

Wild Days of Puma City by Christie Wright

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If you drive through what was Puma City today along CR77 in Park County, you find only the quiet little village of Tarryall. It lies in a rather picturesque valley between the Tarryall Mountains on the northeast and the Puma Hills on the southwest. Back in the late 1890s, prospectors were finding a good showing of metals including copper, zinc, lead, molybdenum, and the possibility of silver and gold. A boom town ensued with wooden buildings being slapped together quickly. Some old cabins and sheds remain in Tarryall but the vestiges of the throngs who resided there rather briefly are gone. During 1897, there were 400 prospectors and their suppliers in the noisy camp called Puma City.

Developer Charles W. Gilman platted Puma City from a small portion of Sections 5 and 6 of Township 11 South and Range 72 West on November 10, 1896.



Puma City, 1898

A benchmark still exists there, establishing that the elevation is 8,690 feet. When one looks at the Puma City plat today it is difficult to imagine that the entire layout occupies only one acre of land. Blocks numbering 2 through 22

were subdivided into lots consisting of 2.5- by 12.5-foot rectangles. A full block contained 48 lots. Alleys between lots were only two feet wide and ran north-south. Miners presumably purchased several lots to accommodate their tent camp.

Streets labeled First through Fourth ran east-west. Main Street ran north-south. Sterrett Avenue ran parallel to Main Street on the east, whereas Gilman and Park avenues succeeded Main on the west side. Sterrett, Main, and Gilman were eight feet wide to allow access to freight wagons; Park Avenue was six feet wide. The boundary line between Section 5 and Section 6 of T11S, R72W, ran along the center of Gilman Avenue. With 400 people tenting on one acre of land it was not unanticipated that trouble would soon occur.

One story from those roaring days could be called "Double-crossed and shot in the back in Puma City." This is how the event was reported:

The new boom town was located about ten miles from the Colorado Midland Railroad line in Lake George, and prospects for growth looked encouraging. The rosy outlook prompted Peter S. Cox (a newcomer possibly from the Carolinas) to enter a business deal with a local man, James R. Gregg, and purchase his saloon. Apparently, the understanding was that Gregg wanted to pull up stakes and leave. The ink was barely dry on the purchase agreement when Gregg took the Cox money and opened a dance hall/saloon across the street from the place he had just sold to Cox. Sensing a double-cross, Cox grabbed his Winchester and strode across the narrow street to get an explanation. Before anyone realized what was happening

there was a rapid succession of gunshots, and Cox was dead.

This is how the affair was described in the *Fairplay Flume* of Friday March 12, 1897:

The Shooting at Puma: Particulars Hard to Obtain, An Evident Desire to Keep Things Quiet.

On March 3, Peter S. Cox was killed in the Puma Dance Hall at Puma City. Sheriff Wilson of Fairplay, Coroner Mayne of Como, and Deputy district attorney White of Guffey were on the ground the next day and a coroner's inquest was held. Among the witnesses examined were: J.W. Fulton, W.W. Freeman, C.H. Lewis, W.M. Teeters, Judge Robinson and Jack Rumsey. Dr. Hayes' testimony was to the effect that two bullets penetrated the body from in front and one from the back, the latter causing death. Attorney Weymouth appeared for the defense. The jury brought in the following verdict. "We the jury find that P.S. Cox came to his death from gunshot wounds at the hands of one James R. Gregg and the man known as the "Aspen Kid," alias Charles Harrison. We the jury are unable to decide whether this killing was done feloniously or not." It appears that James Gregg and Peter S. Cox had had some difficulty at Jasper City in the morning about the transfer of the saloon which Cox had bought of Gregg. Cox claiming that Gregg had agreed not to open another place but was to leave town. Gregg had opened a place nearly across the street from the place he had previously sold to Cox and this seems to have been the prime cause of the difficulty. On the day mentioned, Cox, who was a very nervous man came from his saloon into the Puma Dance Hall with a winchester rifle in his hands and after

talking with the new proprietor for few moments appeared to "stand pat" before Gregg. Who fired the first shot is a mooted question. Who fired the fatal shot is still more in doubt, many more were fired than those which took effect, and the holes in Cox's body, it was evident were made by different caliber revolvers. James Gregg was placed under arrest also Charles Harrison known as the "Aspen Kid". The bonds were fixed at \$500 which Gregg immediately secured. Harrison was unable to find bondsmen and is now in the county jail. The preliminary hearing will take place next Monday at Puma, where perhaps more will be developed.

So, we anticipate that there will be more investigation and possibly a trial to see who shot Cox in the back and whether the killing was done in self-defense. Perhaps the sheriff will have determined who owned the gun matching the slug in Cox's back? Maybe I have read too many Sherlock Holmes mysteries? We will soon see that Cox was an unnecessarily nervous man and Gregg was very personable and popular, and maybe only John Wayne believed that a man's word was as good as a contract in the old West! Several weeks after the shooting the *Fairplay Flume* (Friday, April 2, 1897) published an article indicating just how close Cox came to getting even with Gregg.

Here is how the article ran:

Mr. James Gregg, who is charged with killing P.S. Cox at Puma City a short time ago, was in Fairplay last week. Jim was wearing the suit of clothes he had on at the time of the shooting and it is very evident he did not do all the shooting that was done at that time. One bullet tore the back of his coat collar and did not miss

his neck an inch; another tore its way across his coat at the small of the back, about half the bullet cutting its way through the skin, another inch further in and it would have broken his back. Another bullet went through the coat pocket on the left side, while still another went through the lapel of his coat under his chin. If that is not coming all around a man and putting him in a close corner we don't know what is. It was high time for somebody to get action.

The same issue of the *Flume* made a joke about the killing after which it would have been difficult to find an unbiased juror should a case have been brought against Mr. Gregg.

Here is that article:

Button Holes With Bullets. The way they have of "buttonholeing" men at Puma City is no trouble. We were thinking seriously of starting a paper down there but after a close inspection of Jim Gregg's coat we have changed our mind. Now Jim is naturally a quiet orderly sort of a fellow, rather retiring than otherwise in his disposition, and still he wears a "four-button-hole cutaway". We are a thoroughly progressive moulder of public opinion and, be as humble and conservative as our constitution would permit, we are convinced that the very first issue of our paper at Puma, the very first mould as it were, would result in a dead editor! No! No! Puma is not for us. Get thee behind us ambition! We plod along in the columns of the FLUME content with such excitement as is afforded, by having an irate populist come into the office, accuse us of "slurring the family" and threaten to thrash the daylights out of us, and occasionally we may take a horseback ride and turn somersets down Red Hill (at

so much per set, taken out in advertising,) broken collar bones and disjointed fingers afford ample recreation for us.

No, thank you, we don't want any of those bonquet "flashlight" buttonholes which a man should wear to be in with the four hundred at Puma City.

Possibly there was some additional lawbreaking in Puma City during 1897, because the *Flume* of Friday, May 21 of that year reported that Gregg, the popular saloon man of Puma City, was in Fairplay to testify as a witness in the Stringham case. So far, I haven't found additional information on that one.

Approximately four months after the Cox shooting, attorneys for Gregg and Charles Harrison (the Aspen Kid) would have their bails reduced. Gregg's from \$5,000 to \$3,000 and Harrison's, from \$5,000 to \$500. By October 1897, Gregg did finally move from Puma City to Como as he had originally promised Cox. Then, by the end of October or the first few days of November 1897, Gregg was acquitted of any criminal action in the killing of Cox, and Harrison was discharged without trial because the evidence in the Gregg case showed that Cox was to blame for the shooting incident. It was evident that the "Aspen Kid" was really a good guy because as the *Flume* of Friday, November 5, 1897, mentioned: *Mr. Harrison by his conduct here, has gained the good will of all citizens of Fairplay.*

We still don't know which of the two men shot Cox in the back, or whether the Aspen Kid was hired by Gregg as the saloon peace enforcer.

How did the nasty event actually play out? Men who have been drinking and

enjoying themselves with lively stories are often not the best witnesses to a fast-moving gun battle. When the dead man turns out to be an outsider like Cox, who was obviously itching for a fight, and Gregg was viewed as a friendly barkeep, what kind of statements are witnesses who frequent Gregg's establishment likely to make about the shooting? History is history and Harrison and Gregg were cleared as legitimate self-defenders. Then again if one examines the evidence critically the event might have occurred closer to this imagined scenario:

Peter Cox had just spent good money to buy the lively Puma Dance Hall and Saloon from James Gregg who said he wanted to move to a better place, like Como. But instead Gregg builds a new Puma saloon across the street and takes his clientele with him. The music is loud, and the double-cross brings a little bile into Mr. Cox's throat. He loads his Winchester and strides across the street to get a straight answer from James Gregg. Maybe Mr. Cox begins a little too strongly and calls Gregg a "deal-breaking SOB!" Gregg also overreacts and pulls a pistol and shoots Peter Cox twice in the chest. Neither bullet is immediately fatal and quickly Gregg is running and dodging while Peter Cox is giving chase and rapidly pumping bullets at his fleeing offender. James Harrison sees his boss is in trouble and takes up a position behind a large aspen-support post and kills Peter Cox with a carefully aimed, close-range shot in the back. The "Aspen Kid" saved his employer. After a few minutes the whole event was over. Most people would have been diving for cover, so who actually knew what happened besides James R. Gregg?

James R. Gregg was born in Missouri and was 26 years old when Peter Cox was killed. By 1900, the U.S. Census shows Jim had moved with his wife Charlotte M. (they married in 1891) and their little daughter Eva (who was then 6 years old), to south Telluride in San Miguel County, Colorado. Jim was then employed as a laborer.

Present Day Puma City/Tarryall

Will the old Puma City area again become a mining community? An article in the *Park County Republican & Fairplay Flume* of June 20, 2008, describes how International Beryllium Corporation of Vancouver had staked 517 mineral claims in the area just south of Tarryall. This area of renewed mining interest surrounds the abandoned Boomer Mine that was an active beryllium producer from 1948 until the early 1970s. In fact, the Boomer was the second largest producer of beryllium in the United States for a brief 15-year period. Beryllium is a light very strong metal with many applications that fit our modern technology.