



Parked in the Past

Montgomery City – early Park County boom town, now stores Colorado Springs water

October 31, 2014

Laura Van Dusen, Correspondent

It was all “bustle and excitement” at Montgomery City when the Rocky Mountain News, of Sept. 24, 1861, broke the story of a rich gold discovery. In a letter to the editor, it was said that the first gold found there was on Aug. 22, 1861. At a month old, two arrastras (a primitive pulverizing mill) were already in operation, another was nearly completed and two 12-stamp quartz mills were almost ready to use.

The unidentified writer told of one piece of quartz from the Allen Lode (later called Nova Zembla Lode) in which “at least \$20 [in gold] could be seen with the naked eye” and that upon his arrival, “half a pan of dirt from this land yielded \$8.”

Comparing the value of gold in 1861 – \$18.93 per ounce – to the value on Oct. 12, 2014 – \$1,221.70 per ounce – the rock would be worth about \$1,291 today, and the half pan of dirt, about \$516.

The writer mentioned eight other claims recently discovered; he said they tested to be “very rich.”

Ninety-six years later, in 1957, a dam was completed and the former townsite of

Montgomery was buried under 5,000 acre feet of water.

Montgomery Reservoir, near the summit of Hoosier Pass, is storage for Blue River water diverted under the Continental Divide and water from the Middle Fork of the South Platte River flowing from its source above the former town. Drinking water for the city of Colorado Springs is stored there.

But, in the fall of 1861, construction was in full swing on that September day. The writer began building a cabin the day he wrote to the News.

He said, “although I have only arrived here this morning, I have got part of my logs upon my lot, and will have a house ready for occupancy by day after tomorrow evening.”

Two hotels were going up, one a two-story, 50-foot by 100-foot, with a public hall on the top floor. That hall was likely where residents watched traveling shows. Carroll’s Minstrels played to full houses, alternating between Montgomery and Buckskin Joe, and theatrical groups entertained frequently.

One play, "The Soldier's Daughter," was performed for Montgomery audiences in the spring or early summer of 1862. It was described as "a new and glorious comedy" in the April 3, 1862, News, boasting elegant wardrobes procured from New York and magnificent painted scenery. After a run in Central City and Denver, the play was scheduled to open in Georgia Gulch, and in Laurel [aka Buckskin Joe] and Montgomery cities.

In another story, a reporter described the booming town in the Oct. 26, 1861, News.

"Four weeks (ago) I saw the smoke curling from one solitary cabin, there is now visible not less than fifty habitable abodes, and many of them quite large and roomy – beside a score more in process of erection," it read.

The good news kept coming. From the Nov. 5, 1861, News, "There is not as rich a region yet discovered."

The Nov. 11, 1861, News told about rich specimens of gold-bearing quartz, said to be richer than that of the neighboring town, Buckskin Joe (also called Laurette with various spellings), but harder to get to. Even so, in March 1862, the gold-bearing quartz was found at a depth of less than 20 feet and, "the deeper they sink," said the March 5 News, "the richer the quality of the quartz."

The names of the mines were as colorful as their yield, among them, Pleasant Help, North Star, Magnolia, Vermont, Pocahontas, Little Thunder and Woodchuck. Everyone wanted to get in on the action. The May 19, 1862, News reported 5,000 claims within a mile radius of Montgomery.

Man's world

It was truly a man's world in early Montgomery and the South Park region, according to the 1860 U.S. Census. The South Park enumeration district, part of Arapahoe County, Kansas Territory at the time, had three women residents. That's it. With the exception of three boys under age 16, the rest – or 10,437 – were men. Over 9,000 of those were miners aged 21-40. The "Tarryall & South Park" enumeration district was only slightly more balanced; there were nine women, nine children under 16, and 939 men.

Together in 1860, the two districts equaled 11,400 of the 32,049 living in Arapahoe County. Counting the total 1860 Colorado population, which was formed in 1861 from parts of Utah, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Kansas territories, population of the two South Park districts equaled just under one third of Colorado's 34,277 total.

Apparently the male-female ratio had not changed much by 1862 and probably prompted

the following early-day singles ad published in the May 10, 1862, News. All he wanted was a well-mannered, affectionate young woman with lots of money.

Wanted – A middle-aged gentleman, of pleasing address and moral manners, possessing several valuable gulch and lode claims in Buckskin Joe and Montgomery, is desirous of cultivating the acquaintance of some lady of accomplished manners and affectionate disposition, not over thirty-nine years of age, and with a view to matrimony and making a summer trip to Salmon River. She must be possessed of six or seven thousand dollars in dust [\$387,000-\$452,000 in October 2014 gold value] or

Treasury notes [\$140,000-\$163,000 inflation adjustment], so as to make assurance doubly sure, and enable the subscriber to devote his undivided attention to her and his travelling wants across the Utah Plains, and through the wild and rugged passes of the Snowy Range and Snake country. Address, in confidence, Z.Y.X., Denver, post office.

More growth

In January 1862, with snow two feet deep, a third quartz mill was running and the greatest drawback in the region was lack of workers, the News reported.

Snow was also a problem during Montgomery's boom years; the winter of 1863-1864 was especially tough, according to Father John Dyer in his autobiography, "The Snowshoe Itinerant."

He said that snowdrifts in Montgomery were to the tops of the doors and that along the streets, steps were cut into the snow to access homes and businesses.

Another storm, described in Black Hawk's Oct. 24, 1866, Daily Mining Journal, said snow began falling on Oct. 10 at Montgomery. At noon the next day 40 inches had accumulated and was still falling.

Snow didn't completely stop activity in Montgomery though. In March 1862, Blake & Fay's store was doing a brisk business, and a third hotel, the two-story Exchange, opened. Doctor Bailey started a medical practice and ran the drug store.

"Buildings in every direction (were) rising as if tossed into existence by a magician's hand," said the March 24, 1862 News.

In May, two more hotels and two more stores opened and in June, Alexander Ray opened a French bakery.

Mail was delivered weekly in 1862, two daily stages ran between Montgomery and Buckskin Joe, and later in the year tri-weekly stages ran the entire 100 miles to Denver, connecting Montgomery to the outside world.

The Denver stage, run by Ab Williamson and William McClelland, was robbed at gunpoint two years later near present day Como by the infamous Reynolds Gang.

Meanwhile

While the gold rush in Colorado brought settlers to Montgomery and other mining camps, back East "in the States," the Civil War was raging.

The News reported daily on battles, but, as the South Park correspondent said, "The citizens of Park County glide along as smoothly and quietly as a duck in a storm."

It's not that people in Montgomery didn't know about the war. They did. For the most part residents supported the Union. In 1862, to show respect for the president, they named the towering mountain to their east, Mount Lincoln. At 14,286 feet, it is the highest peak in Park County and eighth highest in Colorado.

Indians were a worry whether they were fighting the settlers or other tribes. A story in the June 23, 1862, News reported 600 Indians, consisting of 400 Arapahoe and 200 Sioux, seen in Fairplay by Alex Ray, the Montgomery baker. It said they "were on a war expedition against the Utes."

During Montgomery's boom, residents were also watchful for outlaws, including the stage-robbing Reynolds Gang and the murderous Espinosa Brothers.

Decline

The first sign of Montgomery's decline was recounted in a Jan. 13, 1865, News

story of a mass meeting held by citizens of the Consolidated Montgomery Mining District. Mining was already depressed and the meeting was held to find solutions.

One problem discussed was that claims at Montgomery were being made by individuals and corporations, some under fictitious names, who had no presence in the district, had made no improvements and had not prospected on the claims, all lawful requirements to prove a claim's validity. The unproven claims were being represented as legitimate lodes and were being sold to eastern capitalists.

The fictitious claims were located throughout the district and so close together that, "it would be impossible for any new discovery to be made without coming in contact and conflict with one or more of those fictitious lodes," the News story said.

A resolution was passed at the meeting requiring all discoverers to "personally represent, or legally represent their interests in such mining property, at Montgomery City, Colorado, on or before the 15th day of March, A.D. 1865" to show their legal rights to hold the claims and show that necessary improvements had been made. If the requirements were not done, the claim would be declared vacant and all rights would be forfeited.

The resolution couldn't stop Montgomery's downhill slide because the easily found rich ore near the surface was gone. Although it continued for a while, digging deeper was costly. The Nov. 22, 1867, News said there was talk of bringing in "working capital" from France to develop the mines.

New life came to Montgomery in the 1870s when silver miners working claims on Mounts Bross and Lincoln commuted

from Montgomery. That continued until 1893, when silver was demonetized, causing the price to plummet.

By the early 1900s, tax liens and foreclosure sales were the only news from the former bonanza.

Dammed

After laying dormant for more than 50 years, another change came to Montgomery. In July 1954, a bid was accepted by Fisher Contracting of Phoenix to build a dam at the former townsite.

In the years between 1954 and 1957, when the dam was under construction, remaining structures that once defined the prosperous mining town were removed.

One building may have survived from those early years. In 1868, a two-story 40-foot by 25-foot abandoned hotel was bought by Father John Dyer for \$100. He had it dismantled log by log and moved from the "nearly depopulated" Montgomery to Fairplay for use as a church and parsonage for Rev. W.F. Warren, according to Dyer's book.

Some sources say the church burned in the September 1873 fire that nearly destroyed Fairplay. Some say it survived and became the "Father Dyer Chapel" at Fairplay's South Park City Museum. The latter seems credible; news stories of the fire do not mention the church burning, nor does Dyer's book.

Montgomery had a small cemetery. It isn't known who was buried there – there weren't many – but the remains were exhumed in 1953 and now occupy a common grave at the Fairplay Cemetery.

Today

Tranquil is what best describes the site today. In summer and fall anglers are drawn to the sounds of water lapping the rock-strewn shore and leaves rustling in the mountain breeze. An old road above the reservoir leads hikers, historians and off-road buffs to the abandoned Magnolia Mill and, six miles farther, to Wheeler Lakes.

Winters are still harsh. Snow piles high, breezes change to chilling winds and water freezes deep. As in the past, it is often June before winter thaw is done.

See images on next page.



Arastra

An early method of grinding gold and silver ore. One month after gold was discovered at Montgomery, two arastras were in use in the Middle Fork of the South Platte River above the townsite. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, William D. Chamberlain photo, Ed and Nancy Bathke collection)



Montgomery today

Mount Lincoln, left, towers over the former Montgomery site in October 2014. The Middle Fork of the South Platte River flows between peaks where Montgomery once flourished. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Last hurrah

About 13 years before dam construction began, this photo shows six standing structures at the Montgomery townsite. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, George White photo, Special Collections-Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs)



Boom town

Buildings were rising everywhere “as if tossed into existence by a magician’s hand,” said the March 24, 1862 Rocky Mountain News. This is the result. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives; source South Park Historical Foundation)



Man's world

The faces of early Montgomery. The population was mostly white men aged 21-40. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, James W. Nutt photo, Ed and Nancy Bathke collection)