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The Gold is there, 'most anywhere.  
You can take it out rich, with an iron crowbar,  
And where it is thick, with a shovel and pick,  
You can pick it out in lumps as big as a brick.

(Chorus)

Then ho boys ho, to Cherry Creek we'll go.  
There's plenty of gold,  
In the West we are told,  
In the new Eldorado.

—ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, JUNE 18, 1859

# 1

## Pike's Peak or Bust

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A gloomy winter slipped past, but gave way to a spring of 1858 that was not much brighter economically. The flowers bloomed, but too briefly to take most people's minds off the trials of daily life. Still, for two groups of people, spring finally brought the chance to follow their cherished dreams of gold beyond the western horizon. Gold, they had every right to believe, was waiting out there. One group, in Indian Territory, prepared to travel the relatively short distance to the foothills of the central Rockies, where some of them had found gold back in the California excitement of 1850. The other group, in Lawrence, Kansas, also knew that gold existed to the west, because the army scout Fall Leaf had brought some back from the military campaign there the year before. Unfortunately, he did not know its source, so they had to decide where to start searching.

As the two parties provisioned and prepared to travel, a betting person would have put money on the success of the Russell party out of Indian Territory. Its members had the most experience: Some had come from the

Georgia gold fields, and others were from California—where, like many of their fellow rushers, they had met with little success. Their lack of success eventually forced them to return home, but gold fever still burned in them.

The initial discovery of placer gold, near where Denver one day would be, dated from June 1850, when a Cherokee party traveling to California panned some color near a small stream later known as Ralston's Creek. As times worsened in the late 1850s, the siren promise of those few flakes of gold intensified—if they could just relocate the place.

Veteran Georgia and California miner William Greenberry Russell, known as "Green" Russell, emerged as the major mover in the early days of Colorado mining. Related by marriage to the Cherokee Indians, he had heard about the 1850 discovery of "color." That intrigued him, as did the idea of seriously prospecting in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Correspondence during the winter of 1857–1858 between Russell and the Cherokees laid the groundwork. Russell, his two brothers, and six others headed west to Indian Territory in February 1858. There they gathered supplies and other needed equipment, and found more men who agreed to join the expedition.

Eventually, the party traveling west included the Russells, some Cherokees, and two groups of Missourians—104 men in all, according to Luke Tierney, one of the early fifty-eighters. After intersecting the well-known Santa Fe Trail, they traveled to Bent's Fort, then up the Arkansas River almost to Fort Pueblo before turning northwestward toward Cherry Creek. By May, the Russell party had reached the site of the future Denver and the area in which gold had been found eight years earlier. By late June, all the groups had ended up together.

Disappointment, not gold, was their reward. Over the next couple of weeks, many discouraged men decided to return home. Finally, only thirteen men—all Georgians, led by Green Russell—resolved to prospect further. They moved northward along the foothills for about thirty miles.

Unbeknownst to the Russell group, another party had had the same idea. Fall Leaf's little sample had stirred up a good bit of interest among Lawrence folk. The long winter evenings gave locals plenty of opportunity to sit around and talk, and dream, and plan. Still, despite persistent attempts at persuasion and promises of rewards, Fall Leaf refused to guide anyone west to the gold regions. His stubbornness was probably wise: he had no idea where the gold had actually been found, and the Lawrence party going west may have seemed too small for safety.

Undeterred by such a minor setback as lack of a guide, when weighed against the expected rewards, about thirty men decided to try their luck at

finding the site. In late May, they too set off westward toward Pike's Peak, the only well-known and prominent point in the region. Eventually, joined by a few others, their party grew to a total of forty-nine, including two women and a child.

As they headed for Pike's Peak, they met some members of the discouraged Russell party, but the Lawrence group determinedly continued. Camping near Garden of the Gods, they enjoyed the magnificent scenery, and several small parties climbed Pike's Peak (including the first woman, Julia Holmes, to do so). They found no gold, however, and moved north to Cherry Creek.

At Cherry Creek they joined some members of the Russell party who had not yet given up. They prospected but found no gold; hearing of gold diggings down near Fort Garland in the San Luis Valley, the group turned southward. They found old diggings, but yet again, prospecting failed to yield any gold. By that time, some discouraged members of the party had given up and returned home or gone on to Taos, New Mexico, to check out that area (Holmes among the latter). Then, at last, the group that had remained near Fort Garland heard exciting news.

The Russell party had returned to Cherry Creek and finally found some placer diggings. One of the party, William McKibben, who had a fine sense of history, described what happened when Green Russell returned to camp and "gave us the astounding intelligence that he had discovered a mine where we could realize \$15 per day":

Our joy knew no bounds, we huzzaed, whooped and yelled at the prospect of being loaded with gold in a few months, and gave vent to any amount of hisses and groans for our apostate companions that were making all speed for home. We congratulated ourselves, sir, that we inaugurated a new era in the history of our beloved country.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, the "Paul Revere" of the story arrived at the camp. While at Fort Laramie, trader John Cantrell had heard about men prospecting on the South Platte and decided to visit them on his way home to Westport, Missouri. Arriving on July 31, he stayed for a few days, secured some gold dust, and started home.

By late July, even before Cantrell reached home, rumors of gold discoveries reached newspaper offices along the Missouri, traveling via that mysterious mountain "telegraph." Both Leavenworth, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri, papers printed highly exaggerated stories based on reports "direct from the mountains." The former claimed that 500 miners were making, on

the average, \$12 per day.<sup>2</sup> The latter cut that figure to 150 miners making \$8 to \$10 per day. Considering the times, both stories must have caught readers' attention. The *Journal of Commerce* could not restrain itself: "The gold discoveries are creating great excitement in the mountains."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, by the time Cantrell reached the Missouri River towns, his imagination had long since taken wing. Initially he reported that the Russell party took out \$1,000 in ten days; even more encouragingly, he "thinks if properly worked," one man could make \$20 to \$25 per day. That was a month's wage for many people, who earned a dollar or less per day, and farmers did not make more than a few hundred dollars a year. No wonder people thought El Dorado had been found! For the depression-locked Missouri River towns and farmers, no news could have been better.

Every day the story improved. Cantrell claimed that he had "traversed about 70 miles of country and every stream," and on every one he prospected he had "found gold." Thanks to the telegraph, the news spread relentlessly throughout the country, although never as fast as the exaggerations and speculation, which exploded like a prairie wildfire.

Gold discovered at Pike's Peak . . . Parties are starting from various points for the new diggings.

*Kansas Chief* (White Cloud, Kansas), September 9, 1858

Gold at Cherry Creek . . . Gold found in all places. A new gold fever may be predicted as plainly at hand. Eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains richly treasured with Gold.

*St. Louis Democrat*, quoted in  
*The New York Times*, September 20, 1858

The Star Salon has a large specimen of gold bearing quartz directly from the Pike's Peak mines. It seems to be very rich, and the sight of it is not calculated to allay "gold fever."

*Leavenworth Journal*, September 14, 1858

Those best acquainted with mining will no longer doubt . . . gold abounds in the Streams.

*The New York Times*, September 28, 1858

Perhaps the most enthusiastic was the Elwood, Kansas, *Kansas Weekly Press* (September 4, 1858):

Gold! Gold!! Gold!!! Gold!!!!  
Hard to get and Heavy to Hold  
Come to Kansas!!

Meanwhile, some members of the Russell party ventured into the mountains and came back empty-handed. The entire group then took an extensive prospecting tour north along the Front Range well into Wyoming, without success. When the members of the party returned to Cherry Creek in late September, they were stunned to find members of the Lawrence party there, as well as others, including some traders. Still others soon joined them, the first of the fifty-eighters who had hurried west because of Cantrell and the newspapers' overblown accounts.

There was more than one way to make money in a gold rush, and the Lawrence party set about doing so by laying out Montana City, a site on which they built a few cabins. Not everyone thought this the best site, though, so, after organizing a town company, others laid out another "city"—St. Charles—and set out for home, leaving one member to protect their paper city. Thus did urbanization arrive at the future site of Denver.

At that point the remainder of the Russell party decided to split up. Some went home to get supplies for next year's prospecting; others went to Fort Garland to obtain winter supplies, and then rejoined the few who had stayed at Cherry Creek. The Cherry Creek numbers were increased by early-arriving rushers and the former residents of Montana City. They eventually called their site Auraria, after the hometown of the Russell brothers, who were telling folks in their hometown, according to the *Dahlonaga Signal*, that "prospects for gold in that country are quite favorable."<sup>4</sup> The Aurarians founded the Auraria City Town Company in late October 1858—a month before the Denver City Town Company formed on November 22, 1858, thus becoming the first permanent community within what is now metro Denver.

All this excitement resulted from perhaps \$500 worth of gold having been found over the summer, most of it in the Cherry Creek region. That averaged out to less than \$5 per person in the Russell party and even less if one figures in the Lawrence group, which had not found any gold. Their consolation prize was a wonderful tourist excursion through some of Colorado's beautiful country!

Not surprisingly, urbanization closely followed the gold seekers. Miners theoretically would find enough gold to pay for the services they did not have time to perform themselves, as well as for entertainment and other urban amenities, as they hopscotched across the landscape following rumor after rumor. The mining West thus broke the familiar pattern of a rural frontier moving slowly and steadily forward, with urbanization lagging well behind the population incursion.

Auraria was not alone for long. In November 1858, William Larimer, an experienced town promoter, arrived in the area. (Town promotion was an accepted, acceptable, and occasionally profitable pioneering venture.) He selected a site across Cherry Creek from Auraria, named it Denver in honor of the governor of Kansas, James Denver, and settled in for the winter. St. Charles fell victim to these newer developments. The sites were nearly the same and the "jumping" (in this case, overlapping city boundaries) had been "greased" by bringing some of the stockholders of the older site into the new company.

Auraria and Denver were rivals for two years, and then merged in April 1860. During that time, the news of gold in the Pike's Peak country was still spreading like wildfire. Some newspapers seemed to compete to top previous stories. For instance, the *Kansas Weekly Press* (October 23, 1858) told of a kettle of gold from Cherry Creek valued at \$6,000–7,000. It continued: "Emigrants to the gold diggings have become so common it is useless to ask them where they are bound." They carried the essentials: "washers, pans, picks, wheelbarrows," food, and the all-important "whiskey." Most had no mining experience and must have planned to learn on the job. The *Lawrence Republican* (September 2, 1858) captured the mounting gold fever in verse:

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

Nevertheless, not everyone was caught up in the gold frenzy. The editor of Brownville's *Nebraska Advertiser* (September 9, 1858) solemnly told his readers: "We advise those taken with 'Pike's Peak' fever to not overdo themselves; we think the disease not dangerous, and [it] will pass off without any serious results, by taking a slight dose of reflection." He further opined that there seemed to be "no intelligence sufficiently reliable" to warrant a "stampede." That same day, the *Kansas Chief* (White Cloud) forecast that many persons "will rake and scrape up all the money they can gather, and proceed to the gold regions, where they will probably meet only disappointment, spend their means, and be left destitute."

These predictions were right on the mark, but the prognosticators might as well have been whispering in a windstorm. Many Americans who had missed the California opportunity a decade before saw a second chance in the midst of hard times. Furthermore, these gold fields were closer at hand

and easier to reach. Thirty days from the Missouri River could put one at Cherry Creek and gold.

As winter set in, little settlements, optimistically called “cities,” sprouted up around both the Cherry Creek diggings and along Boulder Creek to the north. With time on their hands, the newly arrived settlers also involved themselves in politics, electing a delegate to Congress and to the Kansas territorial legislature. This did not take place without some dissent, however. One letter writer called it a “partisan, sham election.”

As 1859 dawned, the country thrilled to the Pike’s Peak excitement, which occasionally managed to push the rapidly intensifying sectional crisis off the front page. In some ways it was 1849 all over again, with the major exception that Pike’s Peak country, as mentioned, was located within days of the Missouri River. River towns, both in 1849 and a decade later, promoted themselves as the shortest and fastest way to the gold fields—St. Joseph, Leavenworth, Kansas City, Lawrence, and points in between all trumpeted their advantages.

They were followed closely by merchants hoping to tap the mounting excitement. They offered for sale anything related to that magical phrase *Pike’s Peak*: gold washers, gold augers, medicine chests, bacon (which, they promised, would not go rancid during a would-be miner’s western adventures), saddles, mules, chewing tobacco, pans, picks, even “Pike’s Peak Life Insurance” for the faint of heart. Suggestions on what and how much of each item to take seemed to surface in every store that just happened to have the required goods. For depression-locked businesses and merchants, the frenzy proved a godsend.

Guidebooks promised to get the fifty-niners to their prizes in near “comfort and ease”—as it turned out, too easily and comfortably, really. Miners had a choice of nearly forty such guides, ranging from those that offered bare details to those that tapped the fanciful imaginations of numerous authors (a few of whom had been with the Russell and Lawrence parties or had traveled to Pike’s Peak and returned in the fall of 1858). These books were published by printers from the Missouri Valley to New England, areas hit hard by the depression.

Despite the heritage of the earlier Georgia rush, and Southerners’ involvement in the discoveries of the summer of 1858, folks in the southern states did not seem caught up in the newest enthusiasm. For them, slavery and states’ rights issues were more pressing than a new gold rush.

Their Yankee neighbors suffered no such compunctions. The guidebooks all presented a starting point and detailed a chosen route (with

maps, watering places, fuel sources, and camping spots outlined), and some included a variety of other tips, such as supplies needed, mining methods, and stock-handling methods to prevent loss or injury. D. C. Oakes told his readers they should plan to outfit for six months, taking only “what is likely to be needed.” That totaled precisely \$517.25, and included oxen, a wagon, blankets, gold pans, provisions, matches, a frying pan, and knives, forks, and spoons. Oakes’s estimate—more realistic than many—was well out of the reach of many, so they stayed home and merely dreamed of chasing riches.

Some guidebooks honestly described the problems of the journey ahead, whereas others made the trip seem more like a Sunday afternoon picnic. All, however, either hinted at, or bluntly stated, that gold would be found: “buckets” worth, “purest gold,” “found everywhere,” “veins yielding \$3,000,” and similar fanciful proclamations limited only by the author’s imagination or greed. Lucien J. Eastin’s *Emigrants’ Guide*, for instance, included a letter from Auraria promising: “Each day brings to light some new discovery. The shining dust glitters in the sand. Miners are making from five to ten dollars a day. Nuggets have been found worth twenty-five dollars and fifty dollars.”

Readers often prepared for a lark, leaving their good sense and inhibitions behind. Yet a guidebook coauthored by William Byers warned:

In conclusion, we would say to all who go to the mines, especially the young, *Yield not to temptation*. Carry your principles with you; leave not your character at home nor your Bible; you will need them both, and even *grace* from above, to protect you in a community whose god is mammon, who are wild with excitement, and free from family restraints.<sup>5</sup>

Good advice, but how many heeded it?

A Rocky Mountain blizzard’s-worth of letters, pamphlets, guidebooks, articles, and other promotional material tempted avid readers that winter and spring. Few were able to separate the truth from fiction; not that many cared, with golden visions dancing in their heads. Anywhere they looked, they were bound to find something that they wanted or wished to believe about the Pike’s Peak country. They saw little hope, and certainly no such grand expectations, in their stay-at-home neighborhoods, as depressed as the economy was. There seemed scores of reasons to go and few to stay home.

There were a few pessimists among the multitude. Commenting on the guidebooks, the editor of the *Kansas City Western Journal of Commerce* (June 12, 1859) noted: “They have changed the course of rivers, removed mountains, lengthened streams and made bleak hills and barren sand wastes smooth, and even highways.”<sup>6</sup> The *Boston Evening Transcript* (May 19, 1859)

was even more blunt: “Pikes Peak is a humbug.” The editor believed that people were being lured by “the cruelty and atrociously false stories concocted by persons in border towns.”

There was more than a bit of truth in both observations, but that was not what people wanted to read. Comments in New York and Chicago newspapers in 1859 were much more to their liking:

HO for Pike’s Peak! There is soon to be an immense migration to the new El Dorado. Many go to dig, perhaps quite as many to speculate on the presumed necessities, or fancies, or vices, of the diggers.

*The New York Tribune* (January 29)

A bigger army than [that with which] Napoleon conquered half of Europe is already equipping itself for this western march to despoil the plains of their gold. The vanguard has already passed the Rubicon, if I may so metamorphose the muddy Missouri.

*The Chicago Press and Tribune* (February 4)

Naive, gullible, desperate, optimistic, confident—a host of adjectives could describe the gold seekers. Perhaps the story of a Council Bluffs, Iowa “Dutchman,” which may or may not be apocryphal, captured it all. Ovando Hollister, in *The Mines of Colorado*, recounted the story.

A Dutchman [German] . . . was observed gathering up a large lot of meal-bags. He was asked what he was going to do with them. “Fill them with gold at Pike’s Peak,” he replied. O! he could never do that, they said. “Yes I will,” returned he, “if I have to stay there till fall.”

Hollister, who knew better by the time he wrote the book in 1866–1867, concluded. “It is [a] matter of congratulation that people have become well cured of such charming infatuation.” Not so in 1859: Dreams of gold filled many heads as the new year dawned. So far, the only real footing for all this excitement was the small amount of gold found by the Russell party. However, few questioned the basis of the sensational commotion and increasingly frenzied and exaggerated reports coming east from “gold country.”

Meanwhile, out along Cherry and Boulder Creeks and the South Platte River, the vanguard of the “march” who had already arrived settled in to wait out the winter. They anxiously watched for the snow to start melting so they could rush into the mountains to search for the elusive gold that they were convinced was hidden in the recesses of the canyons and peaks to the west.

Experienced forty-niners understood that gold came down the streams out of the mountains. Their technique, learned in California, was to work their way up the creeks and waterways and pan for gold to find the source of the mineral, where it washed into the stream. *There* would be the bonanza.

Snow came early in October of 1858, along with cold nights, but that did not stop those idling in the makeshift settlements along the foothills from looking west and even fighting their way into the mountains. Georgian George Jackson, in January, was hunting and prospecting along Clear Creek (then called Vasquez Creek) when he found gold near the future Idaho Springs. Jackson well understood that one did not brag about a gold discovery, so, as he said, he kept his mouth as tight as a “number 2 beaver trap.”

Still, he eventually told a few friends. They formed a prospecting party and struggled up the narrow canyon during the spring runoff. They were rewarded in May 1859 by finding gold at Chicago Bar. In mining terminology, a *bar* is a placer deposit in the slack portion of a stream where the heavy gold, washed out of the mountainsides, accumulates. Finding these bars had been the goal in '49, and it was again during the Pike's Peak rush.

In Boulder, a January prospecting party found gold-bearing quartz high in the foothills between two canyons. Gold Hill they called it, and they knew enough to mind their own business; plus, they were distant from the settlements in and around the future Denver. This discovery, however, was the first to become generally known. William Byers, in his first issue of the *Rocky Mountain News* (April 23, 1859), carried three reports referring to Gold Hill and its vicinity.

By far the most important discovery was made by the Georgian John H. Gregory—another experienced miner, albeit somewhat lazy and inattentive. He too worked his way into the mountains, in April of 1859. He and four companions eventually fought their way up the snow-clogged north fork of Clear Creek to near its head, where they panned and found the bonanza they had been seeking. Some pans yielded as much as \$8 worth of gold, rivaling the balmy days of California in 1848 and early 1849. Gregory's strike area later became Central City and Gilpin County, which quickly grew into one of Colorado's greatest gold districts. Like so many other discoverers, however, Gregory did not stay around long enough to prosper from his good fortune. He soon sold his claims and drifted out of Colorado history.

These three discoveries laid a solid basis for the Pike's Peak rush—a rush that had started with the Russell party's findings and accounts that greatly magnified their significance. Americans felt that they had finally come into some good luck. Not only could Midwesterners and Easterners rush to Pike's

Peak, the region's best-known geographical point, but Californians could also stampede over the Sierra Nevadas to the silver discoveries that became Nevada's astonishingly wealthy, famous, and productive Comstock lode. In a unique coincidence of United States history, two major rushes at the same time drew folks hither and yon searching for their personal El Dorados. America's mineral cup overflowed, and for those obsessed with gold, pressing sectional issues receded into the background.

The fifty-niners knew nothing of these three strikes as they prepared to venture westward. For well over a decade, people had been traveling over the Mormon and Oregon Trails along the Platte, and for a generation over the Santa Fe Trail. There were also new and relatively untested routes along the Republican and Smoky Hill Trails. Before the exodus concluded, some would be dead, others shocked by the hardships, and most disappointed that gold did not appear in "buckets galore." Again personal accounts and newspaper reports captured the drama:

Our streets during the week have been lined with white topped wagons. The vast majority are gold seekers for western Nebraska and Kansas.

*Nebraska City News* (March 12, 1859)

It is astonishing how rapidly we learn geography. Indeed, ninety-nine out of every one hundred persons in the country did not know that there was such a topographical point as Pike's Peak. Now they hear nothing, dream of nothing but Pike's Peak. It is a magnet to the mountains, toward which everybody and everything is tending. It seems that every man, woman and child, who is going anywhere at all, is moving Pike's Peakward.

*Evening News* (St. Louis) (March 17, 1859)<sup>7</sup>

They journeyed in both conventional and unconventional ways. One emigrant started with six dogs pulling his "light wagon." Another had "two large" dogs pulling his. A projected wind wagon schooner, designed to sail over the "prairie ocean" pushed by gentle westward breezes, sounded great in theory but sank into the first gulch it encountered. Some pushed handcarts, others planned to walk. If they lacked personal knowledge, they depended on their guidebooks, which they hoped contained a good map and an honest account of what they would face. Before it was over, though, some became lost, wandering in the wilderness, and at least one party resorted to cannibalism.

The editor of the *Wyoming Telescope* (April 9, 1859) became concerned about a "number of young ladies" en route to the diggings: "They have little

idea of the hardship they may have to undergo during the journey." They probably journeyed on, undaunted, along with 100,000 equally excited fellow Americans. "Pike's Peak or Bust" was their slogan.

They were crossing what had been described by the expedition of Stephen Long as the "Great American Desert." Indeed, for many who were accustomed to water and trees, the land appeared desolate and inhospitable, except along the rivers. Newspaperman Albert Richardson described the land he traveled over by stagecoach in June: "We are still on the desert with its soil white with alkali, its stunted shrubs, withered grass, and brackish waters often poisonous to both cattle and men."

Along the way, the seekers encountered problems they never expected. In a letter published in the *Daily Missouri Republican* (May 29, 1859), an unidentified young man told his father about his experiences. His party had "suffered much on the journey," having taken the Smoky Hill route and been "sorry for it." After the wagon team gave out a hundred miles from their goal, they had to "pack" the rest of the way: "We soon got out of all our provisions, save a few crackers. On these we subsisted for six days, our daily allowance being two crackers each." He concluded, "The suffering on this route has been terrible." On the whole, it was far better to take an established route than to try to find shortcuts over to the gold fields.

Human nature created almost as many problems as Mother Nature. Former forty-niner Henry Wickersham described his 1859 experience: "I find human nature has not changed much since my trip to California. Men going to Pike's Peak now quarrel just as much as men did going to California then. We came very near having bloodshed in camp a day or two since."

Another veteran Californian, and soon-to-be Colorado newspaperman under the nom de plume "Sniktau," E. H. N. Patterson, became very sentimental when he stumbled on the grave of W. Probasco of Caryville, Kentucky. Looking at the "tomb I could not resist a feeling of sadness. . . . [H]is bright hopes of golden treasures in the snowy peaks upon which his dying glance may have rested, had been nipped by the chill fingers of Death."

Not everyone was melancholy, discouraged, or disagreeable. Lawyer Charles Post, who eventually made Colorado his home, said that when they first saw Pike's Peak in the dim distance, his party gave that all-occasion nineteenth-century cheer, Pike's Peak "three times three. It was a beautiful sight, the rising sun shining brightly on the perpetual snowy camp of these mountains made us all feel quite cool. At the same time [we] were delighted to know that the Auriferous Peak after so long and wearisome a journey, was at last in view."<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, most reaped only disappointment in the promised land. The ragtag settlements were not awash in gold; in fact, no one seemed to know where it might be except in the snow-locked canyons and mountains to the west. Some went back home within a few days or weeks, as discouraged now as they had formerly been excited. A few wagons carried placards such as “busted by damn” (more politely, “busted by thunder”) or, as one “pilgrim” painted on his wagon. “Oh, Yes! Pike’s Peak in Hell and Damn Nation.” Others went west to Oregon or California, and still others were simply stranded. A father of a fifty-niner had his son’s letter published in the *Daily Missouri Republican* (May 29, 1859): “Times here are hard and dull. There is no gold at Pike’s Peak. No man can make ten cents a month. I am out of money, and without a chance to make any.” He pleaded with his father to send \$125 “to take me back home” where he knew he “could make something. . . . If you don’t send me some money, I will starve to death. Send in haste.” Guidebook writer D. C. Oakes, hurrying westward, met some disappointed Pike’s Peakers returning home. Some threatened him; others buried him in effigy and left variously worded epitaphs:

Here lies the body of D. C. Oakes,  
killed for aiding this damned hoax.

When the “go-backers,” as they were derisively called, departed, and reports started trickling back home and into newspaper offices, the rush gained this new label of “hoax.” The *Missouri Republican’s* editor bluntly described the situation, albeit with a Victorian flourish, on May 11:

Destitute of provisions or means of conveyance, disappointed and utterly disheartened, with broken hope and blasted fortunes, toil-worn, foot-worn, and heart-weary, these wretched adventurers come straggling across the plains in squads of dozens or scores.

Henry Wickersham was not discouraged, however. He stated: “I place no reliance in any of the reports. I want to see for myself. Nearly every man we meet tells a different story.” He philosophically concluded, “It seems a man can’t travel on this road two hundred yards without forgetting how to tell the truth.”<sup>9</sup>

Among those racing west was William Byers, who planned to start a newspaper, the *Rocky Mountain News*, in Denver. He was not alone: John Merrick had the same idea with his *Cherry Creek Pioneer*. Both Byers and Merrick knew the importance (and potential profit) of owning the first newspaper to hit the streets of Denver. Byers won the race; the *News* beat out its

rival with a first edition late in the evening of April 22, although it was dated the next day. The *Pioneer* lost the race by a mere twenty minutes, according to unofficial timekeepers, but its initial issue was also its last. Merrick was the first, but not the last, newspaperman, or merchant, or businessperson, to find out that in mining rushes, it pays to get there early.

The *News* gave Denver City a definitive advantage in the struggle with its urban rivals "Golden City," nearer the mountains at the mouth of Clear Creek, Boulder City; and the soon-to-be Central City. The popular tag "city" implied something about the community to the outsider, though none of these struggling communities could yet live up to the claim. Having a newspaper to promote and advertise a city and what it offered was one of the best hopes for success. Both the publishers and the would-be cities knew, though, that all their efforts would be for naught if the "hoax" image and the reverse migration were not stopped and replaced with reliable news. Only the really gullible would be fooled a second time. At that point, two men, almost single-handedly, turned the region's future around: William Byers and America's best-known newspaperman, *The New York Tribune's* Horace Greeley. Byers was already on the scene, and so had a strongly vested interest in the outcome. Greeley, however, did not.

Greeley and Albert Richardson, a young journalist, were on a trip to Utah and California to give their readers reports about the rapidly changing West. In early June, they stopped in Denver, which was rife with stories of the three solid strikes, to inspect the new town and get the real story of the rush. The area where Gregory and his friends were mining appeared to be the best-known and richest, so Greeley and Richardson decided to visit Gregory's diggings. They were joined by correspondent Henry Villard of the *Cincinnati Commercial*, who was also visiting Denver.

With Byers's encouragement, Greeley, Richardson, and Villard journeyed to "see the elephant" in Gregory's Diggings. Greeley found out at first hand what mountain travel was like, including struggling over "steep, rugged" trails and being caught in a "smart shower, with thunder and lightning." Crossing a stream, his mule stumbled, and his fall left him stiff and sore by nightfall. Nevertheless, the party reached the diggings the next day, and found the miners ready for them.

They encouraged Greeley to try panning, which he did—and found some gold, as they had known he would. Greeley also "visited during the day a majority of those which have sluices already in operation." That evening, June 8, a mass meeting, lit by burning pine branches, was held, primarily to discuss the organization of mining districts and the institution of a set

of mining laws. Before that, however, their famous visitor was called upon to give a speech to the reported 2,000 to 3,000 assembled miners. “Three cheers” greeted him. Not one to turn down such an opportunity, Greeley promptly admonished the miners about the temptations of gambling and drinking, encouraging them to maintain good order and “to live as the loved ones they left at home . . . would wish.”

Those admonitions may or may not have fallen on listening ears. His support for “the formation of a new state” and praise for the “vast future before this region” caught their attention, however. After three rousing cheers, several other speakers took the platform, touting the “flattering prospects of the mines and the rich treasures in the gulches and ravines.” Richardson hit upon two popular themes: “The late discoveries promised to add a new star to the federal constellation, and to locate the great Pacific Railroad of the future in this central region.” The eastern visitors interlaced a few jokes about “mules and mule-riding” before the speech making concluded.<sup>10</sup>

Greeley recounted his adventures in *An Overland Journey*. Leaving Denver, his party started up a hill, a “giddy precipice.”

Our mules, unused to such work, were visibly appalled by it; at first they resisted every effort to force them up, even by zigzags. I was lame and had to ride, much to my mule’s intense disgust. He was stubborn, but strong, and in time bore me safely to the summit.

A lot of fifty-niners and others had stories to recount about mules. They, and burros, became legendary in the mining West.

For his Victorian stay-at-home readers, fascinated by the goings-on in the West, Greeley recounted his adventures in a report from “Gregory’s Diggings, June 9, 1859.” They learned that six weeks earlier, the “ravine was a solitude, the favorite haunt of the elk, the deer, and other shy denizens of the profoundest wildernesses.” By the time of publication, though, “probably” one hundred log cabins were being constructed, “while three or four hundred more are in immediate contemplation.”

As yet, the entire population of the valley—which cannot number less than four thousand including five white women and seven squaws living with white men—sleep in tents or under booths of pine boughs, cooking and eating in the open air. I doubt that there is as yet a table or chair in these diggings, eating being done around cloth spread on the ground, while each one sits or reclines on mother earth. The food, like that of the Plains, is restricted to a few staples—pork, hot bread, beans and coffee.

Greeley guessed that "less than half of the four or five thousand people now in this ravine have been here a week; he who has been here three weeks is regarded as quite an old settler."

Greeley also gave some sound advice: "And I feel certain that, while some—perhaps many—will realize their dreams of wealth here, a far greater number will expend their scanty means, tax their powers of endurance, and then leave, soured, heartsick, spirit-broken." He himself adhered to "my long-settled conviction that, next to outright and indisputable gambling, the hardest (though sometimes the quickest) way to obtain gold is to mine for it." He maintained that "a good farmer or mechanic will usually make money faster, and of course immeasurably easier, by sticking to his own business than by deserting it for gold-digging."

The insightful Greeley understood the significance of activity besides mining that was taking place in the diggings. "Mining quickens almost every department of useful industry." A blacksmith was on the scene, sharpening picks "at fifty cents each," and a "volunteer post office [had been] established." Looking into the near future, he foresaw that a provisions store would soon be needed, "then groceries, then dry goods, then a hotel, etc., until within ten years the tourist of the continent will be whirled up these diggings" over easier roads. This visitor "will sip his chocolate and read his New York Paper—not yet five days old—at the Gregory House, in utter unconsciousness that this region was wrested from the elk and the mountain sheep so recently as 1859."<sup>11</sup>

Greeley and his party went back to Denver the next day, and remained there for several weeks. His June 20th dispatch made a more sober assessment of the gold craze, returning to his concern about whether all this would pay off: "I answer—it will pay some; it will fail to pay others. . . . but ten will come out here for gold for every one who carries back so much as he left home with." Victorian rhetoric overtaking him, he concluded that "[t]housands who hasten hither flushed with hope and ambition will lay down to their long rest beneath the shadows of the mountains, with only the wind-swept pines to sigh their requiem."

He warned his readers that the distance from the settlements, the elevation, the high cost of almost "every necessary of life," and the need for capital to develop the mines made this anything but a "poor man's diggings." He could not have been more blunt in proclaiming, "this is not the country for you!" Repeating his earlier theme, he wrote, "Far better to seek wealth further east through growing wheat, or corn, or cattle or by any kind of manual labor, than to come here to dig gold."<sup>12</sup>

Optimistic and positive, yet constructive and moralistic, Greeley gave his readers a remarkably insightful, vigorous account of the early days of Colorado mining. He saw a great future for the West, and confirmed that the gold was no mirage. The perceptive Greeley also realized that what the region needed most was a railroad built all the way to the Pacific Coast. His Pike's Peak readers could not have agreed more.