



Parked in the Past

Balfour, Colorado – a dream that died Founded by Aspen capitalists, projected to rival Cripple Creek

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The population of today's Park County has dropped 5.7 percent, or 968 people, since 2008, decreasing a little each year. And the first year of decreasing population, from 2008 to 2009, was the first recorded population decrease for 37 years (see the May 3, 2013, Flume).

Population figures change with the economy, and financial motivation is a big factor in attracting new residents and keeping current ones. Whether that will happen in today's Park County is yet to be seen.

But in early 1893, Park County was losing the financial incentives to keep its population. The entire nation was in a depression. It was the year that Congress repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act; one of the results was that silver prices dropped and gold prices increased. It was a rough time for Park County's silver mining industry.

And then, in late 1893, gold was discovered in a seemingly unlikely place and at an opportune time. The discovery was in the rolling grasslands of Park County about nine miles south of Hartsel. The new gold field was being promoted

as a rival to Cripple Creek, and a town grew in the midst of the promised gold. It was called Balfour.

Balfour begins

In November 1893 the cry of "gold!" was heard in South Park. It was discovered on a 160-acre former sheep ranch nine miles south of Hartsel on present-day Colorado Highway 9.

It was publicized as being in the same geological formation and having the same mineral content as Cripple Creek, Colo., where gold was discovered in 1890 and is still mined today.

In fact, in Buena Vista's Dec. 20, 1893, Colorado Democrat, it was reported that the surface indications at Balfour "are much more promising than they were in the Cripple Creek district."

And in the first edition of The Balfour News, published on Jan. 20, 1894, it was reported that "Balfour will take its place among the steady gold producers of the state."

The town grew quickly. That same publication reported that when the

president of the Balfour Town & Improvement Co., Henry B. Gillespie, and the town secretary, A. J. (Jim) King, arrived at the townsite on Dec. 2, 1893, a few scattered tents and the old sheep rancher's cabin were the only structures.

Within 10 days, if notations on old photographs are correct, a town was born, with several frame cabins replacing the tents. By the time of the first publication of *The Balfour News*, a "handsome frame office structure" was the town's headquarters.

It didn't take long for the news to spread. Within the first two months of its founding, *The Balfour News* reported "a population of fully eight hundred people." Seventeen mines were mentioned in the first issue, and it said plans were being made to open a post office, a general store and a livery barn. Lots were being sold, and the buildings being erected were of "substantial character indicating the faith of the builders in the permanency and future growth of Balfour," said the first *Balfour News*.

By March 1894, both the *Buena Vista Herald* in Chaffee County and *Custer County's Silver Cliff Rustler* were reporting a population of 1,000 in Balfour with "hotel accommodations of a superior order for a new camp."

It seemed too good to be true.

Timing

After the Sherman Silver Purchase Act was repealed, the price of silver dropped substantially and gold prices boomed; the U.S. currency was no longer based on the bimetalism of silver and gold, but was based solely on gold.

As a mining community, Park County residents typically favored bimetalism; and that was reflected in the name of the

new town. It was named in honor of an English statesman who was making an effort to establish bimetalism in Britain, Arthur J. Balfour.

The gold discovery also came at just the right time for Gillespie, the Aspen capitalist who became president of the Balfour Town & Improvement Co.

Gillespie was experienced in mining. Before coming to Balfour, he was the owner and later the manager of the Mollie Gibson Mine in Aspen. It was the richest silver mine in the world, according to the 1892 book "The Silver Dollar: A Business View," by Edward Frederick Browne.

When the bottom fell out of the silver market in the summer of 1893, Gillespie, who also had experience as a town promoter, found a new area to promote in southern South Park.

Early gold

As early as 1885, E. O. Fyffe, a sheep rancher and owner of the land that would later become Balfour, reported that "a number of prospectors" were working the land in the "Buffalo Sloughs district" and finding good gold (see the March 12, 1885, *Flume*). Fyffe raised sheep on 160 acres of the Buffalo Sloughs, (slough is an area of soft, muddy ground).

And when the Hartsel Gold Mining District, which was centered on Balfour, was established in November 1893, the *Flume* reported it was located on "what is known to Park County people as the Obe Fyffe ranch." (See *Flume*, Nov. 30, 1893.)

But Fyffe was no longer in control of his land. He had been convicted of second degree murder and was serving a 30-year sentence in the state penitentiary. He shot a fellow sheep rancher in 1891 in

a dispute over a fence line, said the July 7, 1891, Aspen Daily Chronicle.

Gillespie and the other town directors, some of whom came from Aspen with Gillespie and others who came from Denver, had to appeal to the court for permission to take possession of the land. It was in control of an assignee, the Denver branch of Salina, Kan.-based Crippen, Lawrence & Co. They were negotiators in real estate mortgages.

The names are significant because when the town was platted in December 1893, two of the streets in the new town were named Crippen and Lawrence. A man named Lawrence owned one of the mines in Balfour, and J. J. Crippen was a town director. (Possibly this was the Joseph J. Crippen who was a principle in the firm of Crippen, Lawrence & Co.)

King was an exception to the group of Aspen and Denver investors and mortgage brokers involved in the formation of Balfour. He was a former two-term Park County Clerk and Recorder, and in the 1880s was a store and mine owner in the town of King, near Como. That town was named after him.

Growth

Even before the Balfour News published its first edition in January 1894, the Balfour Town & Improvement Co. was selling lots at a fast pace. The Dec. 7, 1893, Fairplay Flume reported that articles of incorporation for the new town were filed, and the demand for town lots was "quite active."

And the original investors were generous to newcomers by not investing in lots for themselves. In the story of Dec. 7, an Alma resident, Roy Gard, reported that "Aspen people did not seem particularly

anxious to secure lots," but that they stood aside and allowed others to invest.

In March 1894, Fairplay merchant Samuel Cohen opened a store in Balfour. In the first six months of 1894 more businesses opened: a mining and milling company, at least three hotels, an undertaker/furniture maker, and another store with an attached bakery.

Also, the post office was established – with A. J. King as postmaster – the town was incorporated, and a chamber of commerce and bureau of information were established. Stages ran from Cañon City and from Spinney.

A school was opened in March 1894 with 25 pupils. Four months later, in July 1894, Balfour had the fifth-highest enrollment of school children of the 24 districts in the county, with 39 enrolled.

The districts with more pupils than Balfour in July 1894 were Alma (127), Como (108), Fairplay (92) and King (49). There were 81 children enrolled in the five Platte Canyon-area schools combined in July 1894; the most was 27 in the Bailey school.

Five and a half years later, in October 1899, the Balfour School was discontinued by the county commissioners until such time as "there were fifteen children of school age to attend." It did not reopen.

Mining

There were some who doubted the value of gold at Balfour.

To convince everyone that the town was the site of a viable gold mining operation, a banner was attached to the rail car carrying the first assay sample to Denver, proudly announcing, "The first car load of gold ore from Balfour mining camp,"

according to the Feb. 13, 1894, Aspen Daily Times in a reprinted story from the Balfour News. It said the streamers and results of the assay “will open the eyes of the unbelievers.”

But it may not have been as eye-opening as the gold producers hoped; the gold from the richest mine in the district, the Ella C, assayed at \$40 to the ton in its first car load, which Buena Vista’s Colorado Democrat reported as “pretty good for a maiden effort.”

And assay results increased. A story in the March 27, 1894, Aspen Daily Times said wire gold was discovered at the Ella C that assayed at \$413 per ton.

More good news was reported in the Denver-based trade publication The Daily Mining Record of May 10, 1894, when it told of the findings of Benjamin Sadtler, a professor of metallurgy and mineralogy at the Colorado State School of Mines (now the Colorado School of Mines) in Golden.

He said the geological conditions at Balfour and at Cripple Creek “are essentially the same” and that the Balfour camp “would seem to promise equally well.” He clarified that by continuing: “This, however, can only be finally determined by further development, as not enough has yet been done to determine finally the degree of mineralization, although what results have been obtained are exceedingly promising.”

The article said that out of 400 samples assayed, “the large majority showed from a trace upwards of gold.”

Sadtler said an assayer named Mr. Snyder had obtained assays from \$2.40 in gold value up to nearly \$6,000 per ton. Another assayer, a Mr. Briggs, had results in “various amounts, although

none quite as high as Mr. Snyder’s highest.”

Sadtler concluded that “with proper development, the future of the camp should be bright.” He based his conclusion on the presence of mineralization geologically similar to that of Cripple Creek and on the presence of well-defined veins.

Dream dies

But the expectations and dreams of profitable gold mining were never realized at Balfour.

Even from the beginning, news reports alternated back and forth with conflicting accounts of Balfour’s riches. Buena Vista’s Colorado Democrat may have spoken for the region when it said in its Dec. 18, 1893, edition, “the newspaper reports of Balfour make one’s head ache.”

But the good news stories outnumbered the bad until, on Nov. 22, 1894, one of the last optimistic newspaper reports about Balfour was published. The Flume reprinted a Balfour News item that said, “Balfour is in a better condition at present to boom than ever before in the history of the camp.”

And still it didn’t boom. Little more was printed about the dying town until March 27, 1896, when the Aspen Daily Times reported, “The Balfour mining camp – a region that experienced an excitement two years ago over gold discoveries that never materialized the gold – is now totally deserted.”

Even that wasn’t quite true.

It wasn’t until Feb. 1, 1906, nearly 10 years after that story, that stage service and the mail route from Hartsel to Balfour

was discontinued and the post office was closed, said the Jan. 16, 1906, Flume.

And still, people lived in Balfour. The second-to-the-last historic resident of Balfour died on July 14, 1907. She was Mary Morse, who had lived with her surviving husband in the otherwise deserted Balfour for years. She was buried at the Hartsel Cemetery.

The last historic mention of Balfour in The Flume was on Dec. 3, 1915, when the Park County delinquent tax list showed Balfour properties for the last time.

In the end, Balfour died “for want of that important requisite to a successful mineral camp – mineral,” said Aspen’s Rocky Mountain Sun on Dec. 24, 1898.

Images on the following page.



10 days old

This photo was taken when the town was 10 days old, on or about Dec. 12, 1893. Some streets had already been laid out. One of the larger buildings might be the “handsome frame office structure” used as the Town Hall. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, Carnahan photo; source: Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College)



Early days, Balfour

A group of early residents of Balfour pose in front of a structure around 1894. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, source: Harold Steinhoff)



Balfour Mine

Mining at Balfour was in the dirt. Mines in the “Buffalo Slough” had problems with water filling the hole. This photo, taken in 2003, shows a typical Balfour mine. (Photo courtesy of Park County Office of Historic Preservation)



Balfour site, 2005

No structures are visible in this view of the former Balfour site from 2005. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, source: Jane Gilsinger)