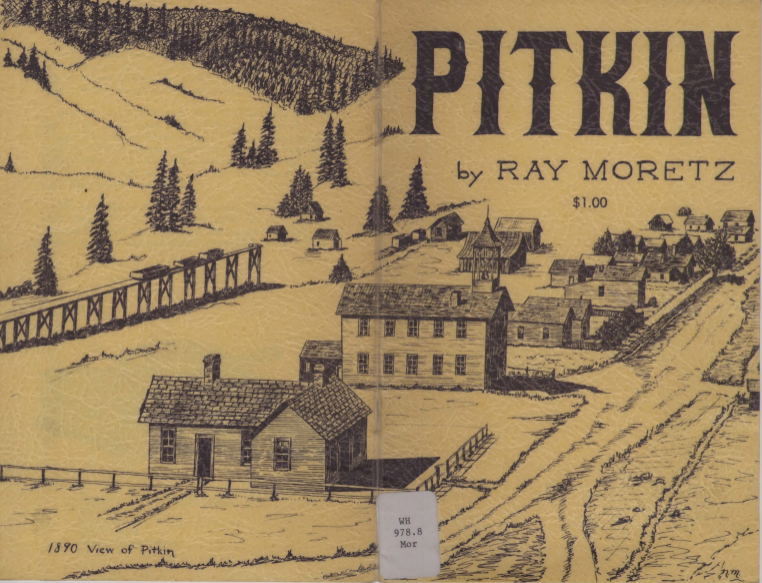


PITKIN

by RAY MORETZ

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1890 View of Pitkin

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PITKIN

by RAY MORETZ

Illustrated by

NELL MORETZ

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History

The Town of Pitkin was founded in 1879, and by 1880 was twice as large as Gunnison. It was ranked twelfth among Colorado's cities. Its phenomenal growth, and rapid decline was not uncommon in that "boom and bust" period of Western History.

As the initial excitement dimmed in the older silver camps of Leadville and Aspen, the prospectors fanned out over the Western Slope in search of new bonanzas. The geology of the Pitkin Area was similar to that of Leadville, and prospectors soon discovered rich outcrops of silver bearing ore. The first recorded claims were in the vicinity of Fairview Peak, and were located in 1878. The rush was on, and people poured into the Quartz Creek Valley by wagon, horseback and afoot.

Transportation, which proved to be a continuing problem for Pitkin, was especially trying in 1879. The nearest supply point was at Alamosa, and goods were carried on wagons over almost impassable trails. The first residents made do with hastily constructed log cabins or tents, until a steam sawmill began producing lumber. Later, a toll road was opened to the Arkansas Valley over Williams Pass.

The Town Board initially sold lots for five dollars each, but

speculators soon drove the price to seven hundred dollars each. A price that wouldn't be repeated in Pitkin for more than ninety years.

Pitkin's early citizens were proud, and cooperated in various civic projects. They organized a volunteer fire department, acquired a cemetery, built an irrigation system, and started the first school in 1881. Recreation was important also, and was provided by local dramas, a town band, dances, and a baseball team.

Lawlessness was not as rampant in Pitkin as in some of the neighboring mining camps. Several murders did occur, and one of the more serious incidents grew out of a shooting during a card game. It happened just east of town in a railroad construction camp, and the alleged murderer was lodged in the town jail. That night, some of the victim's friends threatened to lynch him, but were thwarted by armed guards. The man was later tried and hanged in Gunnison.

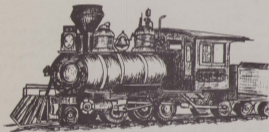
Fires were a serious hazard in and outside of town. The most disastrous fire burned almost two full city blocks in late 1898. It started in a general store, and was scattered by the explosion of a large quantity of blasting powder. Forest fires denuded almost all of the surrounding hills at one time or other, and those scars are visible today.

The delayed arrival of the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad had a profound effect on the early development of Pitkin. Some of the high grade ore from the mines had been packed to Leadville on burros from the earliest days, and some was freighted on wagons to the Arkansas and San Luis Valley smelters. Most of the ore was too low grade to support such freight charges, and was stockpiled at the mines in anticipation of lower rail rates. This practice continued for almost two years, and many of the mine operators went broke, or sacrificed their interests to others who had the capital to keep the mines in operation. It is believed half the miners and prospectors had left the area before the arrival of the railroad.

In the meantime, the railroad company was having monumental troubles of its own. Instead of solid rock under the Continental Divide, the Alpine Tunnel engineers found loose, shifting rocks and soil that necessitated heavy timbering from portal to portal. Snow and bitter winter temperatures slowed construction, and often half the construction crew was busy working on weather related problems. The first train finally chugged into Pitkin on July 12, 1882 and was greeted with a celebration featuring kegs of beer and orations by prominent citizens.

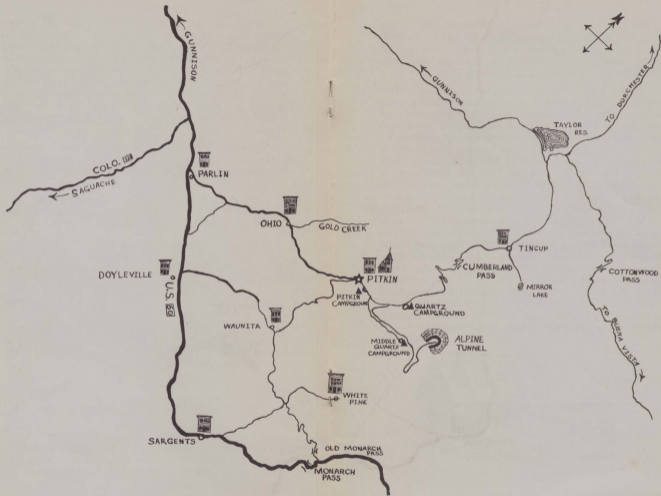
Mining gradually declined, and was replaced by timbering as the town's industry. For many years the railroad was lined with neat stacks of telephone poles, crossties, mine props and lumber.

Population also declined, and reached an all time low during the winter of 1970-71, when fewer than twenty-five people called Pitkin home. In 1881, the population was 2,500.



Pitkin Today

Pitkin has fewer than forty year-round residents, but the average summer population is above one hundred. It also serves several hundred campers from the National Forest Campgrounds nearby, at any given time during the summer months.



The town has held its charter, and is governed by a mayor and a board of trustees. Its little revenue is derived from a small levy on real property, and from a portion of the state gasoline tax. The town sponsors a volunteer fire department, and maintains the streets and irrigation ditch.

Only a few glimpses of early Pitkin may be seen today. Many of the older buildings surely have unique and fascinating stories but unfortunately, all the old time residents are gone, and those stories are lost forever. Some are known tho, and going from west to east are listed here. The crumbling foundation on the bluff just north of the Quartz Creek Lodge is all that remains of an ore reduction works, built in 1892 by the Quartz Creek Mining and Milling Company. One block east, at the corner of Second (Armstrong Gulch) and Main Streets stands a small cabin that served as the headquarters of various mining companies, and later as an assay office. The Pitkin Hotel was formerly called "The Bon-Ton," and its predecessor was a sawdust floored tent restaurant with the same name. The large building with the false front, one half block east of the hotel, once housed the bank, and was later occupied by various merchantile firms. The present post office building was the home of the "Pitkin Miner," an early day newspaper. The small house just east of the U.S. Forest Service Compound contained the switch-board of the "Pitkin Telephone Company." Although unconfirmed, the house standing at the corner of Fourth and State Streets is believed to have been one of Pitkin's bawdy houses.



Climate

Pitkin's elevation of 9,245 feet provides a delightful summer climate, with temperatures rarely reaching ninety degrees during the day, and falling to the fifties and sixties at night. The winters are long, and snow falls from September through May, for an annual average of about one-hundred and twenty inches. Temperatures as low as minus thirty degrees are common, and snow that falls in November usually stays until April, sometimes accumulating to a depth of three to five feet. Quartz Creek is muffled by a blanket of ice and snow, and the small areas of open water are rare.

The Mines

Probably no free man in history worked so hard for so little as the prospector; and probably none has so enjoyed the freedom of spirit, and the optimism that life offered. Only a small percentage of those who came to Pitkin struck it rich, but that was the way of the Frontier West.

More than one thousand ten acre mining claims were located, improved, and patented near Pitkin. The names that were given the claims undoubtedly represent some fascinating stories. Many were named for Indian tribes, other for Civil War heroes; and some for cities, states and even countries. A great number of women's names were used, and included some like these; Linda Belle, Nellie Bly, Ida May, Belle Mahoney, Little Sadie, and Black Bess. And there were those which showed a sense of humor like; Double Header, Get There, Way Up, School Maam, Silent Friend, and Salary Grabber. The Terrible and Horrible claims came by their names honestly. A group of miners began work on the claims late one fall. Unaware of the severity of the mountain winters, they failed to stock an adequate food supply, and in their half starved condition, many had pneumonia and died.

The most productive mines were the Fairview, Cleopatra, Silver Islet, Little Tycoon, Maid of Athens, Silent Friend, and Nest Egg. It is believed that some of these mines produced more than a million dollars worth of minerals. For the majority of the would-be mining tycoons though, a shallow pit, abandoned tunnel, or deserted log cabin represented a monument to their shattered dreams.



There are many stories of the "riches to rags" termination of mining ventures. One of the most graphic in this area concerned the Silver Islet Mine. The owners were offered \$650,000 for the property in 1881. Many of the stock holders lived out of state, and were unaware of the local transportation crisis that was so disastrous to the mining industry. They decided to hold out for a million dollars. Five years later, the mine brought \$7,500 at a sheriff's sale.

Time, vandals and thieves have devastated the mines and mining areas around Pitkin. The nearest of these was the Roosevelt Mines and Electric Company property located two miles Southwest of Pitkin. The area is just across Quartz Creek from the present Roosevelt Picnic Grounds.

During the early nineteen twenties a complete mining operation was performed at this site. The ore was taken from a tunnel driven thousands of feet under Copper Mountain; and processed in a stamp mill. Support buildings included a compressor house, changehouse, blacksmith shop, saw mill, stable, powder magazine, several miners cabins, and a power house.

The power house was a 28 foot by 40 foot structure, and housed two 150 K.W. generators, powered by twin 15¼ inch turbines. Water for the turbines was delivered by a 4 ft. pipeline constructed of two inch pine staves, bound by one-half inch iron bands. The pipeline was 6,625 feet in length, and headed in a dam on Quartz Creek, just west of the present Cherokee Pines Motel.

The Surrounding Area

There are several scenic side trips that are a must for a visitor to Pitkin. Some of the roads are rough and narrow, but the compensations are great.

The Alpine Tunnel is the principle attraction, and has lured people from all the states and many foreign countries. The present automobile road was built with few exceptions on the old Denver, South Park, and Pacific Railroad grade. In the thirteen miles total distance from Pitkin the grade never exceeded four percent, though the gain in elevation is more than 2,200 feet. This was the first railroad tunnel through the Continental Divide, and in 1882 was the highest one in the world. For a complete history of this remarkable chapter in American history, read Dow Helmer's "Historic Alpine Tunnel."

A trip over Cumberland Pass to Tincup and Taylor Dam and Reservoir offers a variety of mountain scenery. From Pitkin you follow Quartz Creek to its source, and then to the summit of Cumberland Pass, a 12,015 foot lookout with a sweeping vista

of nature's finest. Tincup had the reputation of being one of the most lawless towns in Gunnison County. It is populated now only by summer residents. Taylor Reservoir lies in a picturesque valley and provides excellent fishing and boating.

A drive over Waunita Pass, south of Pitkin, will take you past the site of the extant town of Bowerman. Hailed as the "Cripple Creek of the Western Slope" in 1903, nothing remains but a few cabin foundations. Follow the signs to Waunita Hot Springs Resort, or to White Pine, another early mining camp. This route will also take you over the old Monarch Pass, a scenic drive to U.S. Highway 50.

Six miles west of Pitkin, in the town of Ohio, a road turns north along Gold Creek. Several idle mines may be seen along this road, but please don't damage or remove any of the property. At the end of this road trails lead to several high mountain lakes.



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