulf of Mexico. On the way there, the road nourished the towns of Parker, Franktown, and Elizabeth, the last named for Evans's sister-in-law, Elizabeth G. Hubbard. Within a decade the Denver & New Orleans suffered the usual fate of undercapitalized local lines and became part of the UP system, which eventually swallowed the Denver Pacific, the Kansas Pacific, the Colorado Central, and the Denver, South Park & Pacific.

The most important railroad in assuring Denver's regional dominance was the narrow gauge Denver & Rio Grande Railway (D&RG), organized in 1870 by 34-year-old William Jackson Palmer. Having supervised construction of the Kansas Pacific and having watched other roads build east to west, Palmer decided that a north-and-south line along the Front Range would be a money-maker. Palmer hoped to reach Mexico City, but the D&RG never built beyond Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The federal government gave the D&RG a 200-foot right-of-way but refused a land grant, so Palmer turned to town building to help finance construction. If existing towns refused to donate land and other incentives, the D&RG acquired property nearby for a depot and townsite. When Colorado City balked, Palmer founded nearby Colorado Springs in 1871. When Trinidad spurned him, he bypassed it for El Moro.

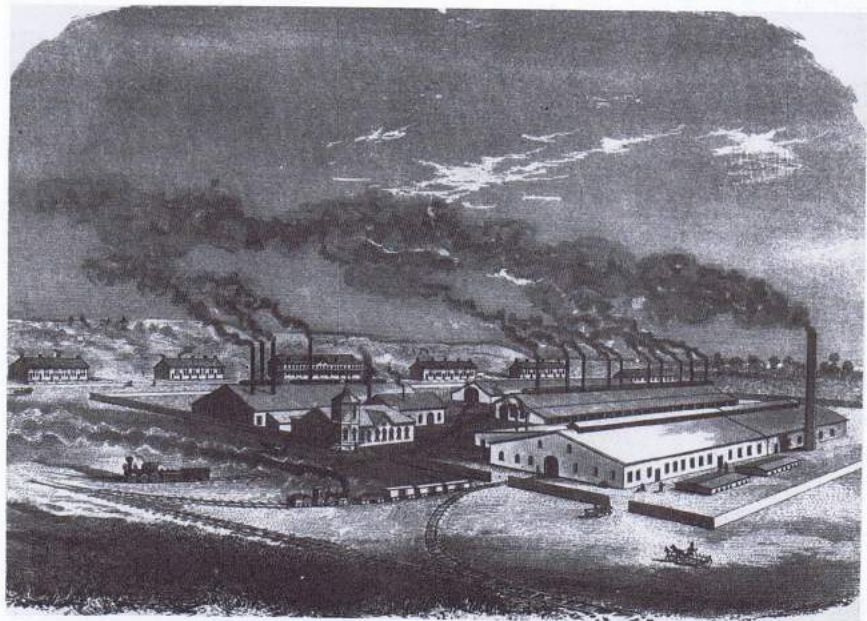
Although the D&RG started south, silver rushes turned two of its branches to the west. After the Leadville boom began in 1877, the road raced west to Cañon City and followed the Arkansas River to Leadville. With the rush to the San Juan Mountains, the D&RG built west over La Veta Pass, crossed the San Luis Valley, dipped into New Mexico, and then penetrated southwestern Colorado to Durango and Silverton. Palmer's road also became the first to span Colorado, linking Denver with Grand Junction.<sup>16</sup>

The Colorado Central, the Kansas Pacific, the D&RG, and Evans's three roads were pioneers among over a hundred different lines to lay track in Colorado. The transcontinentals that had originally ignored Denver — the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe; the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific; the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; the Missouri Pacific; and the UP — all chugged into Colorado by the 1880s. With their coming, Denver expanded its sway over Colorado and the Rocky Mountain West.

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Skies darkened but the economy brightened after the Argo Smelter opened in 1878. The Argo was the first of many ore-processing giants to capitalize on Denver's railroad network. (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)



More than any other factor, this spiderweb of steel explains Denver's nineteenth-century transformation from a mining camp to a regional metropolis. Incoming trains brought passengers and freight, making the Mile High City the hotel and business hub as well as the warehouse and distribution center of the Rockies. Outgoing trains carried the products of Denver's factories and food-processing plants to the mountains and plains. Railroads also employed thousands of Denverites to work the trains and to repair them.

Only after iron horses reached the mines did Colorado's mineral riches pay off. During the 1860s high freight costs and primitive mining and smelting methods undermined the golden promise of 1859. Refining problems were partially solved at Nathaniel Hill's Boston and Colorado smelter in Black Hawk. In 1878, Hill moved his plant to Denver at the junction of the Colorado Central and the Denver Pacific four miles north of downtown. There, he constructed the Argo Smelter, hoping that like Jason and the Argonauts of Greek mythology, he would become as rich as Croesus. Next to the Argo, competitors sprang up in the 1880s — the Omaha and Grant Smelter managed by James B. Grant and Dennis Sheedy's Globe Smelting and Refining Company. Railroads hauled ore from as far away as Montana and northern Mexico to feed smelters whose massive brick smokestacks dominated Denver's skyline. By 1890 these smelters had become the city's largest industry.<sup>17</sup>





The Queen City's flush times as a gold and silver center were celebrated in the grandiose Mining Exchange Building at Fifteenth and Arapahoe. (Photo by William Henry Jackson, Colorado Historical Society.)

Efficient ore processing and cheap rail transportation — as well as the discovery of Leadville and Aspen silver — caused mineral production to soar. Less than \$35 million in gold and silver was produced between 1858 and 1870. Between 1881 and 1890 precious metals worth over \$185 million were processed. Silver prices slid in the 1890s, but gold production soared with the Cripple Creek discoveries. Base metals also poured from the state's mines: in the 1890s over \$55 million in copper, lead, and zinc was extracted. Colorado coal output, even more directly attributable



to coal-burning and coal-carrying steam trains, climbed from \$16,000 in 1869 to over \$4 million in 1890.<sup>18</sup>

Railroads also sparked an agricultural boom by promoting the "Great American Desert" as a new Garden of Eden. William Byers, as land agent for the Denver Pacific, helped convince easterners, including the utopia-minded Nathan Meeker and *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, that an agricultural colony north of Denver would flourish. This led to the 1870 establishment of the Union Colony, later renamed Greeley, on the Denver Pacific tracks. Not to be outdone, the Kansas Pacific set up agricultural experiment stations in eastern Colorado, and the D&RG likewise fostered settlement along its tracks. Such railroad boosterism worked. Between 1880 and 1890 the number of farmers in Colorado grew by 300 percent, and dozens of new farm and ranch towns sprouted on the eastern plains. Much of the resulting agricultural harvest flowed to Denver, which emerged as a brewing, food-processing, livestock, and flour-milling center.<sup>19</sup>

Arrival of the first three railroads in 1870 had an immediate impact. The *Rocky Mountain News* expanded to a nine-column format, and the First National Bank reported that its assets jumped from \$457,536 to \$1,538,606 that year. Denver, which had stagnated during the 1860s, grew by over 700 percent during the 1870s, reaching a population of 35,629 in 1880. To keep people coming, the railroads tirelessly advertised Colorado. The D&RG hired the photographer William Henry Jackson to produce pictures, postcards, and brochures featuring mountain scenery. The Rio Grande even created a literary department to crank out poetry and fiction, as well as travel books and brochures. Such propagandists told of mechanical monsters with "lungs of copper and breath of steam" puffing "up the steeps of the Great Divide, over the chasms deep and wide."<sup>20</sup> Tourism, like mining and agriculture, became big business thanks to the railroads.

By the mid-1880s a hundred trains a week snorted through Denver. Train whistles screamed and moaned all day and into the night. Hobos, new residents, tourists, health and wealth seekers arrived daily; they came in boxcars, inexpensive day coaches, and Pullman palace cars. Among the newcomers was the English sparrow. This "tramp bird," reported Denver journalist William Columbus Ferril, made its journey west by rail, nesting first at the station "in the old vines and eaves and cornices." The birds multiplied rapidly "until now the English sparrow abounds everywhere."<sup>21</sup>



The railroad reigned, enthroned like a king after 1881 in the majestic Union Station, the largest and busiest building in town. Its 180-foot clock tower housed a giant, electrically lit timepiece with four faces showing the correct railroad time. Within a single generation, railroads transformed a pokey frontier crossroads into an industrialized regional metropolis. Without railroads, Denver would have withered, as did many other frontier towns. With their spiderweb of steel Denverites began bragging that they had built the Queen City of the Plains.