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CHAPTER 1

DAYS OF HOPE, YEARS OF DESPAIR

“Marley was dead, to begin with, there is no doubt whatever about that.” Charles Dickens penned those opening words over a half century before Christmas eve, 1896. His *Christmas Carol* had been published long before Georgetown emerged on the silver scene. As Georgetown folk prepared now for Christmas, in that depressing year, 1896, they might have feared that they, and their era, were as dead as what Dickens had written about Scrooge’s partner. “Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.”

While Christmas Eve darkened over Georgetown and the valley, this favorite Christmas tale was probably being read aloud to families gathered around the fireplace or potbellied stove in countless homes. As the story unfolded, the opening might have struck a receptive chord about the situation for the dejected locals. Bleak and cold as Dickens’s London was on that long-ago foggy Christmas Eve, Georgetown seemed almost as “cold, bleak,” and “biting.”

The year 1896 had been filled with contrasting emotions of hope and expectation, reality and despair. More of the latter than the former, filled

Christmas stockings that season, as Georgetown, Silver Plume, and the silver-mining West suffered through a few highs but mostly lows.

The gloom generated by the crash of 1893 was compounded by the gripping Depression that had descended on the area that summer. How bad was it? The Colorado Bureau of Labor Statistics asked “prominent citizens” of each county to comment on the situation in the fall of 1893. Clear Creek’s respondent starkly stated, when dealing with the Georgetown area, “It is a very serious question with us now whether they [silver mines] will ever start up again, as the outlook at present is very blue.”¹

Certainly, circumstances would not worsen, but every year it seemed to, as the darkening depression settled dolefully over town, county, and state. The recently lost 1896 presidential election only made matters more emotional and more disheartening. William McKinley and gold were swept into office to reign triumphantly. He was not the hero of the Georgetown silverites. Their hero, William Jennings Bryan, had lost along with desperately desired “Free Silver,” with its promised revival of a higher silver price. These had been a last hope as the savior for disheartened local mining. Georgetown had done its best, voting over 30 to 1 for the “silver tongued orator.”

The *Georgetown Courier*’s editor bitterly remarked in the November 7, 1896, issue: “We have no doubt that there is a remarkable coincidence in the number of McKinley votes cast in Georgetown and the number of applicants for the post office.”

Marley might not be dead in Georgetown, but the residents’ beloved “free silver” cause was, even if they futilely wished not to face that reality. Substituting but two words for one, their plight was told by Dickens: “There is no doubt that [free silver] was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story.” For Georgetown folks, nothing wonderful would come tomorrow or in the tomorrows stretching into the future.

The Georgetown paper realized this, even though some of its readers could not bring themselves to agree: “For three years the people of Georgetown and other silver mining camps have been down to hard-pan. We did not start in at bed-rock on a four years’ crusade with nothing in sight and with no hope of finding anything. Heaven temper the wind of an impoverished people.”² The opening years of the 1890s had not been good to Georgetown and its chief industry. The price of silver had dropped from an 1890 high of a \$1.05 per ounce to 68 cents in 1896, and that referred to smelted and refined silver,

not to the raw ore coming out of the mine portal. Coloradans feared that the price might drop lower, a not unreasonable fear considering the times and the world monetary market.

To make matters worse, the district was over thirty years old, too old for a mining region. The seasons of its youth withered into only a fading memory, already vanishing into legend.

The cost of mining had gone up as the mines went down, and, as part of a disheartening general pattern, the value of the ore decreased with depth. Investors looked to new, exciting districts, ones with seemingly unlimited potential, not ones where the best locations and richest deposits had long ago been staked and worked for a generation. The future would not have been all that rosy, even without the trials and tribulations of the 1890s.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, Georgetown's miners and the other folks did not give up hope. They believed that the federal government would eventually see the necessity of putting silver back on a 16 to 1 ratio with gold. With gold stabilized at \$20 plus change, silver would be at \$1.25, a price last seen in 1875. Those had been flush times, and Georgetown thirsted to return to the "good old days."

The New Year did not dawn with a brighter tomorrow. Georgetown and its silver mines were locked virtually in a life-and-death struggle to survive. Hope could only carry them so far before it would die "a starving," as Ben Franklin had reminded his readers well over a century before. But with a never-say-die spirit, which was a western tradition, Georgetown set out to reestablish its silver foundation and push onward to better times in the upcoming new century.

As the *Georgetown Courier* proclaimed on its front page:

The Oldest newspaper in Clear Creek County

OUR INDUSTRY, MINING

this district has produced over \$60,000,000

It was not that the district suddenly shut down during the 1890s. The generosity of Congress in 1890 in passing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act—and the corresponding spike in the price of silver with increased government purchase—created \$1.3 million in silver production that year. The county did not drop under the million-dollar production level until 1897, the last year it reached that plateau.

A check of the *Engineering and Mining Journal's* and the *Courier's* mining columns and notes reveals the times and the trends, as Georgetown struggled to survive in a seemingly hostile environment.

The Colorado Central Mine once a large steady producer apparently has been ruined by long and costly litigation. It will probably be added to the list of abandoned mines in this district.³

Prospectors recently opened gold bearing ore at the Cyclone on McClellan Mt. near Silver Plume. They were doing assessment work and opened a vein of 7 ounce gold.⁴

The western end of Clear Creek County is one of the very few mining districts in Colorado working out its own salvation. For several years capital fought shy of the district because its product is mainly silver. Yet for all that with the low price of silver and lead the product has averaged about \$1,000 for each man engaged in mining.⁵

It is infinitely easier for a needle to go through the eye of a camel than for a local paper to gather mining information in this district. Mining here is generally regarded as a private enterprise in which the public has no business.⁶

Georgetown has some silver mines working. The town has never recovered from the great depression.⁷

In many ways, the last two excerpts are the most revealing. The *Courier* carried less mining news in these years than Georgetown papers had ever had before. It did carry news on the Idaho Springs District, as did the *Engineering and Mining Journal*. That gold district was going through a revival, as the county's gold production stayed steady—in the high \$600,000 to \$700,000 range—and eventually surpassed its longtime up-county silver rival. As might be imagined, silver production actually improved somewhat over previous totals, even as miners and investors turned their attention to the more profitable golden mineral. Silver as a by-product was sometimes found in gold mines.

The secretiveness is interesting. Usually camps and mines in bonanza did not mind a little publicity. If nothing else, it helped tempt investors, those individuals who were usually most welcome in any district. Georgetown owners apparently did not want such notoriety. Perchance, however, they had very little to point to with much pride or potential.

Mines ruined by litigation did not bode well for the district. Gold accidentally found while doing assessment work was a rare exception and not a pillar on which to build the future. Blaming easterners for western problems was as old as the hills, and there was definitely truth in the statement that Georgetown had never recovered.

The *Courier* indicated all this when it carried more mining news from Idaho Springs than it did from Georgetown: "Eastern people have recently secured property on Bellview Mountain. They are spending considerable money on development without having made a showing. The men in charge do not appear to be getting work out of the investment. It is for this reason and no other that there are failures in that section on properties which show large bodies of high grade ore."⁸

Development in some mines had been hurt by poor management, and, in reality, only yearly assessment work was being done. Fortunately in one case, and purely by accident, miners discovered gold. On nonpatented claims (ones that were not owned outright or patented), federal law mandated that at least \$100 worth of assessment work be done every year before December 30 in order to hold the claim against relocation by other parties.⁹

The fact that the claims were nonpatented and that only assessment work was conducted told a story. Owners still held to the hope that they might discover valuable ore but did not have the confidence, or money, to put that idea to the test beyond just maintaining ownership. Mining was becoming more expensive every year and the odds of finding a bonanza decreasing.

All the major mines had been patented, which included \$500 worth of "patent improvement," including "officially" surveying the claim. It meant advertising the application in a local newspaper for the benefit of anyone who might have an adverse claim on the property and, finally, making a written patent application. When all that was accomplished, the government approved the purchase of the land for \$5 an acre. With ownership in hand, the property became subject to taxes, but assessment work no longer had to be done each year.

Old as a mining district, Clear Creek County showed the disparity between patented and nonpatented claims. The 1902 report of the Colorado Bureau of Mines noted "nearly 23,000 lode and placer claims, mill and tunnel sites duly recorded."¹⁰ Of those, only 1,300 owners procured a patent.

Another thing that happened in the Georgetown district, and other mining districts fallen on similar hard times, was that the county levied tax liens on mining properties because the owner had failed to pay taxes. If no back taxes were paid, the property could eventually be sold at a tax sale.

Those all flashed warning signs to potential investors. Meanwhile, upper Clear Creek County needed a fresh transfusion of capital. These signs indicated that mining had slipped into a downward cycle, one that would unquestionably prove hard to reverse unless some new and exciting discoveries were found in the surrounding mountains. That was precisely what Silver Plume and Georgetown townspeople wanted, hoped for, and prayed would happen.

They did not sit around and wait. They were determined, despite the low price of silver and apparently no help coming from Washington, to revive their fortunes. That they had looked to the federal government was not unusual. Despite the legendary rugged independence of westerners, from cowboy to miner, Washington had been a silent and sometimes-not-so-silent partner in the opening and settlement of the region. Miners everywhere had turned to Uncle Sam, and their uncle had been very good to them in years past. Under the 1872 Mining Law, for instance, patented mining claims, as mentioned, could be purchased for \$5 per acre, an astounding bargain. The mining law itself, which western senators had been crucial in getting passed, had done everything it could to encourage the development of mining.¹¹ It benefited the whole country to have the West developed, or so those westerners ardently believed and argued.

Furthermore, the federal government encouraged and helped railroads, a vital ingredient in mining's success throughout the West, and the federal army aided in settlement and development. Without Uncle Sam, mining would have been a much more difficult proposition, as would any other attempt to settle the West.

With steadfast determination, upper Clear Creek County refused to give in to the decline in mining, the industry that had given it birth, development, and fame. Silver would rise, and Clear Creek would rise with it. Mining had never actually stopped, and not all of the county's mines experienced the problems previously mentioned.

In order to make the mines more profitable, different techniques had to be tried. Since the start of mining in the district, its high elevation presented problems. So had the cost of mining through shafts, which necessitated

lifting ore to the surface and pumping out water the same way. It had not been long before the idea of tunneling in from a lower elevation to intersect the vein gained popularity. This eliminated the expense of hoisting ore to the surface and then transporting it down the mountain. It lowered the cost of hauling supplies and men into the mine while easing the price of dewatering the mine. All these benefits would, in theory, make the more plentiful, lower-grade ore more profitable.

Of course, it was easier said than done, a great deal easier. The initial outlay of tunneling into the vein proved both time consuming and costly. It ran the risk of hitting ore too low in grade to work profitably. As the old mining saying went, “no one knew what was beyond the pick at the end of the mine.” With even the most careful planning, it was also possible to trespass on someone else’s property underground, which could lead to costly litigation. Therefore, it was better to consolidate a whole group of properties that might be impacted by a tunnel.

These problems had not deterred miners before and would not now. There had been “tunnel crazes” earlier, and the upper Clear Creek District was about to succumb once more, partly through renewed hope and partly through desperation.

The editor of Silver Plume’s *Silver Standard* expressed it well when quoting the Georgetown correspondent of Denver’s *Rocky Mountain News*: “One of the most formidable undertakings ever agitated in this section is now under consideration. A syndicate of capitalists have been investigating our resources, etc., and will in all probability conclude to prosecute a tunnel into the innermost recesses of Leavenworth and McClellan mountains, starting at a point near the base of Leavenworth mountains at the south end of Georgetown, with the view of intersection with a large number of well-known mines at great depth.”¹²

Not finished with such exciting news, the editor continued: “It is thought that a large vein will be encountered by this projected tunnel, also that a large number of undiscovered veins will be disclosed as the tunnel proceeds.” There lay, once more, the dreams that had carried mining for eons past, a “large vein” and “undiscovered veins.”

This one did not pan out, but that did not deter the optimistic, or those who wanted to mine the investors’ pockets through such glittering possibilities. Denver’s *Weekly Republican*, January 1, 1900, in its review of mining in

the past year, heralded “CLEAR CREEK IS HOME OF TUNNELS.” Not finished with such exciting news, the subheadline raised hopes even further: “Bores penetrating deep into the rich treasuries of the mountains—increase in gold production—valuable new discoveries.” Then the article opened more promising expectations. “Thousands more miners will find work when the great tunnel enterprises reach the veins of ore which traverse the mountains.” It sounded like the boom days all over again.

While the gold discoveries were mainly in the lower part of the county, gold was also being mined in upper Clear Creek. Georgetown and Silver Plume old-timers and newcomers had not lost faith. They saw a better future coming. The article continued, “the citizens of these camps are confident their ores will command a better price in the future, but until that time do not hope for outside investment in the silver mines.”

Georgetown would gain the most from all this, the reporter went on to say. It was the center of the ore-buying and -smelting concerns and transportation—and even “many of the miners working in Silver Plume live in Georgetown.” Despite some pretense advanced by other camps in the district, Georgetown had always been the dominant mining community and would continue to be so.

A second plan was to have more mines owned and operated by local people, a long spoken and unspoken ideal. They would know local conditions better, be less likely to gut a mine for quick profits, and employ their neighbors. Optimistically, too, they simply would not abandon the property if it did not live up to what they initially expected. Not to mention locals, it was hoped, would possess a higher rate of “staying power.”

Instead of relying on outside investors, let the home folks do it. That was the theme of an article that discussed Georgetown, but it was just as applicable to the entire district.

A home pool is being formed here to take hold of some promising mines which are now lying idle and get a bond and lease and develop them . . . the plan is to form a pool comprising some of our leading business men, limiting the pool to thirty members who will each put up \$50, when matter will be pushed forward by putting four men at work on whatever property the board of managers may elect. This will be a good start on this line and will no doubt be the forerunner of several more home pools which will be formed.¹³

Tunnels and home investment pools were proposed to reenergize local mining, but Georgetown and Silver Plume folk were not finished by a long shot. What really was needed, many people thought, were better mills and smelters, with an economical process to reduce the ores to gold and silver.

To help gain these improvements, the “leading citizens of Georgetown and vicinity” organized the Georgetown Board of Mines and Commerce. Its purpose, simply stated, focused on calling “attention to the outside public of the splendid opportunities for investment afforded in our district.” The board promised to provide “conservative, reliable information” and encouraged “and invited” investigation.

Not a step behind, Silver Plume organized a Board of Mines and Trade. Likewise, it promised to call attention to the mineral resources and send out printed matter “giving statistics of production and so forth.”

To old-timers, all this echoed earlier cries and efforts. In fact, the *Courier* (February 10, 1906) reviewed the history, in a long story: “Georgetown and Its Early Mills and Smelters.”¹⁴ The article concluded by discussing Georgetown’s greatest prosperity, when the town “had a population of nearly 5,000.” For those who had not lived there at the time, it was a pretty dismal repetition of problems, fires, and failures, intermingled with a few successes. Revisionist history was already taking place. Georgetown’s population never came close to that many people, according to the census statistics.

Uncle Sam pitched in to help support the district with professional paper number 63 of the United States Geological Survey. The publication of the *Economic Geology of the Georgetown Quadrangle (Together with the Empire District), Colorado* in 1908 provided a detailed look at the area’s mining and geology.¹⁵ While not a nighttime reading companion, it nevertheless provided miners and investors with a fascinating look at the past and present.

With 422 pages crammed with maps, drawings, and photographs, it provided a sweeping look at the region, focusing on mine after mine. This was no quickly produced puff publication or self-promoting effort. The volume offered a scientific examination of mining and a variety of related topics. Readers could, for example, select a mine or group of lodes, perhaps the Lebanon group of lodes, which the authors evaluated as having “medium importance.” The overall vein structure and mineralogy were then discussed, along with several individual mines, including maps of the principal underground workings with a smidgen of history.

By carefully reading the appropriate pages, the investor would come away with a detailed, professional view of a potential investment. From there, he or she would have some basis to make a judgment independent of local sources. The conclusion might not be as optimistic as the owner would want, but it would be straightforward.

Optimism, however, was not in short supply at the turn of the century, and, when it came to a new mill or process, it proved epidemic. A few examples will suffice.

The old Clear Creek mill, which has done service for well nigh thirty years, is rapidly going under a change under the supervision of Wm. Rogers. Nearly all the old machinery has been torn out and the interior of the building is being overhauled, and new floors, braces and supports are being put in and the structure generally made as good as new. When this work is completed, the placing of new machinery will be commenced. . . . When completed, the mill will be one of the most complete in the country.¹⁶

The mill being erected by the Griffith Mines company is fast nearing completion. The greater portion of the machinery has arrived and the contractors are employing a good force of men in the setting and adjusting of the equipment.¹⁷

A large force of carpenters are engaged in the construction of the mill [Capital Prize], which is being erected to treat the vast amount of concentrating material that had already been exposed, and the building will soon be ready for the reception of the machinery, which has been seen selected after making exhaustive tests for determining the best method.¹⁸

W. E. Malm, in charge of construction and installation of equipment at the Malm chemical-electro plant in the east part of town, has had a force of men at work during the past several days in grading for the switch that is to connect with the Colorado & Southern tracks.¹⁹

These efforts did not quite match the “process mania” of a generation before, but expectations soared high with every new process and mill.

The plans, construction, machinery, process, and expectations of a new mill held great interest for the general public (perhaps for potential investors also), or so assumed the local editors. They covered these developments in careful detail and, then, as expectations perhaps failed to be met, shifted their

attention to some other savior. The key to this anticipation and profit came in working the more abundant low-grade ore in a profitable manner.

One example will suffice, and it is a classic one. The *Courier* breathlessly announced in its March 21, 1914, edition, "The Malm Mill to Be Rushed to Completion." In the coming summer, another article predicted they "will see the Malm dry chlorination works of Georgetown in active operation." The original plant had been commenced in 1909, "and \$100,000 spent in the erection of a building, the construction of cement foundations, and the installation of machinery, etc."

Work had stopped because of the "stringency of the money market" before the project was finished. Now John L. Malm, an electrochemist who had "spent years in research and experiment in developing this process," rode to the rescue. He had worked out the "bugs" in an experimental plant built in Corbin, Montana.

Georgetownites and others in the upper Clear Creek district breathlessly awaited the coming millennium. Dashed expectations arrived soon enough. The *Courier* of May 30 tersely noted that "it is currently reported that the Malm mill has been completely dismantled and all the machinery shipped away."

PHOTO ESSAY 1

GEORGETOWN AT THE TURN
OF THE CENTURY



Young cottonwoods in front of the Nelson home on Rose Street c. 1895. In later years the small brick building would serve as the Catholic rectory. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, f5212.



These women referred to themselves as the first literary society in Colorado, which may be true, but difficult to prove, c. 1900. "Back row: Miss McKee, charter member; Miss Elizabeth Gaylor, charter member; Mrs. Henry Seifried; Mrs. Charles Wolfe. Middle row: Mrs. J. S. Randall, charter member; Mrs. Charles Bullock, charter member and first president; Mrs. E. S. Weaver, charter member; Mrs. Orson Clark; Mrs. Wm. Jacobs (aunt of Mrs. Pulsifer); Mrs. Dr. Collins, Sr., organizer; Mrs. Ella Adams. Front row: Miss Mattie Naylor, charter member; Mrs. Horace Bullock, charter member; Miss Ada Hardy, first secretary; Mrs. Frank Wood, first member to be admitted after the organization." Label courtesy of Erl Ellis collection (currently in possession of Christine Bradley). Colorado College Special Collections, Kernochan, pp. 82–22a, album 3 p. 56.



Women pose for a picture in front of Dagleish photo studio, Sixth and Taos streets. Note the photo-drying racks on the second floor. Image courtesy of History Colorado (Dagleish photo, f25107).



By the late 1890s Georgetown's commercial district covered every inch of available space, but paint was beginning to peel and roofs needed fixing. Image courtesy of History Colorado 10032956.



The parade winds its way up Taos Street c. 1900. The Dagleish photo studio building is on the east side of the street. Stereoviews are visible in the windows, and a display kiosk is on the corner. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, Dagleish photo x1227.