

EBEN SMITH

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The Dean of Western Mining

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Introduction

In July 2012, more than 100 years after Eben Smith's death, the owners of a warehouse that once belonged to the Denver Mine and Smelter Supply Company began to demolish the building with the hope of selling the land to a new owner who wanted to construct apartment buildings. Neighbors of the warehouse, which was built in 1909, filed an ultimately unsuccessful petition to have the warehouse declared a Denver landmark and be saved from destruction. The neighbors argued that the building deserved landmark status because of its connection to Colorado's mining history and to mining pioneer Eben Smith, overlooking the fact that Smith had sold his interest in the Denver Mine and Smelter Supply Company in 1901 and died in 1906, three years before the warehouse was built. Critics vocally condemned the landmark attempt, arguing that allowing a hostile neighbor to attempt to thwart an owner's plans for a historic building made a mockery of Denver's landmark preservation ordinance, and *Denver Post* columnist Vincent Carroll pointed out the folly of using Smith's name to save a building he had never seen.¹

My interest in Eben Smith started with a house. I had passed it while on a school field trip in 1990, and it fascinated me. Since I could only remember the area where I had seen the house, my dad, brother, and I spent a Sunday afternoon searching for it. When we finally found it, I learned from a sign on the fence that it was called the Smith Mansion. Over the following months and years, I visited the Denver Public Library a number of times to find out whatever I could about the house and its history. I even had the opportunity to take a tour of the house, conducted by then-owner L. Douglas Hoyt. As part of my research on the history of the house, I also came to know about the family of its builder and first owner, Eben Smith's son Frank L. Smith, who had made his own fortune from mining and built the house in 1902.

While the story of Frank Smith and his house was compelling, even more impressive was the story of his father, Eben Smith. Like many in 1849 and 1850, Smith went to California during the gold rush to seek his fortune. Unlike the majority, he found it. He next turned his sights on Colorado, arriving there in 1860 with a new business partner, Jerome Chaffee. Over the next forty-six years, Smith was involved in mining in nearly all of the major mining camps in the state, from Central City to Cripple Creek, and he developed mines such as the Bobtail, Little Jonny, and Victor. One short article on his life said "the name of the fabulously rich mines which he discovered or developed . . . read like chapter headings in the romance of the West." In addition to Chaffee, Smith was also associated with David Moffat, earning a reputation as his "right-hand" man. The mining teams of Smith and Chaffee and Smith and Moffat were among the most successful and respected in Colorado, and many in the state held Smith in especially high regard.²

Just as the names of his mines read like chapter titles in the history of the West, so do the names of Smith's associates. In addition to Chaffee and Moffat, just a few of his better-known associates were Horace Tabor, J. J. Brown, Bela Buell, and Charles J. Hughes. Smith met John Gregory and William Green Russell, who would become legendary figures in Colorado mining, shortly after they found gold in Colorado. And while not as well-known, many other Smith associates and employees would appear in mining camps around the state, including Charles Mater, several members of the Curnow family, and dozens of other miners.

Without mining, the state of Colorado would not exist as it does today, and Eben Smith played a major part in developing mining in Colorado. Yet

despite the credit for establishing Colorado's mining industry that he received during his lifetime, Smith has received little attention from historians. In part, this reflects the kind of life he lived. Smith was more than happy to leave the role of public promoter and the responsibility of being in the public eye to his partners while he worried about the output of his mines. For the mines to give up their riches, they needed people to invest money. Investors such as Horace Tabor, J. J. Hagerman, David Moffat, and Jerome Chaffee supplied the capital, but they needed men like Eben Smith to coax the mines into producing. The mining and milling knowledge he acquired in California and his ability to put it into practice in Colorado made him a leader in technological innovation, and his willingness to use new technology usually served him well. Smith indeed could make the mines produce.

Steven F. Mehls, in his biography of David Moffat, writes that Moffat "took the more prestigious but in some ways rather risky route of the mining financier and promoter." The same was true of Leland Stanford, who invested in mines but left the day-to-day operations to others. Horace Tabor first made his fortune by grubstaking the discoverers of the Little Pittsburgh Mine in Leadville. J. J. Hagerman also made his fortune investing in mines in Michigan and then in Cripple Creek. The Guggenheims, already rich from Meyer Guggenheim's numerous business ventures, built their great fortune, according to biographer John H. Davis, from investing in mines in Leadville and Cripple Creek among other places, as well as in smelters in Colorado and Mexico.³

For these men, mining was a means to an end. In each of these cases, they used the fortunes they made in mining to pursue their other and, to them, more important interests. In Moffat's case, this was to build railroads and promote Colorado. Stanford and Hagerman also used their mining riches to build railroads. Tabor put his money to more artistic pursuits, building his famed opera houses in Leadville and Denver, in addition to the office building known as the Tabor Block in Denver. The Guggenheims used their fortune to establish a number of charitable foundations. Chaffee used his fortune to advance his political career and promote the state.⁴

Mentioned far less often in biographies are those men who actually worked the mines. Some made it; some did not. One who did not was Arthur Hill, who went to Alaska in 1898 and to Arizona in 1899 to pan for gold. His biographer, John Moring, described Hill as "notional," given the many interests he had in life. Hill later found success as an actor and a police officer in San Diego,

not as a miner. Another example of a man who actually worked the mines was Winfield Scott Stratton. Arriving in Colorado in the late 1860s, Stratton spent seventeen years prospecting all over the state, always coming up empty-handed. Stratton became so obsessed with finding a mine that he gave up a promising career as a carpenter. Unlike Hill, Stratton finally achieved his dream when he discovered the famous Independence Mine in Cripple Creek in 1891 and became a millionaire. Thomas F. Walsh, another Smith contemporary, prospected for years in the Black Hills and Colorado before discovering the Camp Bird Mine near Ouray, which made him a millionaire.⁵

Eben Smith straddled the positions of investor and worker. Starting out at the bottom ranks with Hill and Stratton, Smith soon worked his way up to the ranks of Moffat and Tabor. Smith's life and career might best be compared to two of his fellow Central City pioneers, Henry Teller and Peter McFarlane. Arriving in Central City in 1861, Teller started out as a small-time lawyer who worked his way up to become a US senator and secretary of the interior under Chester A. Arthur. By the time of his death, Teller was one of the most respected men in Colorado. Eben Smith started out much the same way, although he arrived in Central City already well-off. Just as Teller rose through the ranks of Colorado politics, Smith rose through the ranks of mining. But he never left behind his days of digging in the dirt. For Eben Smith, mining was his great love.⁶

Peter McFarlane arrived in Central City in 1869, at the tail end of a depression in mining brought about by the difficulty in processing ore from the area. McFarlane and his brothers worked in construction before moving into designing and building mining equipment. Along the way, he served as a member of the city council in Central City and as the town's mayor. By the late 1890s, McFarlane's long experience had given him a strong reputation in the mining community and the state as a whole. When Gilpin County's mining industry began to decline in the early 1900s, McFarlane remained convinced that it could be revived with the right equipment. As the owner of the Central City Opera House from the late 1890s until his death in 1929, McFarlane clung to the building even though he lost a great deal of money in doing so. Given the troubles Smith had with some of his business ventures near the end of his own life, he might very well have sympathized with McFarlane's troubles.⁷

Much of Eben Smith's career intersected with America's Gilded Age. In the years after the Civil War, the country found itself rapidly changing from

an agrarian economy to one based on industry. As a result, people began to move from farms and rural areas to the big cities. J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller, among others, earned fabulous sums of money that they used to build elaborate homes and fund charitable institutions, all while becoming either heroes or demons to the world around them. In the frontier West, natural resources such as gold, silver, and land became hot commodities ripe for exploration and exploitation as tens of thousands of people headed there to mine, speculate in land, build railroads, or supply those who were heading there.⁸

Historian Gene M. Gressley describes westerners of the Gilded Age as possessing a “powerful opportunistic sense . . . If economic rewards did not come today, they would tomorrow or the morrow after that.” No matter what happened, westerners were convinced that a bright future awaited them despite any setbacks or failures they encountered. While westerners are often viewed as fiercely independent, Gressley writes that the West matured only after absorbing “massive amounts of Eastern capital and technology.” When westerners exceeded their economic reach, they relied on the federal government to intervene in areas such as transportation and water. In the West of the late nineteenth century, the public and private sectors, according to Gressley, were expected to cooperate. Westerners also imported eastern legal, political, and social institutions as they created new societies based on what they had known. But while seeking help from the East, westerners also feared being dominated by easterners. Gressley argues that the relationship between the West and the East during the Gilded Age was much like that of a colony and a mother country.⁹

While Gressley’s colonial argument has fallen out of favor in recent times, the optimism displayed by the miners has not. Historian Duane A. Smith writes that “optimism was never absent” in Colorado’s mining industry. Eben Smith’s life illustrates the opportunistic sense and optimism Gressley and Duane Smith write about. That search for a brighter future and for more economic blessings than his parents had drove Eben Smith throughout his career. In all, about 250,000 people arrived in California after James Marshall, an employee of John Sutter, discovered gold near Sacramento on January 24, 1848. This is the story of Eben Smith, one of those 250,000, who achieved the success of which many of them only dreamed.¹⁰

1

“I Left Pennsylvania When I Was 19”

In August 1902, entrepreneur, miner, and politician Eben Smith wrote what amounted to his only autobiography. To prove to a man in Michigan that he had never been to Michigan and therefore could not possibly owe him thirty-two dollars, he wrote, “I left Pennsylvania when I was 19 years old, went to California, remained there until 1859, returned to Pennsylvania, came to Colorado in 1860 and have lived here ever since.” While this short life history hit the high points and saved Smith thirty-two dollars, it left out a great deal.¹

According to a family history compiled between 1889 and 1891 and published in 1892, the Smith family was of “sturdy Scotch-Irish ancestry.” Eben Smith’s great-grandparents, John and Mary Smith, lived in Ireland. A family friend interviewed for the family history said, “The Smiths were a well to do people in the old country” based on the high position of their church pew. Eben Smith’s grandparents, Samuel and Jane Smith, along with Samuel’s brothers William, Robert, and James, left Ireland for the United States in 1796. Each of the four brothers bought a farm in Erie County, Pennsylvania, with Samuel and Jane settling on 400 acres near Union Township. Samuel and Jane

Smith had twelve children, the third of which was their son William, born in 1801. In 1817 the Smith family moved to a 250-acre farm near Beaverdam. William Smith married Mary Nelson in Beaverdam on February 15, 1831.²

Like his father, William Smith was a farmer. The oldest of William and Mary's eight children, Ebenezer Smith, was born in Beaverdam, Pennsylvania, on December 17, 1831. According to a later biography, Smith inherited "little from his parents save a vigorous physique and strong mental powers." A reporter for the *Erie Daily Times* wrote in 1906 that Smith also had a "determined personality" that would ensure success. Little is known about Smith's early life, but he was educated in public schools in Erie and at a private academy in Waterford, Pennsylvania. He also trained as a ship's carpenter, which some thought helped him greatly in his future mining career.³

After James Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848, it seemed as if the entire population of California, from Los Angeles to San Francisco, abandoned their cities to go search for gold. As word of the discovery spread farther, people from the United States and the world began heading to California. By land and by sea, thousands made their way to California seeking wealth and adventure. H. W. Brands writes that for many people, "the news from California was the most exciting" they had ever heard, and the "rush to California promised to be the event of their lifetime." For many of those who headed there, the trip to California was the first long trip of their lives, and no matter how they chose to go it was indeed an adventure.⁴

Nineteen-year-old Eben Smith was not immune to the allure of the discovery of gold in California, and in 1850, he decided to go there to try his hand at mining. He traveled "by vessel by way of the isthmus" and arrived in San Francisco in 1851. The trip Smith undertook required taking a ship from New York to Panama, crossing the isthmus, and then taking a second ship from Panama to San Francisco. The voyage cost between \$200 and \$500, meaning that Smith must have been able to save a fair amount of money in order to take it. Gold seekers first took a ship to Chagres, the port on the Caribbean side of Panama. The mass of humanity passing through on their way to California overwhelmed the town, with people sleeping wherever they could, which increased the risk of catching malaria or other diseases. In addition, criminals preyed on the travelers. The gold seekers then had to cross the isthmus itself.⁵

From Chagres, gold seekers traveled on the Chagres River to Gorgona by steamship or other watercraft. They made the final trek from Gorgona to Panama City by horse, by mule, or on foot. The path was little more than a dirt track that frequent rains turned to mud, making the journey even more difficult. In late 1849, those heading to Panama City met those heading back to Chagres, done with California and its promise of riches. Once in Panama City, the early fortune seekers faced a shortage of ships because shipping companies were overwhelmed by the number of people heading to California. The wait for a spot on a ship could sometimes stretch into weeks, leading some to wonder if the journey was worth the trouble. In all, the journey usually took about two to three months (for those who could not afford to travel through Panama, it took four to eight months to travel around Cape Horn).⁶

After leaving San Francisco, Eben Smith first settled at Grass Valley in Nevada County, most likely engaging in placer mining. He then moved on to Sierra County, where he panned for gold for a short time before returning to Nevada County. His placer mining ventures must have been somewhat successful, as his next venture was building a hotel at French Corral in Nevada County. The *Sacramento Daily Union* reported in 1852 that French Corral was thriving "in a degree unprecedented," so much so that when a fire destroyed a large part of the town in 1853, it caused over \$40,000 in damage. By then Smith had sold his hotel, however, and had moved on to Placer County, where he took a job at the Texas Quartz Mill, which was located near the town of Damascus. The mill was reportedly the largest of its kind in California, and Smith's stepson Fletcher Jordan said his training as a ship's carpenter gave him a "natural aptitude for all work about a mill." He appeared to be an "ordinary sort of fellow," but his "natural ability rendered him useful and popular and he got on well." An efficient amalgamator, Smith became a master of the mineral-treating process and soon bought a half interest in the mill. He continued to work at the mill in addition to mining in various parts of Placer County for about a year.⁷

Smith may have first encountered quartz mills while working in Grass Valley, where residents spent much of the 1850s developing the quartz mining and milling industries. As far as most miners were concerned, quartz mining was steadier than placer mining, but one problem always remained: separating the gold from the quartz in which it was found. According to

historian Ralph Mann, miners were convinced that whoever could solve the problem of separating the gold from the quartz would become enormously wealthy, and the challenge attracted "skilled mechanics and draftsmen" to Grass Valley to give it a try. No matter who was trying to solve the problem, though, Mann writes that "the basic combination necessary for a successful quartz mine remained constant: a rich claim, skilled management, a high-quality mill, capital adequate to overcome unforeseen accidents and delays, and good luck."⁸

Quartz, or stamp, mills crushed ore under iron blocks (stamps) that were attached to wood or iron rods connected to a rotating beam at the top of the mill. The stamps rose and fell based on the rotation of the beam, crushing the ore into a fine powder as it passed under them. A stream of water then washed the crushed ore over copper plates that were impregnated with mercury. The mercury and gold formed an amalgam that was then cooked in a retort, burning off the mercury and leaving the gold behind. Historian James E. Fell Jr. writes that the "principle was simple, but stamp milling required a knowledge of engineering, a supply of semiskilled labor, and access to capital." The arrival of stamp mills in California and, later, in Colorado was an important moment for the mining industry in both places.⁹

Learning by experience and watching others was not uncommon among early miners in California. Historian H. W. Brands refers to the way miners learned from each other as "empirical science." Miners watched each other to try to determine what techniques seemed to produce better results and what conditions made one claim pay well while another failed. They also studied rock formations and soon developed the knowledge of which would pay and which would not. In addition, "California revealed what gold geology looked like," enabling miners to search for it around the world. Where existing techniques did not work to remove gold from rock, they had to invent new ones. While quartz milling required more expert knowledge of chemistry, physics, geology, and engineering, for an interested and willing learner, observation was still a good way to learn the process, and Smith took it all in.¹⁰

While working at the mill, Smith took his meals at a boardinghouse in Damascus owned by Caroline Jordan, a twenty-six-year-old widow and mother of four from Iowa. George Jordan was a farmer in Dubuque, Iowa, who died in May 1850, leaving his wife, Caroline, with four young children.



FIGURE 1.1. Eben Smith, seated in the front row, ca. 1860. The woman seated next to him is possibly his wife, Caroline. Michel Tritt Collection.

Although Caroline remained in Iowa for several months after her husband's death, she eventually decided to move the family to California. According to her son Fletcher, the family took the much more difficult overland route rather than going by ship. They settled in Damascus, where Caroline opened a boardinghouse and met Eben Smith. In late 1852, Smith and Caroline traveled to Georgetown, California, to get married.¹¹

Most of the people who went to California during the gold rush never intended to stay there. They planned to make a quick fortune and return to the homes and lives they had left behind, resulting in the often transient nature of early mining camps. For those who did stay, not only did they have to work at getting gold, they also had to work at creating a new society. Gene Gressley writes that most western towns attempted to re-create the eastern society their residents had known. Brick buildings, which could include churches, theaters, hotels, and a post office, were one sign of permanence

and stability. Stable town governments, a newspaper, the arrival of professionals such as doctors and lawyers, and growing families were additional signs that a new society was taking hold. Although Eben Smith would play a much larger part in establishing a permanent society in Colorado, his brief stint as a hotel owner and his marriage were small steps he took to help build a new society in California.¹²

Smith also helped establish a stable society in California through his involvement with quartz mills. According to Ralph Mann, those who advocated for a stable society pointed to the quartz mills as a further indicator of that stability. In Grass Valley, observers often said the presence of the quartz mills gave the camp the appearance of a New England factory town and referred to it as a village rather than a camp. The mills, they argued, "created stable employment and therefore a stable society." That regular employment would further "impose order and discipline on the laboring populations and create a permanent management class."¹³

Eben and Caroline Smith and her four children moved to Iowa Hill in 1853 or 1854. By early 1854, Iowa Hill was a major center of mining activity, with the *Sacramento Daily Union* reporting in May of that year that anyone who attempted to mine within 6 miles of the town was "abundantly remunerated." Smith formed a partnership with William McMertie and William Walsh to engage in mining and build a quartz mill. Smith was superintendent of construction and half owner of the mill, and when it was completed it overtook the Texas Quartz Mill as the largest milling plant in California, employing more than 300 men. One year later, Eben Smith and R. A. McClellan bought the entire property in addition to the already prosperous Pioneer Ledge and Mammoth Lodes. Together, they worked the property until May 1859, when Smith sold his interest to McClellan at an "advantage" according to Fletcher Jordan. By then, Eben and Caroline had two sons, twins Samuel and Lemuel, who were born in 1858. Fletcher Jordan said Smith was financially comfortable after selling the mill, and he decided it was time to take a break from California. The family first went to Dubuque, Iowa, and then to St. Joseph, Missouri, to visit Smith's brother Samuel, who was a doctor there. Smith originally planned to go on to Pennsylvania to visit his family and then return to California, but the visit to St. Joseph changed his plans.¹⁴

While visiting his brother, Eben Smith frequently conducted business in the banking house of Lee and Chaffee. He was "quite a conversationalist,"

and his favorite subject was mining. In the bank, he struck up a conversation about mining with one of the bank's owners, Jerome Chaffee. Chaffee had been born on his father's farm near Lockport, New York, on April 17, 1825. For the first seventeen years of his life he lived there, working on the farm in the summers and attending public school in the winters. In addition to studying at school, he "supplemented" his knowledge with "hard study at home." When he was seventeen, he moved with his parents to a farm near Adrian, Michigan, where he attended a private academy. Then, at nineteen, he moved to Indiana, where he taught school and clerked in a store.¹⁵

Two years later, Chaffee returned to Adrian, again clerking in a store before becoming a bookkeeper at a bank. He rose rapidly in the bank, and when it failed, he served as receiver to take care of the bank's unfinished business. In 1848, he met and married Miriam Comstock. In 1857, Chaffee went to Kansas Territory to help found the town of Elwood before moving to St. Joseph later that year to found a bank with Albert Lee. In January 1857, the Chaffees' daughter Fannie was born, the only one of their four children to survive childhood. The following November, Miriam Chaffee died. Left with an infant daughter, Chaffee was looking for a business venture that would be financially rewarding when he met Eben Smith in the bank.¹⁶

The nationwide depression of 1857 hit the Missouri River Valley especially hard, and reports of gold discoveries in what would become Colorado attracted a great deal of attention. While Smith was in St. Joseph, he met several of the men who had been searching for gold in the Rocky Mountains, including John Gregory, William Green Russell, John Lyons, and Dick Milsap. All were happy to share the stories of what they had found with the experienced miner. Smith and his new friend Chaffee spent a great deal of time discussing the gold find, and he became so intrigued that he canceled his planned trip to Pennsylvania and eventual return to California to join the Colorado gold rush.¹⁷

Eben Smith's experience at the two quartz mills in California made him an expert on milling ore, and the reports from Colorado convinced him that a stamp mill would be a welcome and profitable addition to the mining activities there. Chaffee was "always awake to the possibilities in a money-making way," and he was excited when Smith told him what they could do with a mill in the region. The two quickly formed a partnership to have a stamp mill built and shipped to Colorado, but whether Chaffee or Smith convinced

the other to join forces is unclear. Some sources suggest that Samuel Smith persuaded his brother to take Chaffee on as a partner even though he had no mining or milling experience.¹⁸

After forming their partnership in early 1860, Smith and Chaffee had a twelve-stamp quartz mill built at Leavenworth, Kansas. Fletcher Jordan believed Chaffee put up most of the money for construction, but he and Eben Smith were equal partners from the beginning. Once the mill was complete, they had it shipped across the plains to Colorado in preparation for their arrival. Chaffee arrived in Colorado in February 1860, followed by Smith and his family (including his brother J. Nelson) on May 26, 1860. As soon as both partners were in Colorado, they surveyed the situation and decided to erect the mill, as well as the building to house it, on Lake Gulch, southeast of the boomtown of Central City in what would become Gilpin County.¹⁹