

Western Experiences and Colorado Mining Camps

Wolfe Londoner*

I was born in New York in 1835. My first adventure was in coming out to California. My attention was called that way by there being a good deal of talk about the discovery of gold, and what was published in the newspapers. My recollection is that I was under 15 years of age when I landed in San Francisco in 1850—got out of New York on a sailing vessel and went around the Horn. My father did not know where I was until I wrote to him from San Francisco.

The first job I got on arriving there was a job at washing dishes. It was rather a new experience to me but the way it happened was that I did not have a single cent when I arrived in San Francisco, and the first thing to find was a place where I could get something to eat. I found a place and they put me to work. I think they paid me \$50 per month. Help was very scarce then in San Francisco. Everybody was rushing to the mines. I stayed in San Francisco all the time I was in California.

The first decent job I got was a situation with a Mr. Jessell, auctioneer, a very celebrated man in early days. He invented a patent kind of auctioneering to beat the city license. They made a very high license, and his idea was to start an article at say \$10, and then drop down to what he wished to sell it for, at a profit. I did not like the hotel business very much, and he tried me, and after I had worked for him for a week he offered me \$150 per month, which I thought was a very magnificent offer. I worked for him until he broke up. I don't know whether it was on account of the wages he paid me or whether he did not attend to his business; but there was a great decline about that time, there was a general crisis throughout the country. It struck me as a boy that the settling up of California was owing to its great distance from civilization—when they got there they were so very poor they could not get away.

I stayed in California until 1855, then I went to New York. From New York my father started business up at Dubuque, Iowa, which was a very prosperous city in 1855, and I was put in charge of two stores he had there. They were running on the high pressure plan until 1857, when the whole thing changed. There was not any money in circulation. All the big merchants issued what was

* Mr. Londoner was a prominent Colorado pioneer and business man. In 1884 he was interviewed for the historian, H. H. Bancroft, who was then preparing a history of Colorado, and the article presented here was the interview taken at that time. Mr. Londoner lived in Denver for many years after the period reached in this story. In 1889-91 he served as Mayor of Denver. He was always noted as a generous citizen and a genial host. He died November 23, 1912.—Ed.

called scrip for the payment of labor and materials, and anybody who could not take it did not do any business and that was all there was about it. After awhile the banks would not take it and the whole thing collapsed. Father went down to St. Louis, started a little business out of the ruins and left me with the family on my hands. After he had been down there several months he wrote up to me that I would have to bring the family down to St. Louis, and I brought them down.

After we were established I got a job with an auctioneer at \$25 per month, which was pretty dry picking, but then it was the best that could be got. I worked on in St. Louis and got a better job after awhile, got a situation with a man by the name of A. Hanauer (now of Salt Lake), who buys and sells ores and has some mines in Salt Lake. I worked with him until the spring of 1860. He went in partnership with the Dold Bros. of Las Vegas, N. M. He made a proposition to me to go out to Colorado and work for him. He said he had to go on and attend to the business of putting up a building in Denver, and wanted me to go on with the train. They had some 43 wagons, I think.

I went up to Atchison by boat and had to stay there for two or three weeks while the train was loading and when it got ready I put my traps on board and pulled out in good shape. The wagon-master was a Mexican, and the first day we only made five or six miles. I walked along and thought it was very nice to walk out on the green fields. The next start was at four o'clock in the morning, and we did not intend to camp until three in the afternoon, for some reason. I got very tired before we struck camp, I crawled into the last wagon and thought I would take a ride. I was in there about three or four minutes when I heard a hollering outside—the Mexican wagon-master was telling me in Mexican to get out of the wagon or he would blow the top of my head off.

There was one of the Mexican drivers who spoke a little English and he explained to me that it was the rule of the train that no one should ride in the wagons or on the tongue, as it was considered not the right thing. The men would have to be walking along looking after the cattle outside and would have no business in the wagons. I tried to explain to him that I was a partner in the concern, but he told me very distinctly that I would have to walk or go back to Atchison. I had only two or three dollars left, Mr. Hanauer had gone on ahead in good style with a wagon and mules, so I made the best of it and walked along with the train until we reached Denver. The train was bringing out goods. Mr. Hanauer did not have very much money, but had some stock. The Dold Bros. were very well fixed.

We reached here (Denver) in, I think, it was forty-five days'

travel, everything in good order, in the year 1860. Business was very fair for a new mining country. Profits were very good, and the proprietors thought they would start a branch at Canon City. They wanted me to attend to the putting up of a building in the summer of 1860. That was the first stone building that was put up in that town. After that had been running a little while they started me up at California Gulch (now called Leadville). Canon City was situated right at the mouth of the Grand Canon, right on the main road from the States to the mines, that is—California Gulch and Tarry-All Diggings (commonly called "Pound Diggings"). It was thought by some that on account of that route being through a warm climate, up the Arkansas River, that it would make a greater city than Denver, and it might have done so had it not been for the war in 1861. We had the worst of it down in the southern country. General Price was raiding around in the southern towns of Missouri, stopping all travel and threw it over the Platte route.

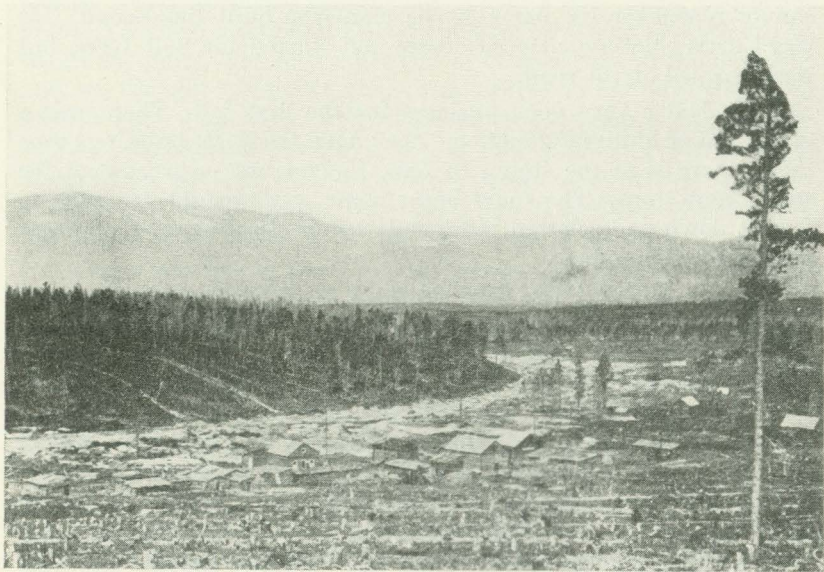
The first firm that opened in Canon City was this firm that I represented, Dold & Hanauer. They sent over twenty large freight wagons with \$50,000 worth of goods for a starter, right from Denver. This belonged to the firm. The warehouse of Majors, Russell & Waddell was, I think, the third warehouse that was built there. I cannot remember the name of the man who built the second. [It was Curtis Stevens.] He left there and started for Salt Lake, but was drowned on the road.

We had a very good business for the first fall. There was a great deal of building going on. They have the finest building stone there, there is in the state. In fact, Denver uses a great deal for store front stone. The court house stone was brought from there. I went down and selected it when I was on the Board of Commissioners for this county.

In the fall of 1860, they got up a great excitement in regard to the San Juan mines. It was started by a man named Baker, who came up with glowing accounts of immense deposits of gold in the streams of the San Juan. He went around throughout the mining camps and told his story and got a great many converts, and there must have been during that fall at least 5,000 miners that went through Canon City and bought all their supplies there. They went away rigged out in very good style, with their mining tools, quicksilver, pack animals, wagons, nice mule teams and lots of provisions to last them during the winter. It was those men who had made a great deal of money during the first year of the mining excitement in the mountains where they had struck good diggings, and they layed out all their gold dust for supplies, think-

ing all they had to do was to go down and strike "Baker's Park," as we called it, and dig it up by the shovel full.

Canon City was the supply place because it was that much nearer south. It was 130 miles nearer the wonderful San Juan mines. We got pretty well acquainted with all those miners and they all promised to come back next season and get more supplies and wanted us to be there and give them good prices for their gold dust. We heard nothing of these miners until late next spring, we could get no news from them at all. There were heavy snows in the San Juan mountains and ranges down there. About the first week in May some of them commenced straggling in. They had lost their plump and ruddy appearance; their nice mining boots with red tops to them had disappeared; of their mining shirts there was only a small scrap or a button or two left, and they were, taking them all in all, a sad and weary crowd who had come afoot across lots and were picking their way back to their first love, the mining camps. Later they came in larger numbers but mainly in the same condition, everything gone. They had lost their animals in the mountains, some of them had died, a great many of them had been lost and were never heard of again, starved to death in the mountain ranges of the San Juan.



CALIFORNIA GULCH WITH DESERTED ORO CITY
IN THE FOREGROUND

This was the scene of considerable placer gold mining in the early sixties.

What little profits the merchants of Canon had made in outfitting them in the previous fall, they gave back to these people in food and clothing and helping them to the camps of Tarry-All and California Gulch. Most of the inhabitants of the once great city of Canon, then emigrated to the mountains, leaving but a very few behind to guard the vacant stone warehouses and dwellings which had been built during its prosperity. In fact, besides old man Rudd and his wife and a man named D. P. Wilson and myself, the town was like Goldsmith's Deserted Village.

Early in the summer of 1861 I went to California Gulch to start a store for the firm there, and hauled a great deal of goods from Canon City. California Gulch in 1860 and 1861 had a population of something over 10,000 and was *The Camp* of Colorado. It was strung along through the gulch, which was something over five miles long, that is the mining part of it. There were a great many tents in the road and on the side of the ridge, and the wagons were backed up, the people living right in the wagons. Some of them were used as hotels; they had their grub under the wagons, piled the dishes there, and the man of the house and his wife would sleep in the wagons nights. They would get some rough boards and make tables where the boarders took their meals, and those who did not want to board did their own cooking. The gamblers would have tables strung along the wayside to take in the cheerful but unwary miner. The game that took the most was what was commonly known in those days as "Three Card Monte."

Most of the claims paid very rich. They would pay from \$10 to \$100 the man per day. Some of those claims produced as high as \$100,000, very little of which did any good to the original owners of the claims, as things were run with a high hand in camp, and the men and women were mostly bad who were not mining, and they managed to get most of the miner's dust and skip. After 1860 the population decreased somewhat, and in 1861 it probably all told did not exceed over 5,000, the miner's desire being to strike new diggings and a great many went over the range but found very little. Some of them went below California Gulch and discovered very good placer diggings at Cache Creek, named so because in 1854 a party of trappers who were hunting in that region were ambushed by the Indians in the vicinity and buried their supplies and attempted to escape over the mountains, but there was only one left out of the party of nine who ever reached Salt Lake to tell the tale.

Cache Creek was a very promising camp, having something over 1,000 miners working in the vicinity and taking the first two years of its discovery panned out very good, in some cases paying as high as \$25 to the man per day. The ground afterwards was

mainly gobbled up by large companies from the east, who operated on the California plan, which is to take everything in sight and squeeze the laborer down to starvation rates, which had the effect of killing the camp, and today there is but one company operating there. During the winter months when miners in California Gulch could not work their claims, a great many of them went down below Cache Creek on the Arkansas River and panned for a living, making from two to five dollars per day. The miners all claim that if a company of practical men would organize with sufficient capital to turn the river that there would be millions of dollars of gold taken out of the soil along the banks and on the bedrock of the river.

In 1863, I think it was, they got up quite a mining excitement over in what was called the Red Mountain district. A great many people from the territory then flocked in and took up claims and made it very lively for the recorder's office, and netted the recorder (who was myself in those days) something like \$10,000 for the season. The fees were pretty high in the early days here. That was about twelve miles from Cache Creek, something like 18 miles from Leadville or what was called California Gulch in those days. It created a great deal of excitement, there were a great many veins discovered which were all lost at the time and amounted to nothing, on account of their not understanding what mineral they were working. They were trying to work gold ore when it was nothing but silver, and it broke most of the prospectors who had taken up claims, and as it afterwards turned out, the miner who was working at California Gulch, or Leadville, sometimes only making his \$2 a day, in walking home to get his supper would walk over ground that would have netted him millions if he had only known anything about silver ore.

I went from Canon City to California Gulch when business dropped out of Canon City, and did a very large business for the firm. I was elected clerk and recorder of Lake County and served four years. During that time the Red Mountain mining excitement came in and I made considerable money out of it, but the best diggings had been worked out, and they got up a big mining excitement in Montana in 1865 that almost made California Gulch look like Canon City. I did not go there but concluded to come to Denver and opened a store, which I now occupy. I think it was in 1866. A great part of the mining population left Colorado and went to Montana. A great many came back with money they had made there and invested it in ranches, bought cattle and now are considered among the wealthy men of the state. They had very rich diggings in Montana.

Attention was turned to cattle as early as 1866 and 1867. They had to go down to Texas to get the cattle. There were quite a num-

ber in the country. They picked them up in very small lots. There were no great bands here. They would drive up cattle from Texas and these men would pick them up to fatten and grade them with better cattle and in that way we got some very good cattle in this country.

I went east and purchased stock, had in cash something like \$5,000, got credit for \$10,000 worth of goods. They were hauled by rail to Julesburg. The freight was about \$5,000. The freight would have been more than the goods cost but at that time the railroad was completed to Julesburg. Julesburg and Cheyenne were the two great termini for the Union Pacific. My elder brother was with me in partnership and he kept the books and I was the porter and salesman. We worked very hard and built up a big business. Our sales for the first year were, I think, about \$70,000. We did a good business right along for quite a number of years. My brother left me alone then, times were dull in the state and people doing business were not making any money, and he thought he would retire. A little while after that the Leadville excitement came up and trade picked up all over the state, especially in Denver, which was greatly benefited by the Leadville excitement. From a small beginning my business has now reached to where the sales amount to nearly a million dollars a year, but it is the hardest kind of work and worse than running a saw mill.

Four years ago I was elected county commissioner and chosen chairman of the finance committee. The entire responsibility of the financial part of putting up the court house honestly devolved upon me, and after I had commenced I found I had got into the worst business I ever struck in my life. It had either to come out before the public after the building was finished and have people say I was a thief, or else neglect my own business and attend to that solely, and as I had a small but increasing family and a great many friends in this country I thought I would let my store run itself for a little while and attend to the affairs of the county, and I had to take in one of my clerks and give him one-third interest in the business to run the store while I was working for the County of Arapahoe at \$5 a day. And everybody says that is the only building of the kind built in the United States that did not have a dollar stolen in the building of it.

It cost a little over \$300,000. The block is worth \$75,000 in the first place and those fountains outside cost us \$4,500, and the stone sidewalks in and out at the lowest contract rates cost about \$26,000. Then we have an artesian well that cost over \$5,000. We have the finest gas fixtures in any public building and paid \$4,500 for those, although at wholesale figure and a special rate from the railroads by which I got them through at the same classification as

for groceries. We have got \$24,000 worth of cherry furniture in that building, which is equal to any furniture that there is in any public building in the world. The furniture is all plain but just as good as you could wish for. The county was very fortunate in getting a contractor, Peter Gumroy, who did the work honestly. When I left the board last January (1884) they drew up a complimentary resolution which paid me for all the work I had done on the court house building. They had a public meeting in the district court at which Judge Elliott presided and the speeches and resolutions were very complimentary to the commissioners.

