

"PIKE'S PEAK OR BUST" (1859)

Prior to 1859 Colorado was inhabited by the Ute Indians in the mountains and the Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes along the front range and on the plains. There were also a few traders and trappers left over from the beaver era of the 1830's & 1840's. By the spring of 1859 word had spread across an economically destitute United States (due to the Panic of '57) of rumors of gold found in what is today Colorado. Actually the gold finds were mediocre but people in the east were so poor and desperate that they did not wait to see if the reports were valid.

"The '59ers" as they were soon to become known, were a mass migration of dreamers numbering at the outset about 100,000. They headed for Pikes Peak for several reasons. First it was one of the only peaks on the front range that had a given name. Secondly, it was near the point at which the Arkansas River emptied out onto the plains and ran eastward (the wagontrains had to follow this river to the gold fields for their water needs). Thirdly, it was one of the few peaks that was still snow capped late into the season, and easily distinguished by the travelers far off on the plains.

The gold dust discovered was actually found on the Cherry Creek where Denver is today. When they arrived at the foothills of Pike's Peak the "59ers" still had another 70 miles to go before they reached Cherry Creek. A rest was needed after their long journey across the plains so they set up camp along a creek which became known as Camp Creek, which today runs through the White House Ranch property. The traffic became very heavy in this area and soon a supply town was established here to accommodate the weary travelers. The town was named Colorado City and it was the first civilization that the "59ers" came upon since leaving for the goldfields.

After leaving Colorado City the "59ers" continued north to Denver City where it had been reported that gold was flowing down the river. Actually there was barely any gold to be found at all. The whole rush had been started by a few greedy Missouri border towns who felt the hoax would help boost their economies which the Panic of '57 had bitterly hit hard. Only a small fraction of those who started for Pike's Peak stayed on. Some began searching for gold in the mountains and found some very rich fields. Gold had been found in large quantities in Gregory Gulch, west of Denver City, and in the South Park region west of Colorado City. Colorado City, which had become Colorado's first capital after the territory was established, saw a new boom during 1860 when it became a major supply town for the South Park gold towns of Alma, Buckskin Joe, Fairplay, and even California Gulch (later Leadville).

It became apparent that the gold fields in Gregory Gulch were more extensive than those of South Park and Colorado City soon lost its seat of capital of Colorado to Denver City. Colorado City continued to be a lively little town for a couple of years until about the mid-1860's when the South Park gold fields began to play out in the Pike's Peak region. Colorado City then dozed off into an almost deserted sleepy little hamlet. This was the condition of the town as Walter Galloway found it when he arrived in 1867. Buildings on corner lots on main street (Colorado Ave) were abandoned. The prospecting population had moved on to richer regions in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and other areas of the west. The gold rush was over and the stage was set for the next inhabitants to inherit the Pike's Peak region. These people were the settlers and homesteaders, like Galloway, who came to stay and build a life in the region. Gold had acted only as a catalyst in precipitating and stabilizing a population movement to Colorado.

SOURCE: The 59'ers by Stan Zamonski