

## Part I: Riches of the Earth, 1858–1900

Born as a mining camp, Denver became a get-and-git-out town suffering from what Mark Twain called the “Californian sudden-riches disease.” When the earth’s resources played out, or richer strikes occurred elsewhere, most of the footloose populace moved on. But a few Denverites persisted, perhaps out of loyalty, perhaps because of their real estate investments. These town builders dispossessed the Arapaho and Cheyenne and made Denver the railroad hub of the Rockies, spinning a spiderweb of steel to tap a vast Rocky Mountain hinterland. Fortunes from mining rushes financed a rush to respectability; the Queen City of the Plains exported pay dirt and imported culture. Palatial hotels, elegant opera houses, splendid churches, commercial blocks, schools and mansions provided at least a veneer of gentility.

Women, who saw to it that Denver became the first large city in the world to give them the vote, struggled to refine urban life. While many men relied on “Judge Lynch,” some women addressed the underlying problems of disease, ignorance, poverty, and unbridled privatism. By the time the silver crash struck in 1893, Denver had emerged as the metropolis of the Rockies, the nation’s twenty-sixth-largest city. Reflecting the city’s Gilded Age origins, Denverites were speculative, mobile, ambitious boosters, proud of their unabashed materialism.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Gold!

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Oh the Gold! the Gold — they say  
'Tis brighter than the day,  
And now 'tis mine, I'm bound to shine,  
And drive dull care away.

Lawrence, Kansas, *Republican*, September 2, 1858<sup>1</sup>

Gold! The magic metal drew thousands to Colorado in 1859. It took gold to lure them; the Pikes Peak country suffered from a terrible reputation. For half a century travelers and explorers had branded eastern Colorado a desert and damned the treacherous Rockies. In 1846 Francis Parkman had journeyed south along the Front Range from Fort Laramie to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River. In *The Oregon Trail*, his classic portrayal of western life, he told of Colorado's "burning plains" infested with "wingless grasshoppers of the most extravagant dimensions." At Cherry Creek he dug for water in the stream's dry bed, and on its headwaters he crossed the "rough and savage glens" of the Black Forest.<sup>2</sup>

Parkman described a parched wasteland uninviting to Anglo-American farmers accustomed to plenty of rain. Even New Mexico's Hispanos, who knew how to scratch a living from semiarid land, stopped hundreds of miles south of Cherry Creek, checked by nature's stinginess and Indian hostility. A few visionaries, including William Gilpin, who would become Colorado's first territorial governor, argued that irrigation could turn the West into a new Garden of Eden. But easterners believed

Parkman, as earlier they had listened to explorers Zebulon M. Pike and Stephen H. Long, who warned of a great desert west of the hundredth meridian, land that Long suggested would best be left to the Native Americans.

The vast area that farmers initially spurned did attract trappers, seeking fur and freedom, solitude and Indian women. In 1816 mountain men and Native Americans traded where Bear Creek joins the the South Platte in what is now Englewood. In 1832 Louis Vasquez, a St. Louis fur trader, made a fort of cottonwood logs near the confluence of Clear Creek and the South Platte. Peter A. Sarpey, a Frenchman, built a small fort five miles north of Vasquez. Other forts — Lancaster, Lupton, Jackson, St. Vrain, and a second Fort Vasquez — dotted the South Platte between present-day Denver and Greeley.<sup>3</sup> Richens Lacy Wootton, who worked for William Bent in the early 1840s, regularly rode between Fort St. Vrain and Bent's Fort. The dust he raised along the Cherry Creek trail through the future site of Denver quickly settled into the plains' emptiness. Summer rendezvous and adobe forts were transitory; traffic, sporadic. Robert M. Peck, a soldier who passed through in 1857, described the South Platte valley as a "howling wilderness."<sup>4</sup>

Gold changed that. For centuries rumors of gold had drifted out of the Rockies. The Spanish adventurer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado had vainly searched from Mexico to Kansas in 1540 looking for fabled golden cities. In 1807, Lieutenant Pike heard of treasure in Colorado from James Purcell, a trader he met in Santa Fe. Trappers spun gilded tales, and Indian legends spoke of magical yellow bullets. Luckily for the natives, who feared that a gold rush would doom their hunting grounds, the stories were dismissed as tall tales until after 1849, when gold strikes in California captured the nation's attention.

In 1850, Lewis Ralston and other California-bound prospectors passed along the Front Range of the Rockies, panning promising streams as they went. On June 21, 1850, John Lowrey Brown recorded in his diary: "Finished crossing at two oclock. Left the Platt and traveled six miles to creek. Good water, grass, and timber. Camp 44. We called this Ralstons creek because a man of that name found gold here."<sup>5</sup> The discovery, which took place in present-day Arvada, was small, so they tarried only briefly, but they remembered Ralston Creek.

Seven years later soldiers commanded by Major John C. Sedgwick marched along Cherry Creek where they chanced upon seven Missourians who said they had discovered gold. Their story was verified when Fall Leaf, an Indian scouting for Sedgwick, found a few nuggets. Later, Fall

## Mountains and Plains

The Cheyennes believed that in the beginning the world was covered with water. A man floating on the surface asked a duck to gather mud from the sea bottom. From this muck the man made land.

Modern geologists think that the Rocky Mountains resulted from an uplift that began around 70 million years ago. Today's peaks are the successors of the Ancestral Rockies raised 300 million years ago, and those mountains were preceded by still earlier ranges. During the eons between the erosion of the Ancestral Rockies and the birth of the present mountains, dinosaurs and other primeval creatures dwelt in the area — the 85-foot-long diplodocus, the three-horned triceratops, the squat goniopholis, and the bony-backed stegosaurus, destined for distinction as Colorado's state fossil. Near Morrison those creatures left a great deposit of fossils that paleontologist Othneil Marsh carted off to Yale University in the late 1870s.

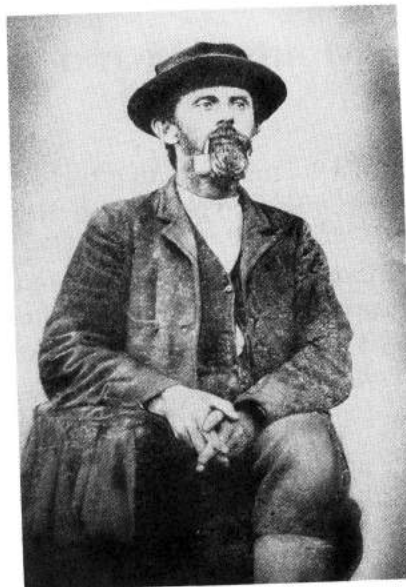
For millions of years after the washing away of the Ancestral Rockies, the region was under water. The resultant Lyons sandstone became flagstone for Denver's sidewalks. Limestone from the shells of sea creatures provided concrete for highways and buildings. At other times swamps flourished, leaving behind carbon-rich debris that made coal and natural gas to heat homes, and oil to fuel cars.

As subterranean forces raised the present Rockies, rain and ice wore them down. Volcanoes occasionally counteracted this dissolution, their lava flows creating such features as North and South Table mountains near Golden. By 28 million years ago the eastern portions of the Colorado Rockies had been planed into tame mountains. A regional uplift changed that — the Front Range was dramatically delineated from the plains by a sharp increase in elevation. Such an abrupt demarcation made railroad building difficult, but it pleased tourists and Coloradans who have turned the mountains into their playgrounds.

Casual observers, seeing the Rockies rise majestically, assume that altitudes uniformly increase as one travels west — that Denver is higher than its eastern suburbs. Yet places as far away as Limon, 80 miles east of the Mile High City, are more than a mile high. Denver, along with its northern and southern suburbs, sits in a trough at the base of the northern Front Range. This depression causes streams that rise on high ground east and southeast of Denver, such as Cherry Creek, to flow west toward the mountains. The basin also captures the South Platte River, which, blocked by elevations rising to both the east and south of its exit from the mountains, must flow north, creating a hospitable valley. There, for more than 10,000 years, nomadic bands of early Americans hunted. There, for less than 150 years, new Americans of European, African, and Asian ancestry have built cities.

Leaf returned to Lawrence, Kansas, where he backed his reports with glittering evidence.

In the meantime, William Green Russell, a farmer and part-time prospector from the gold-mining region of northern Georgia, heard of the 1850 Ralston Creek discovery. With friends and relatives he joined other groups until, in spring 1858, the combined party numbered 104. Reaching Cherry Creek in late June, they panned along the South Platte where they found a tease of color. Theorizing that this gold dust had washed down from the mountains, Russell and five others trekked



William Green Russell, veteran of the Georgia and California goldfields, found gold in the South Platte River in summer 1858. This strike triggered the Pikes Peak Gold Rush. (Colorado Historical Society.)

up Clear Creek. Steep slopes and a wild river convinced them that "a bird could not fly up that canyon."<sup>6</sup> Defeated, they returned to the plains, unaware of Clear Creek's rich gold deposits. Most of Russell's companions had become so disgusted — they were averaging less than a penny's worth of gold from each pan of gravel — that they threatened to desert him in mid-July. Russell pleaded: "Gentlemen you may all go, but I will stay if two men will stay with me."<sup>7</sup> A loyal dozen, including his brothers Levi and Joseph Oliver, remained.

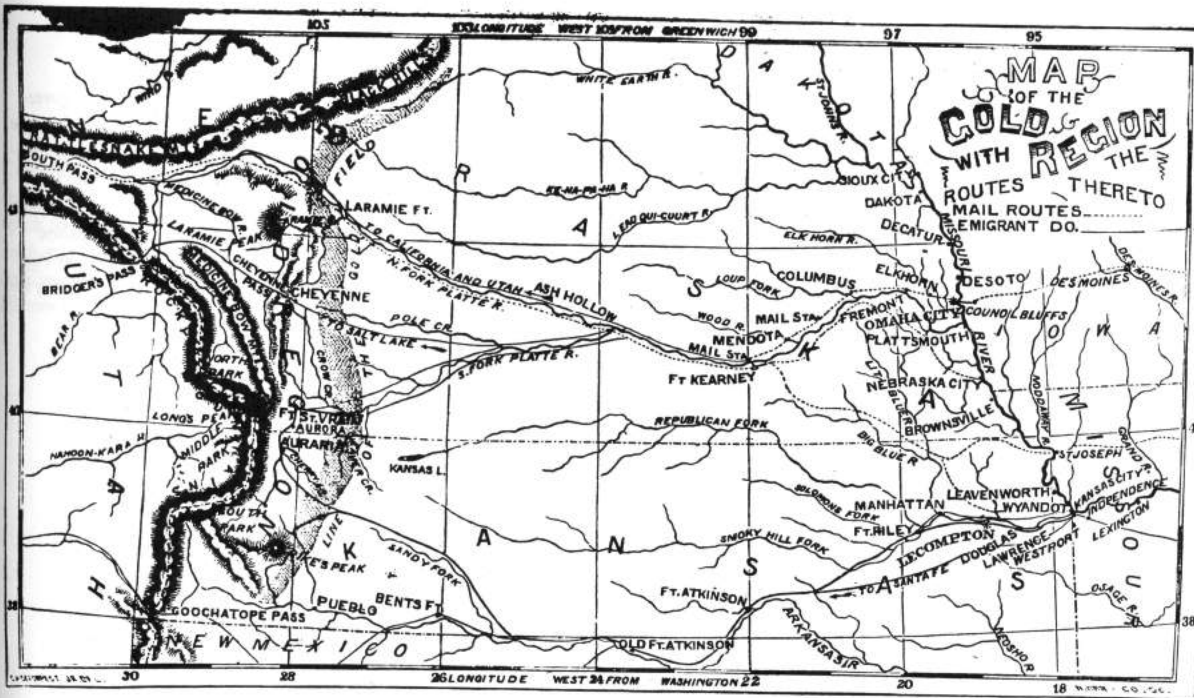
The next day they found gold where Dry Creek joins the South Platte in what is now Englewood. This placer deposit temporarily yielded \$10 a day per man. There, at what they called Placer Camp, the Russells entertained John Cantrell and other mountain men. Cantrell took a sack of South Platte sand to Kansas City, Missouri, where, to the delight of onlookers, he panned out a small amount of gold. Meanwhile, the Russells left Placer Camp and went north along the Front Range into Wyoming in a fruitless search for richer fields. Late in September they returned to the South Platte where they found scores of newcomers poking about in the river.

Swayed by Fall Leaf's reports, these gold seekers had left Lawrence, Kansas, in late spring 1858. For a time the Lawrence party prospected near present-day Pueblo, but hearing of the Russells' diggings on the South Platte, they had traveled north, reaching Placer Camp shortly after the Russells had departed. A mile to the north the Lawrence contingent



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In his gold rush guidebook, William Byers steered argonauts to the Pikes Peak country via the Arkansas and South Platte river routes. Disappointed fortune seekers later threatened to lynch Byers for perpetrating a hoax. (Tom Noel Collection.)

built a dozen or so cabins, which they named Montana City. A few weeks later, on September 24, 1858, the mountain men William McGaa and John Simpson Smith, along with a handful of the Montana City miners, established another would-be metropolis, St. Charles, on the northeastern side of Cherry Creek near its juncture with the South Platte.



Town founder William Larimer, in 1858, declared that Denver was "bound to be a 'great city'." In 1863, embittered by the town's flat economy and its failure to elect him mayor, he returned to Kansas. (Colorado Historical Society.)

Fearful that the winter would be harsh, most of them returned east. McGaa stayed behind, but the main task of guarding St. Charles was entrusted to one man, Charles Nichols. When the Russells returned from Wyoming they settled on the southwestern side of Cherry Creek across from the virtually empty town site of St. Charles. Soon some of the Lawrence men abandoned Montana City and united with the Russells. Others drifted in, some of them drawn by Cantrell's propaganda. On November 1, 1858, they organized

the town of Auraria, naming it after the Russells' hometown in Georgia.<sup>8</sup>

On November 16, 1858, William H. Larimer, Jr., a veteran town promoter from Leavenworth, reached Auraria. The next day his small, well-armed party jumped the St. Charles site, telling Nichols, who had not finished his cabin, that if he objected, "a rope and a noose would be used on him."<sup>9</sup> McGaa shared his whisky with the interlopers; for cooperating, the furry-tongued mountain man was given town lots and honored with a street name.



James William Denver, governor of Kansas Territory, became the city's eponym. Town founders hoped that he would favor Denver City as the county seat of what was then Arapahoe County, Kansas. (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)

Countess Katrina  
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Paper cities and real mining camps soon littered the area: Larimer waded across the South Platte and staked out Highland. Farther to the northwest, on Clear Creek, Arapahoe City and Golden took root. To the southeast, on Cherry Creek, Russellville rose; and south of Denver, Russell's Placer Camp attracted a few argonauts. John Pierce, one of Russell's companions, later joked that "before spring there were perhaps 20 cities in the country as large as New York, minus the wealth, population and buildings."<sup>10</sup>

Having ousted the St. Charles claimants, Larimer and his friends turned honest, although they were willing to overlook an occasional cabin jumping. When the journalists Horace Greeley, Albert D. Richardson, and Henry Villard visited in June 1859, they moved into the shack of an absent prospector. He suddenly appeared, said Richardson, and "apologized humbly for his intrusion."<sup>11</sup>

What Larimer's men did resent was theft comparable to their own: When squatters built on a vacant Denver lot, they tore down the jumpers' building. To secure its claim, the Larimer party officially organized the Denver City Town Company on November 22, 1858. Since the area was then part of Kansas Territory, they decided to name their square mile after James W. Denver, who they believed was still governor, although he had resigned a few weeks earlier. They named streets for themselves — Bassett, Wynkoop, Blake, McGaa, Larimer, Lawrence, Curtis, and Welton were all members of the town company. Other streets were given Indian names — Arapahoe, Champa, Cheyenne, Wapoola, and Wewatta.<sup>12</sup>

Countess Katrina Murat, one of the first to bring a woman's touch to the raw frontier cross-roads, ran the El Dorado Hotel on Cherry Creek. (Colorado Historical Society.)



Soon, the rival hamlets of Auraria and Denver were vying to snare the businesses they hoped would insure prosperity. Both wanted a newspaper, so both promised town lots to editor William Newton Byers. He had arrived on April 17, 1859, and six days later published the region's first paper, the *Rocky Mountain News*. Byers located in Auraria where the second floor of Richens Wootton's saloon served as pressroom and staff living quarters. Stray bullets from the bar below disturbed sleeping printers above, so Byers laid additional flooring. To please both Auraria and Denver, the shrewd editor

later moved the *News* to the dry bed of Cherry Creek — neutral ground between the puny principalities.

Land went to churches, to Masons, to Odd Fellows, and to babies. The infant Auraria Humbell received one parcel; three went to her parents. Hers was the second white birth in the Cherry Creek settlements; William Denver McGaa had been born in Auraria four months earlier, in March 1859. Baby McGaa was, however, a quarter Native American, so early chroniclers, biased against Indians, hesitated to count him. In August, John Denver Stout became Denver City's first white child.

By offering 53 lots and nine shares in the town company to the Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express, Denver won the most important prize of all — the first stagecoach connection. Hotels and saloons wanted to be near the stage terminus, and letter-hungry citizens trooped there to pick up their mail. "It was," remembered town founder Samuel S. Curtis, "the vital move in the making of the city."<sup>13</sup>

Other enterprising pioneers pursued profit wherever they could. Henri Murat, a self-proclaimed count, wrote to a friend: "Gold is found everywhere," and then advised, "you can make your fortune as a shoe maker."<sup>14</sup> The count cut hair; the countess washed clothes. Thomas Warren, a Kentuckian, made clay pay as the town's first brick maker. He also ran a toll ferry, propelled across the South Platte by ropes, pulleys, and the river's current. "Noisy Tom" Pollock, Auraria's first blacksmith,

discovered coal, which he sold for a dollar a bushel. He also found work as hangman, undertaker, and town marshal, receiving 50¢ for each person he jailed. Flexibility counted on the frontier.

Such seasoned mountain men as McGaa, Smith, Wootton, James P. Beckwourth, and Jim Baker were the new towns' old timers. Traders Beckwourth and Wootton brought welcome supplies to the isolated camps, which lacked farms, factories, and practically everything else, except dreams. Beckwourth, the son of a black slave and a white plantation overseer, first trapped in the Rockies in 1825. In the 1830s he managed Fort Vasquez, in the 1840s he helped found Fort Pueblo, in 1859 he opened a store in Auraria. Wootton, at age 42, also knew the region well. He became "Uncle Dick" to the newcomers, who respected his age, experience, and stature. Learning of the Cherry Creek excitement late in 1858, he diverted to Auraria supplies intended for the Indians. Thirsty prospectors savored his Taos Lightning, a potent whisky he served free at Christmas.<sup>15</sup> North of town, near the present intersection of Fifty-third and Tennyson, Baker built a toll bridge across the Vasquez Fork of the South Platte. He protested when the Vasquez Fork was renamed Clear Creek: "Cler Crik ain't cler crik. It's muddy."<sup>16</sup>

As 1859 dawned, the strange congregation of a few hundred men and a handful of women, housed in 75 cabins, prayed for a gold rush. Only a few thousand dollars' worth of gold dust had been washed from shallow South Platte pockets, which were quickly depleted. No veins of ore had been discovered. Yet, Luke Tierney, one of Russell's companions, predicted "by the first of June 1859 we shall have a population here of 60,000."<sup>17</sup>

The prophecy almost came true. Footloose farm boys and city clerks, torn from planting corn, shoeing horses, and sharpening pencils by the Depression of 1857, remembered the riches of California and headed west to the new El Dorado. Their dreams were exploited by merchants and speculators.<sup>18</sup> Among the hucksters were guidebook authors, many of whom touted the discoveries for the benefit of suppliers in midwestern towns. They recommended river routes: the Arkansas, the Platte, or the more dangerous Smoky Hill. They advised gold seekers to leave fancy gaiters and white Marseilles shirts at home; to take instead "three pairs of strong heavy pants, six flannel shirts, three pairs of durable boots, a coat and a military overcoat." In total, they suggested gold rush gear including oxen, wagons, and supplies costing \$100 to \$200 per person.<sup>19</sup> Such expensive advice was often ignored. Poor prospectors walked west, heed-

less of warnings that "to attempt to cross this desert on foot is madness — suicide — murder."<sup>20</sup>

Testimonials from Cherry Creek described Auraria as "surrounded by rich gold mines."<sup>21</sup> William Byers, who wrote about the region before he saw it, later denied that he repeated lies but did confess to including stories that were "a little bright perhaps."<sup>22</sup> By April 1859 the winter trickle of prospectors became a torrent. Lawrence N. Greenleaf, Colorado's first notable poet, satirized the tenderfoot:

Upon the plains he dreamt about a nugget  
So big, it took just fourteen men to lug it;  
And waking, strove the treasure vast to seize,  
But found it was the moon behind the trees.<sup>23</sup>

Horace Greeley jolted westward by stagecoach to cover the rush for the *New York Tribune*. He observed that most travelers began their trek "trim and jolly" but arrived "sober as judges and as slow moving as their own weary oxen."<sup>24</sup> Byers estimated that as many as 150,000 argonauts set out for the Rockies, but many gave up before seeing Pikes Peak. Newspaperman Henry Villard suggested that the number was around 40,000, a guess closer to the 1860 federal census count of 34,231 in the region. At Cherry Creek the emigrants found gold scarce and prices high. Eggs sometimes fetched \$2 a dozen; beans brought up to 75¢ a quart; tobacco commanded \$2 a pound. Impoverished prospectors often sold their ox teams to raise money for food. That kept the price of meat low but meant that some who had come by wagon returned on foot. Hurrying home, the disgruntled "go backs" threatened to hang boosters, including Byers, and to burn Denver. An observer pitied them, "straggling across the plains in squads of dozens or scores, begging at the stations for goods to eat and a temporary shelter from the driving storms."<sup>25</sup>

News of rich discoveries in the mountains 40 miles west of Denver saved the town. George Jackson braved cougars and winter cold in January 1859 to prospect the northern flanks of Mount Evans. He found flake gold, but the discovery's impact was delayed because he and his friends kept the strike on Chicago Creek a secret until late April. More exciting to the eager prospectors in Denver were reports in May of John Gregory's diggings near what soon became Black Hawk: Gregory had found what no one else had — rich veins of gold.

Gold seekers who might have given up and returned east in March turned hopeful and continued west in May. The winter of 1859–1860

briefly halted the migration, until spring thawed the prairie and the emigrant flow resumed, giving Denver a census population of 4,749 by 1860, with men outnumbering women by a ratio of nearly six to one. Such precise figures, however, cloud the truth, for Denver's population continually fluctuated; the town was a revolving door, entry to, and exit from, the mountains. As an inland port on the prairie ocean's western shore, Denver emerged as supply and service center destined to outlast most of the mining centers. Fortunately, Colorado's wealth, in the mountains and on the plains, was so diverse that while individual towns rose and fell Denver survived. Gold, silver, lead, zinc, copper, vanadium, tungsten, molybdenum, oil, coal, natural gas, uranium, and oil shale would one day enrich the piedmont city. Unaware of most of these riches, the '59ers swept across the plains and marched deep into the mountains. The gold was enough for them. Yet, the wealth they sought, the gold they found, and the land they settled did not belong to them.

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### Gold!

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