

David Simonson

I came to Colorado from St. Louis in 1879, first going to Canon City where I engaged in business with, and became a partner of Zeltson, the clothier; the establishment being called "Cheap John's Store". I don't know from where the name was derived. Not wishing to remain within the confines of the store, I soon began selling merchandise to the stores, and ranchers, also, between Canon City and what was later to become Buena Vista. For this work I purchased a horse and buggy at Canon City for \$135.

The first store on my route was Pleasant Valley, next Cleora, and then Buena Vista. I carried some merchandise with ^{me} with, and took orders, then shipping them with the freighters, which I believe cost us from 2 to 2½ cents per pound. I retailed Levi Strauss overalls to the ranchers at one dollar per pair, and eye glasses at five dollars. The larger part of our boots and shoes were bought from the Canon City Penitentiary. We paid \$42 per case, or dozen, for the "Montana Boot", a soft, well made boot.

The trip to Buena Vista usually required a little longer than two days. I ate and slept where ever I could secure such accommodations. Often I ate with the freighters, who were, as a rule, jolly and dependable; but their food was terrible! Yet one could hardly blame the poor fellows, for theirs was a hard life, and they had enough to do without cooking. On one occasion I had supper with a freighter whose fried potatoes were half raw, and his biscuits were streaked with a deep black--grime from his hands. The effect, at least, was different; but not at all appetiz-

ing! It was a rough life for me, a tenderfoot, fresh from the east. I usually made the trip twice a week.

On my first trip to Buena Vista--the post office then located on the McPhelemy ranch was called Mahonville--the only "building" in the town proper was a tent which was occupied by the Dearhammers. Dearhammer was a carpenter, awaiting the boom of the town to work at his trade; and his wife, Sadie, called herself the "mother of Buena Vista"

I studied the "town" as a possible future location for a store, and, favorably impressed, I returned to Canon City and reported to my partners. We decided to operate a store there so I went again to Buena Vista where I met a freighter, Sam Jewel, who was building a residence of clapboards for himself and family. We became friends and I offered him a partnership in the store, which he accepted. He immediately began the construction of a crude, flimsy storeroom about 12' X 30' with rough shelving and counters. After he completed it he freighted the stock from our store in Canon City. We also named this store Cheap John's.

The boom hadn't started yet, but it did soon after when prospecting was started on the hills east of town. The first merchants were Wade and Mead, our store was next, then Bartholomew's furniture store, and Sam Co^h from Fairplay. People flocked in from every direction, and the town had assumed substantial proportions within a week. Buildings sprang up over night. I remember that Rogert's Hotel--now Wilbur's--which is two stories, was erected in a day and night.

The sporting element flocked to town in great numbers. On one occasion, when the freighters and gamblers engaged in a free for all fight--the contention, I believe, was the crookedness of the later, the gamblers threatened to set fire to the town. I did all I could: prepared a large barrel of water and waited. The freighters were victorious, however, and the town saved. Times were very wild, and men killed every day. If one man killed another he went before Judge Moody, plead guilty; he

as fined \$10--nothing more!

Once a girl came from a dancehall to make some purchases in my store. It was late in the evening so I had lighted the large kerosene lamps which were suspended from the ceiling. The girl had finished buying and was about to leave the store when a gambler burst in. In a furious mood, he beat the girl unmercifully; berating her, and me, also, and without reason, for neglecting her duties at the dancehall. He then drew his six-shooter and shot out every light in the store. The next morning he returned and paid me, handsomely, for the damages.

The Methodist was the first church in town, then the Catholic. I aided every church in town except the Episcopal. Father Cassidy was the first Catholic priest, and we were great friends. I sold him the first carpet for the parish house, and when I had finished laying it we had quite a celebration over the event.

I helped to start the fire company in 1880, which had 15 or 20 members. I can't remember the names of the officers. About '82 the block facing the depot caught afire, and we fought it with buckets of water secured from a well. The fire got beyond control and consumed almost the entire block. I also helped to organize a local post of the state militia with which I served for 5 years. Being small and slender, I never did possess a uniform. Captain Johnson was the commanding officer.

Our company also operated a store in Salida under the name, Cheap John. It was started in '80 and discontinued about two years later. Then we erected a building in Poncha, at a cost of \$4,000, and opened a store there. Later I sold the building to a rancher for \$75. In '81 we bought the "Gunnison House", a two story, 3rd room hotel, located at Gunnison, for \$5,000. We rented it for \$250 per month, and retained a lower room for a store. We were offered \$8,000 for the hotel building; we refused the offer. Later Gunnison declined and we lost the building on account of delinquency in taxes.

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In '80, at Alpine, we erected a two story building, with a dance hall upstairs, at a cost of almost \$4,000. The first dance in the town was held there. We abandoned the building when Alpine declined; and later, when the town died completely, the building was reeked by the wind.

(Once I bought two horses at a sheriff's sale here at Buena Vista. H. A. W. Tabor claimed that he owned a mortgage on the horses, which were very good animals, and took them to Leadville. We went to court over the matter, and finally to the supreme court, where I won the case. The decision was the first of its kind, due to some sort of a legal technicality, and is now a text in some law books.)

(Locating the court house, or county seat, here in the spring of 1881 caused the town to thrive more, as did the building of the Colorado Midland Railroad a few years later. Soon after Buena Vista began to decline until now it is but a ghost of the former town.)

Yet it is an excellent town in which to live, and I still make my home ^{there,} with my daughter, Mrs Fred F. Curtis, whose husband is deputy warden at the state reformatory.

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