

THE SKELETAL SHELL GAME: A HISTORY OF A COLORADO GHOST TOWN,
1880-PRESENT

by

Jon T. Coleman

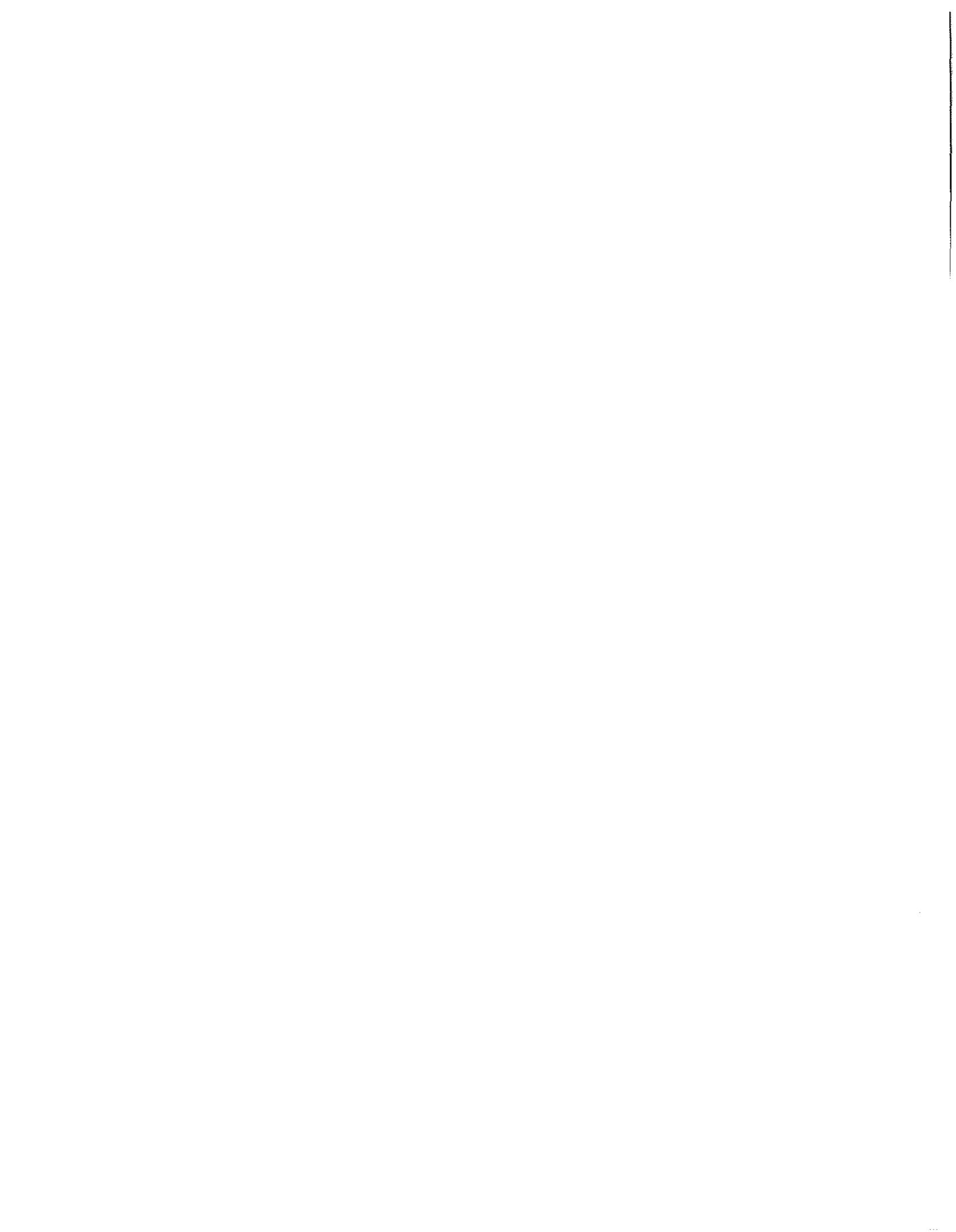
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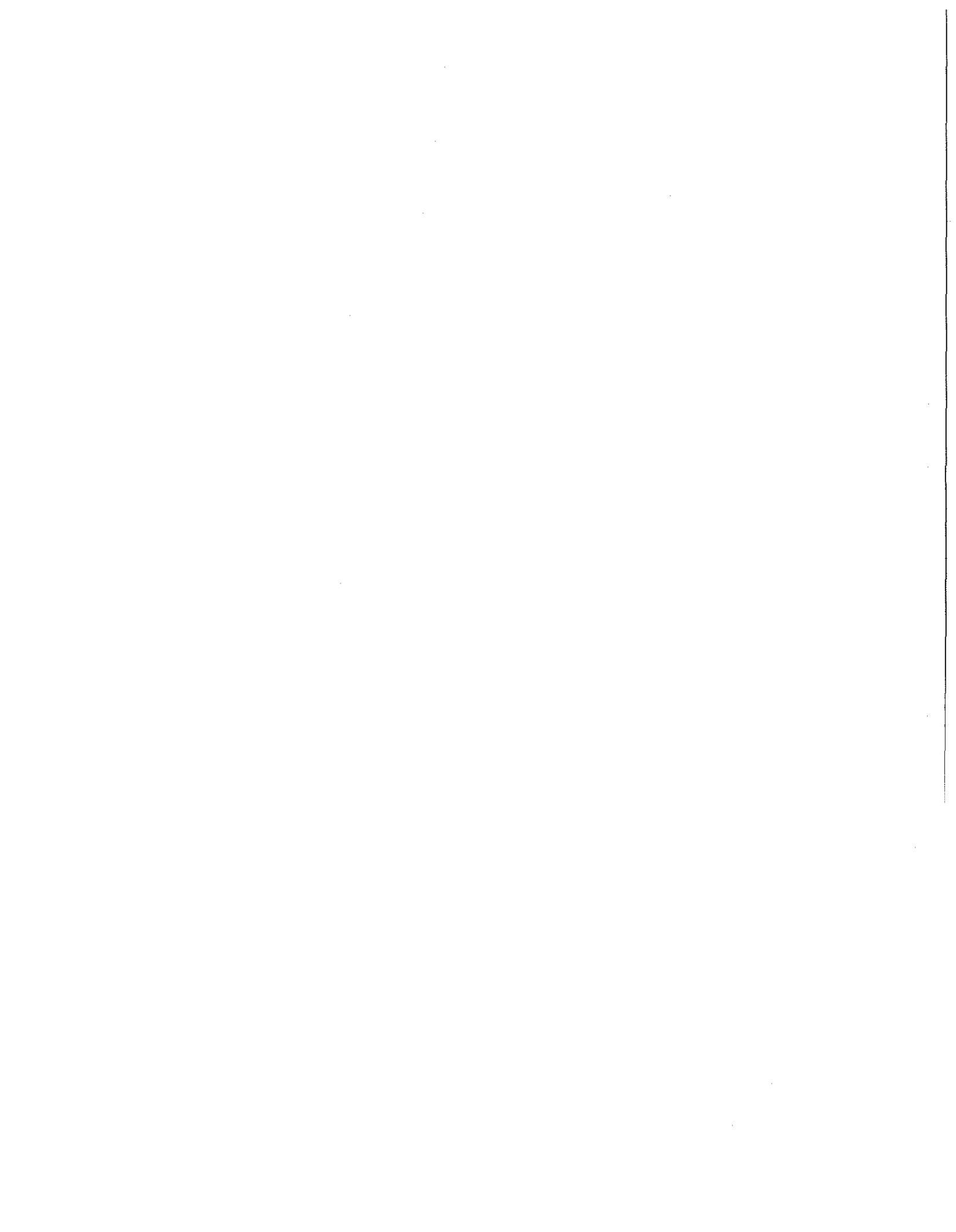
History

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The Skeletal Shell Game: A History of a Colorado Ghost Town, 1880-Present

Thesis directed by Professor Patricia Nelson Limerick

During the nineteenth century, mining rushes in the mountains of Colorado led to the rapid creation and then the swift abandonment of hundreds of towns and camps. Founded in the spring of 1880, Ashcroft, a silver mining town twenty miles southwest of Aspen, boomed for three years. Never more than a mediocre mining town, Ashcroft faded fast. By 1887, half its population had left. By 1913, when the town's post office closed, only twenty-five people resided in Ashcroft. From an economic stand point, Ashcroft's history holds few surprises. Ashcroft followed the boom and bust trajectory of a thousand similar mining towns in the American West. From a cultural perspective, however, Ashcroft's story gathers intensity when its economy "died." A ghost town positioned on the social and economic fringe, Ashcroft became a place where people crafted central aspects of their identities.

Abandoned on the periphery of industrial mining, Ashcroft emerged as a site of identity creation. A series of people used the ghost town to establish identities as "prospectors," "pioneers," "old timers," "Coloradans," "Westerners," and "experts." To create these identities, these people physically and imaginatively altered the town and its history. Ashcroft accumulated layers of myth and meaning as residents and visitors re-constructed the town in order to formulate new identities. Through the excavation of these layers, this thesis explores the cultural significance of a peripheral place from 1880 to the present.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE MEN IN MCARTHUR'S BAR.....	9
III. "HERE IN THE MOUNTAINS ALL THINGS LIVED AND DIED".....	46
IV. ON YOU HUSKIES.....	72
V. CONCLUSION.....	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	110

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century, mining rushes in the mountains of Colorado led to the rapid creation and then the swift abandonment of hundreds of towns and camps. Founded in the spring of 1880, Ashcroft, a silver mining town twenty miles southwest of Aspen, boomed for three years. Never more than a mediocre mining town, Ashcroft faded fast. By 1887, half its population had left. By 1913, when the town's post office closed, only twenty-five people resided in Ashcroft. From an economic stand point, Ashcroft's history holds few surprises. Ashcroft followed the boom and bust trajectory of a thousand similar mining towns in the American West. From a cultural perspective, however, Ashcroft's story gathers intensity when its economy "died." A ghost town positioned on the social and economic fringe, Ashcroft became a place where people crafted central aspects of their identities.

Since Frederick Jackson Turner, historians of real and imagined frontiers have argued that the nation's economic, political, and social periphery was central to the formation of a collective American identity. Americans have continually defined themselves in relation to their margins. Abandoned on the periphery of industrial mining, Ashcroft emerged as a site of identity creation. A series of people used the ghost town to establish identities as "prospectors," "pioneers," "old timers," "Coloradans," "Westerners," and "experts." To create these identities, these people physically and imaginatively altered the

town and its history. Ashcroft accumulated layers of myth and meaning as residents and visitors re-constructed the town in order to formulate new identities. Through the excavation of these layers, this thesis explores the cultural significance of a peripheral place from 1880 to the present..

In the past thirty years, literary theorists and anthropologists have emphasized the cultural importance of borders, margins, and edges.¹ Anthropologist Barbara Babcock has argued that cultures frequently endow marginal people, classes, and places with a symbolic importance which exceeds their actual social, political, and economic significance.² Building on Babcock's assertion that "what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central..." and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival, cultural scholars Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have examined social hierarchies in Post-Renaissance Europe, focusing on dependent relationship between the groups, "geographical spaces," "psychic forms," and cultural expressions at the high and low ends the class structure.³ Stallybrass and White offer examples of carnivalesque social inversion as proof that "low" classes, spaces, forms, and expressions influenced European culture far beyond their social and political importance.

¹ See Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1950); Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (New York: Atheneum, 1985); Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992); Elliott West, The Way of the West: Essays on the Central Plains (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, The Frontier in American Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

² For examples of cultural and theoretical works dealing with spatial and social margins see Barbara Babcock, The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); M.M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968); M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981); Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Random House, 1979); and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

³ Barbara Babcock, The Reversible World, 32; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 2.

Unveiled at the 1893 Colombian Exposition in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis is distant in time and tone from the manifold borders, margins, and edges explored in recent cultural studies.⁴ Turner's thesis, however, linked geographical margins and national identity, placing peripheries at the heart of his interpretation of American history. Defined at different times as "the meeting point between civilization and savagery," "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization," and "an area free land," the frontier, for Turner, explained the exceptionalism of American history and the distinctiveness of American citizens.⁵ The zone on the out-skirts of settlement transformed the European colonists who entered it into independent, democratic, and individualistic Americans. The frontier triggered this transformation by forcing colonists to adopt primitive dress, behavior, and values. As the colonists "mastered the wilderness," they climbed towards civilization, leaving behind the character traits suited to the frontier. But, as long as Americans could repeat the process of falling to savagery and rising to civilization on subsequent frontiers, they escaped the hazards of over-civilization so prevalent in European history. Americans, for example, avoided class hierarchies, a tyrannical state, and urban chaos.

Turner placed a time limit on the influence of peripheries in American history. Over time, the nation's margins came to resemble its center. Settlement, development, and incorporation transformed wilderness into farms and farms into cities. The frontier thesis valorized peripheries at the same time it described their disappearance. By 1890, according to Turner, the United States had run out of margins on the North American continent.

⁴ For works on Turner see Ray Allen Billington, Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Richard Hofstadter, The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969); William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," Western Historical Quarterly 18 (April 1987): 157-76; and Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Turnarians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World," The American Historical Review 100 (June 1995): 697-716.

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in The Frontier in American History (1920; Tucson, Ariz., 1986) 3, 4, 1.

Scholars have been punching holes in Turner's frontier thesis for a long time. Yet, like a stale chunk of Swiss cheese, the thesis has grown stronger with age despite its many holes. The staying power of the frontier thesis is due, in part, to the importance of peripheries as symbols in American culture. In 1950, Henry Nash Smith placed Turner's frontier in a context of myth and symbol.⁶ Turner, he argued, had dressed a long tradition of mythologizing about the American West in the garb of a historical theory. The frontier thesis was a significant cultural artifact that revealed how Americans (Turner included) constructed a national identity around myths of the far West, but the thesis was a misleading and internally inconsistent model for explaining historical change. Smith accused Turner of confusing myth and history, and, by treating the frontier as an expression of American culture, he laid the foundation for the study of the frontier as a product of a culture's imagination.

Smith kicked off a spate of books dealing with cultural representations of the frontier and the West. Scholars combed dime novels, newspapers, movies, television shows, and advertisements for Western myths, symbols, and images.⁷ In the process, they created a sizable historiography delineating how European/American culture has imagined the West. Yet, while cultural historians have endeavored to understand the role of the frontier in American culture, they have largely ignored the peripheral places that continued to exist in the American West. In contrast to Barbara Babcock's assertion that "what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central..." scholars of the imagined West targeted the books,

⁶ Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1950).

⁷ For examples see Don Russell, The Wild West; or, A History of Wild West Shows (Fort Worth: Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970); Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America (New York: Verso, 1987); Anne M. Butler, "Selling the Popular Myth," in The Oxford History of the American West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jane P. Tompkins, West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns (New York: Oxford University

movies, TV programs, and advertisements produced and consumed in the center to understand the meanings that the most powerful classes in society attached to Western myths, images, and symbols. Richard Slotkin, the author of three tomes on the frontier myth in American culture, justifies privileging the center with this explanation: "In the nineteenth century the frontier is increasingly distanced from the center of culture, in space and finally in time; and the social transformations occurring at the center are far more complex and consequential..."⁸ Like Turner, Slotkin argues that by the end of the 19th century actual peripheries were marginally important to American culture.

The history of Ashcroft, Colorado shows the continued cultural significance of peripheral places. The boom and bust cycles of the mining industry created thousands of economically marginal places--ghost towns--which became sites of intense cultural activity. In the twentieth century, people visited Ashcroft with popular culture images of the mythic Old West dancing in their heads. Part of Ashcroft's importance comes from the myth, images, and symbols from a broader American culture which informed peoples' understanding of the ghost town. But, in Ashcroft, these elements of popular culture merged with a local history as complex and consequential as any found in New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles.

Divided into three chapters, this thesis follows Ashcroft from its founding in the 1880s to its operation as a tourist attraction in the 1990s. Chapter One establishes Ashcroft as a netherworld of possibilities where older, single men created a strange community in the ruins of a busted mining town. Chapter Two leaves Ashcroft to explore the larger process of the construction of ghost towns as "dead" places where tourists could mystically

Press, 1992); and Elliott West, "Selling the Myth: Western Images in Advertising," Montana, the Magazine of Western History (Summer 1996): 36-49.

"experience" the past. Chapter Three returns to Ashcroft to investigate the interaction between outsiders' conception of ghost towns and Ashcroft's development into a tourist attraction that fit outsiders' expectations.

Identities and peripheries represent the focal points of this thesis. Ashcroft's physical and cultural distance from the nation's centers of economic, social, and political power made the town an attractive site for people to re-create themselves. The identities formed in Ashcroft were highly personal. Unlike Turner's geographical frontiers or Henry Nash Smith's imagined Wests, the individuals who crafted identities in Ashcroft did so within a local context rather than the national arena of American collective identity. The strategy of looking at real or imagined peripheries to discover national character traits, a national culture, or a national mythology does not work in Ashcroft. Instead, one finds a series of people constructing different types of identities according to Ashcroft's shifting relationship to the center.

From its founding to the second world war, Ashcroft's physical distance from economic and social centers determined the types of identities created in the town. During the town's boom from 1880 to 1887, men worked to transform Ashcroft from a marginal mining outpost into profitable city. Prospectors and merchants who arrived in Ashcroft with little money and property bought land, accumulated mining claims, ran for elective office, and advertised their marriageability in the local newspaper. The low quality of the silver ore found in most of Ashcroft's mines; the location of higher quality ore in mines far from the town; and Aspen's rise as the dominant silver mining center in the Rocky Mountain region doomed Ashcroft's economic success and the incipient middle class identities that depended on the town's eventual prosperity. Ashcroft's economic and social marginality, however,

⁸ Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization,

proved attractive to a group of older, single men who stayed in or moved to the site after the town's bust. From 1887 to 1939, Ashcroft's meager mining economy supported a small population of socially marginal men. Inhabiting the dilapidated buildings left behind from the town's boom, these men created identities through role-playing and ritual performance in the town's saloon.

After the second world war, Ashcroft's geographic isolation declined. Tourism in the Rocky Mountains changed the town's relationship to the outside world. Starting in the 1930s, Ashcroft was increasingly seen and understood by outsiders as a ghost town. The authors of ghost town guidebooks taught tourists to perceive death in Colorado's mining towns. They scoured the mountains collecting information about extinct mining towns and converting this information into texts. The guidebook writers crafted identities as experts, Coloradans, and Westerners through the texts they created, and they encouraged tourists and ghost town aficionados to do the same. Guidebook writers popularized ghost towns as tourists attractions, and, in Ashcroft, the development of nearby Aspen as a ski resort combined to draw visitors in increasing numbers to the town. Eleven miles from a major ski resort, Ashcroft was hardly geographically peripheral. The deserted and scenic site, however, attracted preservationists and environmentalists who fought to keep the town and its mountain setting free from economic exploitation. The town's defenders constructed identities based on their allegiance to and love of a beautiful and undeveloped place. By 1975, Ashcroft had come full circle. Declared a National Historic Site, the town was preserved as an official periphery, never to be touched by the economic development the first Ashcrofters wanted so badly.

1800-1890 (New York: Athenaeum, 1985), ix.

Today, Ashcroft's rickety buildings bear a startling load of inter-related meanings. By combining myth, identity, and place, the analysis of Ashcroft's post-boom history demonstrates how cultural peripheries have remained influential places in the American West. For over a hundred years, people have manipulated Ashcroft to create pasts which tell them who they are in the present. Ashcroft, however, was never a blank slate. People changed the town in order to change themselves. The constructions (real and imagined) left behind during the creation of past identities framed the development of new ones. Ashcroft remains a significant historic site because so much cultural history has piled up on the site.

CHAPTER II

THE MEN IN MCARTHUR'S BAR

On a summer Sunday in 1912, William R. Shaw received a lesson in status, power, and masculinity from a glass of beer in Dan McArthur's saloon. The booze flowed freely at McArthur's bar in Ashcroft, and single beers rarely lingered in a drinker's memory. But Shaw's drink was special. A temperate and obedient eighteen-year-old, he had never consumed alcohol in public with his father's permission. The drink at McArthur's initiated Shaw in the joys of intoxication and, more importantly, the duties of middle-class manhood.

An Aspen businessman, Robert Shaw planned and chaperoned his son's "visit with Dan McArthur."¹ McLars Andeen, a family friend and noted Aspen entrepreneur, accompanied the Shaws on the expedition. After riding for two bone-jarring hours, the men lunched in a meadow below the town. William whiled away the noon hour picking flowers. A graduate of the University of Uppsala in Sweden, Mr. Andeen was a botanical whiz, providing both the American and Latin names for William's specimens. Finished with their picnic, the men sent the driver ahead and hiked the final half-mile to Ashcroft.

A defunct silver mining town, Ashcroft's year-round population numbered in the teens in 1912.² Dan McArthur ran the only business in town. A group of old men were his

¹ William R. Shaw, interview by Ramona Markalunas, 13 September 1973, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

² The 1910 United States census reports nine residents of Ashcroft. Richard E. Cowling, Pitkin County: 1910 United States Census, Colorado Genealogical Etcetera, Volume VII (Boulder, CO: Richard E. Cowling, 1989), 71.

regular customers. The bachelors congregated at "Dan's," and William found "practically all the residents of Ashcroft sitting at [the] bar."³ McArthur, Jack Leahy, Miles Sweeney, Old Man Fitzpatrick, and several anonymous alcoholics perked up when the picnickers entered and ordered a round for the house. William's first drink in public came with a lecture from his father: "he told me...that if I couldn't hold my liquor like a gentleman, that he couldn't do anything about it, and I might as well learn to be a gentleman, and I drank it."⁴ For the rest of the day, Robert, William, Mr. Andeen, and the denizens of McArthur's bar worked out the meaning of these cryptic instructions. "Dan's place" became the stage upon which the picnickers and the old men played parts, exchanged roles, and performed identities. William Shaw stepped from adolescence into adulthood during a ritual booze opera.

While William sipped his way to manhood, Mr. Andeen continued to buy drinks for the bar. His generous spending changed the mood in Dan's place. The bar acquired an ambiance more befitting a salon than a saloon. Jack Leahy led a discussion of Voltaire and Plutarch; Old Man Fitzpatrick recited Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man;" and an unnamed "student of the Congressional Record" offered an elaborate indictment of the government's criminal acts during the demonetization of silver.⁵ The Aspenites subsidized but rarely participated in the conversation, preferring to drink and listen. Towards evening, Mr. Andeen and Robert Shaw "became a little inebriated" and could no longer stand. Reeling from beer and cigars, William loaded his father and Mr. Andeen in the wagon and headed home.⁶

In 1912, the Shaws and Mr. Andeen exploited Ashcroft's social and economic marginality to test the meaning of being a gentleman. Ashcroft's physical distance from

³ William R. Shaw, interview by Ramona Markalunas, 13 September 1973.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Aspen made McArthur's saloon a safe place to experiment with class identities. The Aspen men could get drunk in Ashcroft without risking their reputations. William Shaw's "visit with Dan McArthur," however, carried a more complex meaning than three middle-class men going on a bender in a remote location. Ashcroft also provided an audience. The old prospectors witnessed and participated in the Aspen men's Sunday drinking spree. In McArthur's saloon, the prospectors and the picnickers briefly exchanged roles. The old men quoted Shakespeare and discussed Voltaire while the college educated "gentlemen" became Sunday drunks. The Aspen men defined the boundaries of gentility by transgressing them in a place where crude behavior held no consequences.

The Shaws and Mr. Andeen traveled to McArthur's bar to clarify the meaning of their middle-class identities by temporally blurring those identities with booze and social inversion. Nor were the Aspenites the only drinkers using Ashcroft's marginality to craft identities in 1912. Calling themselves "prospectors," the strange men in the saloon also constructed identities in this failed town. The men lived in run-down log cabins without women or families. They all owned mining claims, but spent most of their time hunting, fishing, reading, and drinking in Dan McArthur's saloon. William Shaw described the Ashcrofters' lifestyle as a "foolish [way] of living in the past," and Shaw was right.⁷ Ashcroft's old men inhabited the many ruins left over from the town's boom. They occupied the buildings; they invested in the town lots and the mining claims; they assumed the titles of mayor, postmaster, and justice of the peace; and they adopted the identities of "prospector," "founder," and "booster." As Shaw noted, however, an aura of foolishness surrounded the citizens of Ashcroft. Their lots and claims were worthless, and their buildings were rotting. Mayoral candidates battled over an electorate that fit around a table in McArthur's saloon.

⁶ Ibid.

They were "prospectors" with dismal prospects, "boosters" with nothing to promote, and "town fathers" with no children.

The Ashcrofters' existence inspired a type of frivolity literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called "ambivalent laughter."⁸ By appropriating social categories and identities that commanded respect and signified power in successful towns, the old men in Ashcroft cheerfully annihilated those categories and identities.⁹ Laughter and parody allowed the men to invade, break down, and reload the meanings of "land owner," "prospector," "mayor," "founder," and "man."¹⁰ Ashcroft's very existence as a town carried both comic and subversive meanings. Populated by elderly men and sporting a dysfunctional economy, Ashcroft parodied prosperous western places. By existing as a failed town, Ashcroft undermined the "valorizing" and "epic" quality of westward expansion predicated upon Anglo-Americans' successful conquest and economic development of the region.

"Ambivalent laughter" filled Dan McArthur's bar during William Shaw's visit. The old men may have been "foolish," but they resembled the middle class Aspenites—who may well have been foolish in their own right—in key ways. First, the Ashcroft men wielded power in their town, even though the source and the extent of their power was far different than the Shaws' or Mr. Andeen's. Second, the year-round residents of Ashcroft were "experts." The old men in McArthur's bar claimed expertise in subjects ranging from the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Michael Holquist ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 21.

⁹ Bakhtin posited that laughter and parody, "at the same time cheerful and annihilating (The Dialogic Imagination p. 21), destroyed the "absolute past" created by epic myths. He talks about laughter in the context of "novelistic discourse" which for Bakhtin symbolized the introduction of "other" voices into the monologue of the epic. Parody and laughter had a subversive quality in the creation of the novel. Bakhtin attached terms like "popular" and "crude contact" to "ambivalent laughter," giving the concept a double edge. "Ambivalent laughter was at the same time frivolous and deadly serious.

¹⁰ Bakhtin placed the creation of the "novelistic discourse" in opposition to Greek epics. I am taking the concept from the time period and context which Bakhtin intended and placing it next to the American "epic" of the frontier.

demonetization of silver to Shakespearean sonnets. When Robert Shaw, a prominent businessman, Mr. Andeen, a University of Uppsala graduate, and William, a college student who would later become a Pitkin County judge, walked into the saloon, they encountered caricatures of themselves. While hilarious, these caricatures were also subversive. By inhabiting roles that mimicked middle-class gentlemen, Ashcroft's "prospectors" called into question the very identities the Shaws and Mr. Andeen traveled to Ashcroft to clarify.

Ashcroft's economic and social marginality made the town a fertile site for crafting, testing, and undermining identities. From 1880 to 1939, the town remained on the fringes of the Western mining industry. Ashcroft experienced the ups and downs endemic to the West's extractive economies, and the types of identities created in the town changed according to its position in the boom and bust cycle. Ashcroft boomed between 1880 and 1887. An unstable town with only a few operating mines, Ashcroft was an economically and socially marginal place even during its boom. But the men and women who came to Ashcroft based their identities on the optimistic belief that the camp would develop into a successful mining town. They constructed incipient middle class identities that would become fully "real" only if the town's silver mines proved profitable enough to make Ashcroft a center in the Rocky Mountain mining industry.

The low quality of the silver deposits in the Castle Creek Valley and the rise of Aspen eleven miles away as a regional mining center pushed Ashcroft to the fringes of industrial mining. The silver mines that continued to operate in the Castle Creek Valley produced enough income to support a population of older, single, and socially marginal men in Ashcroft. These men survived on meager incomes from mining or mining related businesses (like Dan McArthur's saloon), and they supplemented their incomes by hunting, fishing, and trapping. The men who inhabited Ashcroft after the boom crafted extravagant

identities through role-playing and ritual performance in the town's saloon. They acted out their identities in the presence of each other and, sometimes, the presence of picnickers from Aspen. The roles they chose for themselves often inverted the social order that dictated class identities in successful towns. In Ashcroft, poor drunks were the town's leading citizens. Alcohol, laughter, and role-playing were the primary ingredients of identity formation in post-boom Ashcroft, and these ingredients combined in strange, comical, and, sometimes, subversive personae.

Ashcroft, however, was tenuously successful before it became ambiguously funny. Between 1880 and 1883, men and women turned a patch of meadow into a town, mountain sides into mining claims, and rocks laced with lead, silver, and zinc into profit. Some of them also transformed themselves. A marginally prosperous place, Ashcroft was an attractive site for men and women to create identities. Ashcroft's first mayor, thirty-year-old Peter Lonergan, inspected lumber in Michigan before catching "the mining fever" and traveling West.¹¹ Town clerk and civil engineer William Boyd surveyed cemeteries in Cincinnati.¹² Town trustee J.C. Monaghan was a gardener and a cook in Northern Michigan.¹³ Trustee Peter Kearney sold pianos in Kansas.¹⁴ Ashcroft offered these men and the hundreds like them the opportunity to re-create themselves. Whatever their previous occupations, they could start over as "prospectors," "merchants," or "pioneers" in 1880s Ashcroft.

In May 1880, Charles Culver and William Coxhead founded Ashcroft at the upper end of Castle Creek Valley twenty miles southwest of the mining camp of Aspen. Setting out from Leadville, Culver and Coxhead had intended to explore the Roaring Fork Valley, the

¹¹ The Ashcroft Journal, 2 May 1882.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

object of extravagant rumors of silver strikes in the winter of 1880.¹⁵ Prospectors, town builders, and speculators, however, had already swarmed over, mapped, and divvied up the best mining claims and town sites in the valley. Founded the previous summer, Aspen sat at the center of a web of invisible property lines that extended from the town to the surrounding hillsides.¹⁶ Arriving while a property system blanketed a place was crucial to a prospector's success in a new mining district. Culver and Coxhead bypassed Aspen and followed Castle Creek searching for unclaimed land.

Charles Culver recounted Ashcroft's founding in the inaugural edition of the *Ashcroft Journal* printed on May 2, 1882. Ashcroft was booming in the summer of 1882, and Culver's history reflected the town's recent good fortune. He congratulated the "pioneers" of 1880 and credited their "energy and foresight" for "the present prosperity and future bright prospects of the camp."¹⁷ Culver's history vindicated his and the other people's investment in the town, and their contributions went beyond money, time, and labor. Culver's account of Ashcroft's early years showed how some men and women gambled new identities on the developing town.

A self-described "prospector" when he hiked up the Castle Creek Valley, Charles Culver began acquiring titles soon after he and Coxhead decided to promote a town site at the confluence of Express and Castle Creeks. Coxhead walked back to Leadville for supplies, leaving Culver to prospect for mining claims and convince other miners to join them in the camp. A fierce booster, Culver accosted men traveling up the Castle Creek Valley on their way to the mining camps of Ruby and Gothic. His vigor earned him the nickname "Crazy Culver," but he had twenty-three believers in the camp when Coxhead

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7-9.

returned. On June 17, the prospectors formed a "Miner's Protective Association," and they elected Culver the Association's president. In August, the Protective Association organized a Town Site Company with Culver as its chairman. The Town Site Company hired a surveyor, Harry Wilkes, who divided the meadow into 840 lots, six streets, and six avenues.¹⁸

In one summer, Charles Culver added the titles of Protective Association president, Town Site Company chairman, and fervent booster to the amorphous identity of "prospector." He also acquired and began work on four mining claims--the Captain Kidd, the Eureka, the Miner's Delight, and the Water Lily--and eight town lots. In 1881, Culver tacked boarding house owner on to his Ashcroft resume. But, Culver's most significant contribution to the camp--and to his status--was his wife. Mary Culver accompanied Charles when the mining season opened in the spring of 1881. Operating the boarding house, Mary symbolized the town's impending prosperity more than any mining discovery. She confirmed Ashcroft's potential for supporting married couples, families, and an affluent class. She also softened the camp's all-male image. The arrival of a respectable woman distanced Ashcroft from the stereotypes of Western mining camps formed during the California gold rush. Mary Culver represented the middle-class stability that would move the camp beyond its transient beginnings.

Like Charles, Mary wrote an article for the 1882 *Ashcroft Journal*. Titled "Woman," the piece encouraged the town's "ladies" to work "patiently and courageously toward the standard of true womanhood."¹⁹ Mary advised Ashcroft's women to improve their character through a genuine commitment to the welfare of others. She warned against the pitfalls of

¹⁷ The Ashcroft Journal, 2 May 1882.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

gossip, gaudy displays of wealth, and "pondering and sighing over what might have been."²⁰

"True" women, Mary wrote, could never achieve "a life of success" by "belittling one another."²¹ The *Journal* used Mary's manifesto on courtesy to legitimate and advertise the camp. Like the false-fronts the men nailed into the previous summer's log cabins, her column enhanced the town's appearance of permanency. Mary did little to increase the newspaper's sales among the women in town. The only women in Ashcroft in the summer of 1882 were Mrs. Culver and Mrs. Flynn, a merchant's wife.²²

Charles Culver demonstrated his commitment to and confidence in Ashcroft's prospects by bringing Mary to live there. Like Culver, the other men with "foresight" who could envision Ashcroft's bright future accumulated titles, mining claims, town lots, and businesses. But few of these men had wives. The *Journal* included an advertisement for Ashcroft's most eligible bachelors with its announcement of the results of the town's first election: "here is a council composed of six members and everyone a matrimonial prize. Not a blank in the lot. Girls, do you hear that?"²³ Of course, only two pairs of female ears resided in town in 1882 to hear the *Journal's* editor, and Mrs. Culver and Mrs. Flynn were unlikely listeners. The editor announced, however, that single men like Mayor Lonergan--the former lumber inspector from Michigan--could support a wife and family in Ashcroft. While the chances of finding a mate in Ashcroft were dismal, the desire for matrimony exemplified the prospectors' quest for new identities. Marriage symbolized respectability and prosperity. Wives would support the identities the men started to create through owning property and claiming titles.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

The *Ashcroft Journal* promoted the town and its mines by promoting marriage, true womanhood, families, and middle-class values. The newspaper encouraged Ashcroft's citizens to purchase and send "copies...of the Journal to their friends all over the country."²⁴ The first edition of the *Ashcroft Journal* was a booster pamphlet as well as a local newspaper. Like a thousand mining camp newspapers before it, the *Journal* proclaimed its town "the Mining Wonder of the West."²⁵ The paper trumpeted the silver mines surrounding Ashcroft, but it coupled its predictions of bonanzas with promises of middle-class respectability. By giving the social and economic rewards of moving to Ashcroft equal billing, the *Journal* outlined the route to prosperity the Ashcrofters would attempt to follow.

The residents of Ashcroft adopted the symbols and the rhetoric of Victorian respectability in order to make their mining claims, town lots, and businesses attractive to outside investors. Unlike earlier gold rushes, silver mining required up-front capital. Encased in rock alongside deposits of zinc and lead, Ashcroft's silver ore needed elaborate smelters, extensive underground tunnels, and low-cost transportation to be mined profitably.²⁶ Unlike California's gold camps, Ashcroft did not experience a "placer phase," the brief initial period when a few amateur miners could become wealthy digging, panning, and sluicing loose gold from creek beds. Ashcroft's founders dug small exploratory tunnels in order to mine enough rock to "prove" the silver content of the ore in their claims, but none of them had the financial resources to develop their mines.²⁷ Their profits would come from selling their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For an overview of silver processing in the Aspen-Ashcroft region see Lysa Wegmen-French, "The History of the Holden-Marolt Site in Aspen, Colorado: The Holden Lixiviation Works, Farming and Ranching, and the Marolt Ranch 1879-1986," unpublished paper, 1990. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

²⁷ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977).

claims to an individual or a mining corporation with the capital to actually extract and process the silver ore.

The prospectors in Ashcroft resembled salesmen in search of a finder's fee. They mined for investors and buyers as much as for silver ore. The newspaper performed the vital role of advertising the prospectors' undeveloped mines. The editor of the *Ashcroft Journal*, Davis Waite, considered promoting the mines as his paper's primary function. The *Journal*, he wrote, "will mainly be devoted to a full and fit representation of the mines...calculated to invite capital and labor to their development."²⁸ Waite, however, set strict limits on the *Journal's* boosterism. "Outside puffing alone," he argued, "will not build a permanent camp."²⁹ The *Journal* would be a "responsible organ," championing the business interests of Ashcroft without lying or "puffing."³⁰

Davis Waite's concern with ~~veracity~~ and accountability reflected the exigencies of silver mining. Waite "calculated to invite capital and labor" to Ashcroft by advertising the mines, the camp, and the respectable character of Ashcroft's citizens. The rhetoric of marriage, families, and true womanhood highlighted the stability and the permanence of the town. The citizens of a stable and permanent town would be accountable for the truth of the claims they made about their mines and their camp. Of course, this line of reasoning led to a paradox. Ashcroft would only become stable and permanent when investors pumped money into the town and the mines. But to attract this investment, the residents of Ashcroft had to convince outsiders that the camp was already stable and permanent in order to present themselves as the type of people that would not lie about the mines and the town.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *The Ashcroft Journal*, 2 May 1882.

³⁰ Ibid.

Victorian respectability and silver ore were the pillars upon which the residents of Ashcroft based their future. The citizens' social character and the silver mines buttressed each other. The wealth generated from the mines would support the prospectors' claims to respectability, while the prospectors' reputable character would bolster their assertions that Ashcroft truly was "the Mining Wonder of the West." Combining the promotion of mines and social character was a widespread practice in Pitkin County, the legal jurisdiction created in 1881 that included the silver camps of Ashcroft and Aspen. In Aspen, the county seat, the newspaper advertised the year-old camp's genteel refinements and moral atmosphere.³¹ The camp, the *Aspen Times* boasted in 1881, had a grammar school, a literary society, and a Sabbath school.³² Aspen also enjoyed the presence of "at least thirteen ladies" who staged musicals, planned dances, and hosted dinner parties.³³ Aspen's trustees, reports historian Malcolm Rohrbough, promoted their fledgling town as a haven for families as well as "a great camp in the sense of mineral deposits and mining profits..."³⁴ The citizens of Aspen and Ashcroft built their future on a complicated mix of parlors and pickaxes, cotillions and blasting caps, schools and saloons. Aspenites eventually proved far better alchemists of social manners and silver mining than Ashcrofters. But, for a few mining seasons in the early 1880s, Ashcroft was the "silver queen" in Pitkin County.

In the boom summer of 1882, the citizens of Ashcroft looked like they might transform the rhetoric and symbols of Victorian respectability into reality. Town lots that had sold for five dollars now sold for 150 to 400 dollars; the Pearl Mining Company of Philadelphia shipped samples to Leadville assaying 12,613.44 ounces of silver per ton; and

³¹ Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Horace Tabor--the Leadville bonanza king--bought half-interest in the Montezuma-Tam O'Shanter mine for one hundred thousand dollars. The town boasted five hundred summer residents, three decent hotels (the Elma, the St. Cloud, and the St. James), a baseball team, fourteen saloons, a meat market, two grocery stores, a boot and stationery store, and a smelter that would be fully operational the next year.³⁵

In 1883, however, the boom began to fizzle. The smelter was working, but it could not process the Tam O'Shanter's ore at a reasonable price, and Tabor and his partners began shipping their ore to Crested Butte. The smaller mining operations could not afford the tolls over Pearl Pass, and their ore lay in piles un-smelted. In the summer, an arsonist set fire to the St. James and Elma Hotels. George Bethune, half owner of the smelter, mortgaged his share and fled town, taking with him his partner's teenage son Louis, apparently against Louis' will. (Bethune's partner, George Brooks, filed kidnapping charges.) That winter, snow slides killed five miners, and the book keeper at the Tam O'Shanter absconded with four hundred dollars he had embezzled.³⁶

Crimes and accidents became the primary activities in Ashcroft. The town's economy had stagnated. The municipal election of 1885 yielded five votes.³⁷ In January 1886, the treasurer reported five dollars and sixty cents in the town's coffers.³⁸ The Tam O'Shanter continued producing valuable ore, but its workers moved to a bunkhouse near the mine leaving Ashcroft with vacant hotels and empty homes.³⁹ In 1888, Mary Culver filed divorce papers, citing abandonment.⁴⁰ Charles had moved out of the couple's home in town to live

³⁵ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Town Record Book, Charles Teocher, Treasurer, 1886. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

³⁹ Carroll H. Coberly, "Ashcroft," Colorado Magazine 37 (April 1960), 82.

⁴⁰ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving," 123.

in a cabin with his mining partner, B.F. Wilson. Soon after Mary sued for divorce, Charles and B.F. disappeared. The newspaper guessed that the men had died in their mine above Ashcroft.⁴¹ The hard core believers in the town lobbied vigorously for a railroad. Despite demonstrating their potential, Ashcroft's mines remained a risky business venture, and in the late 1880s Colorado's railroad tycoons were worn-out, overextended, and unwilling to bank-roll more railroads in the Aspen region.⁴²

During the bust, Ashcroft's original founders left town. "Moved to Aspen" notices replaced booster "puff" articles in the newspapers.⁴³ Men and women dismantled their buildings, carted the lumber to Aspen, and reassembled their homes and businesses in Ashcroft's booming sister city in order to salvage the middle-class respectability Ashcroft's failure called into question. Ashcroft's land prices plummeted. In 1887, the Pitkin County Treasurer sold sixty town lots for 140 dollars in back taxes.⁴⁴ In 1888, Aspen's *Rocky Mountain Sun* captured the town's declining prospects:

Ashcroft has a population at the present time of seventy people. At the election seventeen votes were cast. There are four married and two unmarried ladies in camp. There is one Bible and that is owned by Mr. Parker who leads the Sunday prayer meetings.⁴⁵

As boom town residents drifted away with unanswered prayers, another type of prospector with very reduced expectations replaced them. Ashcroft's meager economy and cheap land remained attractive to older, single men who created a community that thrived on failure.

A Canadian immigrant, Dan McArthur moved to Aspen in 1886. He purchased half of Harry's Lodging House in Aspen, changing the name to "Harry and Dan's Lodging

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² W. Clark Whitehorn, "Aspen and the Railroads," unpublished paper, 1993. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁴³ For examples of moving notices see Rocky Mountain News, 10 October 1884.

⁴⁴ Deed Book One, Pitkin County.

⁴⁵ Rocky Mountain Sun, 17 November 1888.

House."⁴⁶ A member of the Knights of Labor, McArthur was elected the treasurer of Aspen's branch of the K of L soon after his arrival in Aspen. Unmarried at thirty-seven, McArthur boarded at the "Famous Hotel."⁴⁷ In 1887, he sold his interest in the Lodging House at a loss and went to work at the Merchant's restaurant in Aspen. MacArthur worked off and on at the restaurant for a year and a half. In 1888, he quit the Merchant's and took a job at the Saddle Rock restaurant for the winter.⁴⁸ In the spring of 1889, Dan McArthur moved to Ashcroft and opened a saloon.

For the next three years, McArthur operated the saloon only in the summer months.⁴⁹ Ashcroft had reverted to a seasonal camp, and customers were scarce during the bitter winters at 9,500 feet above sea level. In 1892, however, McArthur kept the bar open through the winter despite the season's torpid business. He reported \$2059.05 in receipts that year but sold only \$188 worth of liquor between December and April.⁵⁰ In 1893, the United States Congress repealed the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Without the federal government's price supports, silver sank to sixty cents an ounce from a high of a dollar ten in 1888. In Aspen, the "silver queen" of the United States, the mining work force dropped from 2,250 workers to 150 workers in a week.⁵¹ Massive unemployment rocked the town. Aspenites scavenged garbage cans for food and waited by the railroad tracks hoping for coal to fall from the trains in order to heat their homes.⁵² In Ashcroft, Dan McArthur took in close to a thousand dollars in 1893. The next year, McArthur's bar netted \$449.65.⁵³

⁴⁶ Dan MacArthur's receipt book. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Malcolm Rohrbough, *Aspen: The History of a Silver Mining Town, 1879-1893* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 214.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dan MacArthur's receipt book.

Dan McArthur remained willing to stay in Ashcroft despite his declining business. For unexplained reasons, he made Ashcroft his home. During his two-and-a-half years in Aspen, McArthur exhibited a restlessness which contrasted sharply with his anchored existence in Ashcroft. In Aspen, he switched jobs, bought and sold a business, and drifted away from the Knights of Labor. McArthur ran the saloon in Ashcroft, however, until 1918 when he retired. He died in his cabin there in 1923. McArthur had a penchant for unprofitable business ventures. As Ashcroft's postmaster, he consistently lost money.⁵⁴ The saloon's profits bottomed out in 1894, but the business never approached its pre-1893 earnings. Dan McArthur did not live in Ashcroft for the money. But why did he stay? Why did he put down roots in this hard scrabble place?

The diary of Charles Armstrong provides some clues to explain why older, unmarried men like Dan McArthur lived in a defunct mining town.⁵⁵ Covering eighteen months between November 1899 and May 1901, Armstrong's diary describes a community in Ashcroft made up of itinerant miners and older men. Charles Armstrong's cabin on Cemetery Hill, a mile-and-a-half north of Ashcroft, and Dan McArthur's saloon, anchored a transient group of single men working in the mines at the upper end of the Castle Creek Valley. Armstrong and McArthur provided "homes" where the miners stopped for news, whiskey, and friendship.

Fifty-two-years-old in 1899, Charles Armstrong listed his occupation as "mining engineer" in the Colorado Business Directory.⁵⁶ Armstrong, however, hired out his surveying skills sporadically. From November 1899 to May 1901, he collected one hundred

⁵⁴ Dan MacArthur's postmasters account book. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁵⁵ Diary of Charles Armstrong, November 1899-May 1901. Transcript. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁵⁶ Summary of Ashcroft entries in Colorado Business Directories in "The Inventory of the Papers of the Town of Ashcroft," Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.

and ninety five dollars from surveying work. Armstrong's total expenses for these eighteen months totaled one hundred and seventy nine dollars--\$108.00 for groceries, \$20.05 for liquor in the saloons in Aspen and Ashcroft, \$8.55 for clothing, \$10.00 for newspapers and books, \$15.00 for dues in Aspen's Elk's Lodge, and \$3.50 for fishhooks, haircuts, and horse shoes. Armstrong also sent fifteen dollars to his sister Roxie in Ohio. To supplement his income and reduce his grocery bill, Armstrong trapped in the winter, fished in the summer, and hunted in the fall. He sold the marten, fox, and lynx furs, making twenty dollars between 1899 and 1901. Armstrong's mixed economy left ample free time, and he spent most of it reading newspapers and books in his cabin. The stage delivered the *Rocky Mountain Sun* to McArthur's saloon in Ashcroft, and Dan distributed the papers at his convenience, sometimes dropping off a few months' worth at Armstrong's cabin.⁵⁷

Charles Armstrong had many friends. Men frequently stopped at his cabin on their way to and from the small, marginally profitable mines still in operation in the Castle Creek Valley. Lou Hannon, the stage driver on the Aspen/Ashcroft road, visited Armstrong the most, stopping the stage to share a swig from his bottle. George Seebree lived in a cabin below Armstrong in the summers. Seebree and Armstrong shared meals on occasion, and Armstrong looked after Seebree's cabin during the winter. Armstrong's closest friend, however, was the man known solely as "Pete" in his diary. An itinerant miner, Pete was the only man Armstrong referred to in his diary by first name alone. Pete was also the only man with which Armstrong shared his "home." Armstrong described the visits of other friends with phrases like "strolled in," "stopped with me," and "was here." But Pete "came home."⁵⁸

Pete wandered in and out of Armstrong's life. In 1899, he held five different mining jobs. Between jobs, Pete returned to the cabin. Armstrong maintained their home by

⁵⁷ Diary of Charles Armstrong.

cooking, cleaning, and staying put. Armstrong also lent Pete money during his periods of unemployment which Pete used to get drunk in Ashcroft and Aspen. Pete helped tend Armstrong's traps; he caught trout for the dinner table; and he worked with Charles on "the Bobtail," the mining claim the men owned together. Typically, Pete stayed at the cabin for one or two weeks before joining another mining crew. In June, Pete leased a mine with Pete Smith and disappeared from the diary. Armstrong noted the departure with the entry: "Pete came up in stage and went back to town in afternoon. He is going in on lease with Pete Smith so the poor devil will soon be busted."⁵⁹

In many ways, Armstrong's relationship with Pete epitomized Ashcroft's post-boom community. The older men living year-round in Ashcroft were "homemakers" for a transient population of single male workers. Charles Armstrong, Dan McArthur, Jack Leahy, Miles Sweeney, and Old Man Fitzpatrick provided meals, news, camaraderie, and "homes." Alcohol, gossip, and friendship bound the community together, and the men who participated in the community knew its members. Armstrong labeled certain miners who passed by his cabin "tramps." Nameless men searching for jobs, the tramps' ignorance of the local labor market and high-altitude mining distinguished them from the equally transient miners Armstrong welcomed into his home. The tramps arrived in the Valley in April and risked their lives looking for work in the high country before the snow melted and the mines opened in late May. "I don't see what they are thinking," complained Armstrong in his diary, "tackling these ranges with their summer clothes on and knowing nothing of the country [sic]."⁶⁰ Ashcroft's post-boom community included only men who "knew the country," and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

the older prospectors like Charles Armstrong secured leading roles in this community by knowing the country better than anyone else.⁶¹

News flowed into Charles Armstrong's cabin. His visitors kept him apprised of all the "doings around Ashcroft."⁶² Few events in a ten mile radius escaped his attention. During two weeks in May 1900, for example, Armstrong learned of the hiring of George Klienhaus and George Miller at Amos Borquin's Famous Mine, the sale of Cris Conn's claim to a guileless investor, Harold Clark's and Ed Ogden's discovery of a fishing hole near Ellithorp's cabin, Bill Mosty's vacation in a down-valley cabin, and Milo Dawson's triumphant return to Ashcroft following a profitable winter in Cripple Creek. Armstrong knew when snow slides closed the roads to the mines in the winter; he knew the reputations of the mine owners in the Valley; he knew where the "wildlife bureau" stocked Castle Creek with trout in the spring; and he knew when miners had spent all their money drinking in Aspen.⁶³

Collecting information was Charles Armstrong's principal occupation. A nominal mine surveyor, he was a highly motivated gossip. When visitors failed to appear at his cabin, he intercepted the stage on the Ashcroft road, chatted with the driver, and checked the coming and going of miners in the Valley. He added to the news he harvested in the vicinity of his cabin information gathered during surveying trips, visits to McArthur's saloon, and summer fishing excursions "over the range" to the Taylor Park mining district. Armstrong's gossip network included hundreds of itinerant miners, and they supplied him with "friends" and status.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

More than any other activity, surveying secured Armstrong's place on the Valley's grapevine. He platted and filed claim certificates for cash-strapped prospectors on credit. Working only in the summer months, he typically charged ten dollars a claim. His clients seldom paid their bills promptly. Armstrong collected his fees months--sometimes years--after rendering his services. He badgered the wealthier mine owners for money, but he allowed most of his clients to pay him when they could. Locating claims around Ashcroft generated more IOUs than income, but surveying rewarded Armstrong with eager informants. His debtors expressed their gratitude by visiting his cabin with news and pints of whiskey. Surveying anchored Armstrong in the Valley's mining economy and society.⁶⁵

Like Charles Armstrong, Dan McArthur collected information. Operating the town's post office out of his saloon, McArthur owned the Valley's primary site for exchanging news. Appointed postmaster in 1896, he held the job until the United States Postal Service halted Ashcroft's mail delivery in 1913. McArthur handled anywhere between two hundred and forty pieces of mail a month, earning, on average, a meager dollar-and-fifty-cent monthly commission for his labor.⁶⁶ McArthur's postmaster duties compensated him mainly with information. Through the post office, McArthur monitored the news flowing into the Valley from the outside world. The stage delivered the Aspen newspapers to his saloon, and he perused the paper before anyone else in Ashcroft. The Valley's miners journeyed to McArthur's saloon to collect their mail, and Dan had first crack at discovering the news enclosed in the men's letters. Even a gossip hound like Charles Armstrong depended on McArthur for information. Armstrong frequently walked the mile-and-a-half to Ashcroft to "spend some money with Dan" and catch up on the latest news.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Dan MacArthur's postmaster's account book.

⁶⁷ The Diary of Charles Armstrong.

Information was crucial in Ashcroft's scrawny mining economy. Mining jobs around Ashcroft at the turn of the century came in the form of "assessment work."⁶⁸ Small companies and individual mine owners hired workers to mine samples of silver ore for assaying and perform the yearly development work Colorado law required of all patented mining claims. The owners needed laborers willing to work for two or three weeks and move on. Men like Charles Armstrong's friend Pete meshed perfectly with the erratic job market. Pete worked for wages, but he habitually lost jobs. Between bouts of employment, Pete hung around Armstrong's cabin. Through Charles Armstrong, Pete gained access to an extensive network of mining gossip and contacts. Pete could afford to leave jobs because Armstrong's connections secured a route back into the wage system. Itinerant miners like Pete depended on the Ashcrofters' information networks to move them in and out of the labor market, and mine owners relied on the Ashcrofters' networks to create a work force satisfied with sporadic employment. The old men in Ashcroft made the mining economy work by linking the Valley's flighty employees to its fickle employers.

Ashcroft's depressed mining economy created a prominent role for gossip brokers. Economic motivations, however, only begin to explain the curious behavior of the men inhabiting Ashcroft's run-down cabins. Information was a valuable commodity in Ashcroft. Knowing this, men like Charles Armstrong and Dan McArthur worked hard to cultivate gossip networks. But Armstrong and McArthur did not exchange mining news for money. They traded gossip for social and cultural rewards--status, friendship, and, most importantly, recognition as "experts" on subjects that extended beyond mining.

⁶⁸ For information on Ashcroft mining in this period see Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft" (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), and Carroll Coberly, "Ashcroft," The Colorado Magazine 37 (April 1960).

The residents of Ashcroft allocated status most vividly during municipal elections. Ashcroft did not need municipal officers. The town went bankrupt in 1887. With no funds to manage, no services to provide, and no ordinances to enforce, town government was one of the many institutions in Ashcroft that seemed to exist for no purpose. The men, however, continued to hold elections. Charles Armstrong voted in the 1889 election. In 1900, he served as the "clerk of election," tallying the sixteen ballots the men cast.⁶⁹ In 1908, Carroll Coberly, the supervisor at the Montezuma-Tam O'Shanter mine, reported that "1 Republican and 22 Democrats" turned out to vote.⁷⁰ "The ticket," Coberly noted, "went as usual."⁷¹ The "usual" ticket featured Dan McArthur as the candidate for mayor and John M. "Jack" Leahy as the nominee for justice of the peace. McArthur was Ashcroft's mayor for twenty years. The title confirmed his status as the town's postmaster, sole business owner, and leading gossip broker. McArthur, according to Coberly, "ran the town."⁷² His saloon functioned as Ashcroft's only public meeting place, and McArthur fulfilled his mayoral duties by preserving order in the bar. "He never had any trouble," Coberly wrote, "folks did as he told them and when he told them."⁷³

A tenacious office seeker, Jack Leahy had a harder time convincing the Ashcrofters to certify his "judge" persona with the title of justice of the peace. Born in Plymouth, Pennsylvania in 1861, Leahy arrived in Ashcroft during the town's first summer.⁷⁴ With two other men, he purchased a three-acre "ranch" north of town and built a squat cabin. Long after his partners departed for richer mining districts, he continued to reside there. Leahy cultivated a reputation as a legal scholar specializing in mining law. He reportedly read law

⁶⁹ The Diary of Charles Armstrong.

⁷⁰ Carroll Coberly, "Ashcroft," The Colorado Magazine 37 (April 1960), 97.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 95.

books, but he never took--much less passed--a bar exam. The miners in the Valley came to Leahy for his home-spun legal advice, and, in 1897, Leahy sought to make his local renown official. He ran for justice of the peace against Ferdinand Reinert, a miner.⁷⁵

It's unclear which candidate won the election. In 1898, the Colorado Business Directory reported that Ashcroft had two justices of the peace, J.M. Leahy and F.E. Reiner (sic).⁷⁶ Either unwilling to admit defeat, or wanting to share the title, the men blessed Ashcroft with a surfeit of legal services during their four-year term. This situation was particularly amazing considering that Ashcroft--in Carroll Coberly's words--"had no business" for one judge, let alone two.⁷⁷ Like all the elected officials, the town's judge actually did nothing. The post was ceremonial and conferred a type of status on its holder. For Jack Leahy, the title of justice of the peace helped authenticate his identity as a "legal scholar." In 1902, Leahy captured the Ashcroft judgeship outright. He served as the justice of the peace for the next twelve years. Every four years, a group of men gathered in front of Dan McArthur's saloon and lent community support to Jack Leahy's "judge" persona.

During town elections the citizens of Ashcroft rewarded the community's leading gossip brokers with titles that went with political power in successful towns. In Ashcroft, a form of social and cultural power accompanied political titles. Jack Leahy, for example, was one of the most popular men in Ashcroft. He lived there for fifty-nine years, longer than any other resident. People visited his cabin for legal advice, news, and stories about Ashcroft's "hectic period."⁷⁸ Leahy gathered most of his gossip in McArthur's saloon. When Ashcroft

⁷⁴ The Ashcroft Journal, 2 May 1882.

⁷⁵ Richard E. Cowling, Pitkin County: 1900 United States Census, Colorado Genealogical Etcetera, Volume VII (Boulder, CO: Richard E. Cowling, 1987), 50.

⁷⁶ Colorado Business Directories, Ashcroft entries, "The Inventory of the Papers of the Town of Ashcroft." Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.

⁷⁷ Carroll Coberly, "Ashcroft," The Colorado Magazine 37 (April 1960), 97.

⁷⁸ The Aspen Time, 27 April 1939.

voters elevated Leahy to the judgeship, they acknowledged his role as a legal expert and an economic mediator. But they also sanctioned Leahy's "judge" identity. Elections gave Jack Leahy the license to re-invent himself, and, through voting, the men in town publicly accepted his new identity. Elections, however, occurred but once a year. Superimposing cultural meanings on economic relationships was a daily activity in post-boom Ashcroft. Charles Armstrong's culinary exploits reveal a different type of cultural alchemy. Through his cooking, Armstrong transformed itinerant miners into friends.

Charles Armstrong entertained dinner guests on a regular basis. He averaged just under a guest each week. In 1900, he cooked forty-nine dinners for visitors.⁷⁹ Armstrong likely served Spartan meals. The men living in Ashcroft purchased their supplies in Aspen and used the stage to transport their "grub." Their basic diet included dry beans, canned goods, potatoes, bacon, coffee, and bread.⁸⁰ Dairy products and fresh meat spoiled quickly, and Armstrong usually did without milk, eggs, and beef. Yet, he occasionally strayed from the basics. On Christmas 1899, he and Pete Smith dined on "roast turkey and cranberry sauce."⁸¹ The next year, Armstrong served apple sauce and roast pork for Christmas dinner. Armstrong baked his own bread, and, every so often, he baked cakes and pies too. Trout and rabbit were his favorite entrees. He stewed rabbits with onions, rice, potatoes, and canned tomatoes declaring the result a "fine dish."⁸² During the summer, Armstrong sometimes ate trout for breakfast and dinner. The men in Ashcroft harvested hundreds of fish from mountain streams. In 1900, Charles Armstrong caught forty-two in one day.⁸³ The abundance of trout made summer the high social season in Ashcroft. The fishermen invited each other

⁷⁹ The Diary of Charles Armstrong.

⁸⁰ Shopping list, the papers of Dan MacArthur. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁸¹ The Diary of Charles Armstrong.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

over for supper to consume the buckets of fish no one person could eat before the meat spoiled.

Charles Armstrong's gossip network attracted itinerant miners to his cabin, but his "fussing around the house" changed some miners into surprisingly close friends.⁸⁴ Armstrong had many kinds of relationships with the men in the Valley. Tramps passed by his cabin, but they never lingered. A large group of men visited Armstrong to chat, but they rarely stayed for dinner. A smaller number of men shared meals with him, and a few of these men lived with Armstrong for periods of time. George Klienhaus, for example, stayed at Armstrong's cabin for four weeks in 1900. A miner/pro prospector, Klienhaus had his own cabin in the Castle Creek Valley, but he apparently preferred Armstrong's company in the summer months. The two men went on extended fishing trips. In July, they camped and fished for five days in the Conundrum Valley fifteen miles northwest of Ashcroft. In August, the two men rode to Taylor Park and fished for twelve days. After they returned, Klienhaus lived with Armstrong for three weeks. In September, he moved back to his own cabin. Armstrong did not record his thoughts about Klienhaus' departure. He only noted that "Geo. Klienhaus went to town on the stage."⁸⁵ Two days later, another transient miner, Charles Torry, stopped for dinner and stayed with Armstrong for five days.

Armstrong's cooking made his cabin a gathering place. His home was a stop on the itinerant miners' social circuit along with McArthur's saloon and Jack Leahy's "ranch." Like his surveying, Armstrong's domesticity secured him a place in the Ashcroft community. Armstrong's homemaking was particularly useful and necessary because he avoided the bars in Ashcroft and Aspen. He drank his visitors' "bug juice," but he fought the temptation to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

join the other miners in the saloons.⁸⁶ His resolve, however, faltered several times between 1899 and 1901. A drinking spree on his fifty-second birthday in 1899 epitomized Armstrong's ambivalent experiences with alcohol. On Wednesday, November 29, Armstrong walked to Aspen and "spent [his] money for no good."⁸⁷ He went on a two day binge, "drinking beer with George Klienhaus and Charley Boyd most of the time."⁸⁸ Returning to his cabin sober and broke, he scribbled this entry into his diary: "came home on the stage, feeling blue."⁸⁹ Rather than succumb to a cycle of drinking and "feeling blue," Armstrong created friendships through his domesticity. He cooked meals for the companionship, the gossip, and the status most Ashcroft men found in the bars.

Between November 1889 and May 1901 Charles Armstrong vowed to stop drinking several times in his diary. On August 28, 1900, for example, Armstrong went on another drinking spree in Aspen. The next morning, he wrote: "Drove to town. Got wheel fixed on cart. Got grub. Got full of beer and spent money that I needed. Got home after dark. I must quit drinking!"⁹⁰ He made similar promises after two other binges. These were hang-over vows. When Armstrong began feeling better, he resumed his usual pattern of drinking: buying a few bottles of beer at McArthur's and accepting swigs of whiskey from his visitors. Armstrong had a complex attitude towards alcohol. He vowed to quit drinking only after sprees that cost him "money that he needed." Throughout his diary, Armstrong described instances when other men treated him to drinks and gave him pints of whiskey. These gifts elicited none of the soul searching and the promises of sobriety that accompanied the binges

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Armstrong financed himself. In fact, Armstrong treated gift whiskey as a sign of good fortune, and he frequently bragged of “getting” pints “off” his visitors.⁹¹

Ashcroft’s depressed mining economy left little extra money for bingeing. Charles Armstrong survived on an average yearly income of a one hundred and forty two dollars.⁹² His average expenses totaled one hundred and twenty dollars, and he spent ten percent (thirteen dollars) of his yearly income on liquor despite his avoidance of the bars.

Armstrong’s total expenses nearly matched to the cost-of-living estimate given by Carroll Coberly, the supervisor at the Montezuma-Tam O’Shanter mine from 1906 to 1914. In Ashcroft, Coberly reported in a memoir, “living really was cheap.”⁹³ The Ashcrofters’ “grocery bills couldn’t have run more than one hundred dollars a year,” and “clothes were inexpensive, maybe fifty dollars a year.”⁹⁴ The Ashcroft men, Coberly wrote, lived frugally. They, for example, re-used coffee grounds and read by daylight rather than purchase expensive kerosene and candles. Holding down the cost of drinking was the key to a man’s financial well being in turn-of-the-century Ashcroft. The Ashcrofters, noted Coberly, “didn’t buy much liquor, but they were perfectly willing to accept it.”⁹⁵

Coberly’s comment on the Ashcrofters’ drinking habits and Charles Armstrong’s attitude towards liquor point out a fundamental aspect of drinking in Ashcroft: it was a practice of exchange that signified power. The Ashcroft men exchanged alcohol through the custom of “treating.” Historian Kathy Peiss has described a version of this “culture of treating” in working class saloons and dance halls in turn-of-the-century New York City.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Carroll Coberly, “Ashcroft,” *The Colorado Magazine* 37 (April 1960), 103.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

The meaning of gift drinks, she argues, shifted according to the gender of the person being treated. When men bought rounds of drinks for one another, they asserted their manliness, respectability, and independence. Treating also created homosocial relationships that stressed mutuality and reciprocity.⁹⁷ The man who purchased a round of beers expected his bar mates to return the favor. Single working women, however, had neither the funds nor the social incentives to engage in reciprocal treating. They accepted drinks, meals, clothing, and entertainment from men in order to participate in the leisure culture of the saloons, dance halls, nickelodeons, and amusement parks. Wage discrimination and the young age of most working women made them dependent on gifts, and these treats came with set of obligations. “Women,” Peiss writes, “were unable to reciprocate [treats] in kind and instead offered sexual favors of various degrees.”⁹⁸ Single working women had to continually balance the benefits of leisure activities (“choice, autonomy, and pleasure”) against the sexual debts they incurred in gaining access to these benefits.

The power dynamics of treating in all-male Ashcroft corresponded with those of working-class men and women in New York City rather than the reciprocal exchange practiced among workingmen. The year-round residents of Ashcroft—the homemakers—accepted and expected gift drinks. Like the single women in New York, they sought out treats for financial reasons. Ashcroft’s depressed mining economy required that the homemakers be thrifty and minimize their bar tabs. Visitors (transient miners and picnickers from Aspen) financed Ashcroft’s saloon culture, and visitors subsidized the Ashcrofters’ participation in this culture through treating.

If the Ashcrofters felt squeamish about accepting other men’s treats without reciprocating in kind and therefore assuming the dependent role assigned to women in

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

places like New York City, they kept their feelings to themselves. None of the sources from turn-of-the-century Ashcroft suggest that the men considered gift alcohol a threat to their masculinity. If anything, the custom of treating seemed to enhance the men's status. The Ashcrofters received gift drinks during ritual performances in McArthur's saloon. In these performances, the old men played the dominant roles. They were the mayors, the judges, and the experts. Within the context of Ashcroft's shifting community of year-round residents and transient miners, treating reinforced the status and power of the men who stayed put, cooked meals, and collected gossip.

In turn-of-the-century Ashcroft, power was related to knowledge. The old men living in Ashcroft were bust-town savants. They pursued expertise in a stunning variety of disciplines. Most, like the men William R. Shaw encountered in 1912, studied mining subjects like Ferdinand Hayden's 1873 geologic survey or the philosophy of bimetallism.⁹⁹ Charles Armstrong studied math. He poured over trigonometry and geometry textbooks in his cabin, calculating practice problems late into the night.¹⁰⁰ Dan McArthur operated a "station for the Weather Bureau" with unrivaled enthusiasm.¹⁰¹ He read and recorded the temperature three times a day for over twenty years. He also measured the Valley's winter snowfall with a block of wood behind the saloon. After every storm, McArthur added the snow that settled on the top of the block to the season's tally. Jack Leahy, however, was Ashcroft's philosopher-king. In addition to studying the law, Leahy read widely in the classics. Shakespeare, Plato, Voltaire, and Plutarch were his favorites. Leahy, according to William Shaw, prevented a labor strike in Aspen's mines once by quoting *Candide*.¹⁰² Jack

⁹⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁹⁹ William R. Shaw, interview by Ramona Markalunas, 13 September 1973.

¹⁰⁰ The Diary of Charles Armstrong.

¹⁰¹ Carroll Coberly, "Ashcroft," *The Colorado Magazine* 37 (April 1960), 95.

¹⁰² William R. Shaw, interview by Ramona Markalunas, 13 September 1973.

Leahy was also a poet. When he died in 1939, Leahy's obituary in the *Aspen Times* declared his poems "the finest pieces of descriptive literature in existence today."¹⁰³

The obituary's portrayal of Jack Leahy as a great poet revealed the astonishing success of the Ashcroft men's expert identities. By 1939, Leahy's reputation as an "educated man" had reached Bunyanesque proportions. His obituary described him as "one of the most highly educated men in the Rockies" whose "wit and brilliance of mind amazed all with whom he came in contact."¹⁰⁴ Leahy's cabin "housed what is probably the finest personal library in existence in Colorado today" in which the old prospector spent his "leisure moments" reading "volumes and articles on every conceivable subject that ever appeared in print."¹⁰⁵ The obituary's hyperbole (Leahy's tiny, ten-by-twenty foot cabin did contain shelves of books, but he neither possessed the space nor the income to assemble a fine "personal library") reflected the journalist's desire to transform John M. Leahy into a "colorful character."¹⁰⁶ The reporter presented Leahy's death as the sign of the passing of a historic epoch. A "pioneer" who "led the way to the rich Aspen-Ashcroft mining district," Leahy was a link to an "old West" undergoing the transformation from lived experience into local myth.¹⁰⁷ In this myth, Jack Leahy played the role of the "the human paradox," half prospector and half professor, who experienced the mining district's "early days" and memorialized them in verse.¹⁰⁸

The 1939 *Aspen Times* obituary embraced the "expert" persona Jack Leahy had created during town elections and ritual performances in McArthur's saloon. The men living year-round in Ashcroft performed their expert identities on a regular basis while helping

¹⁰³ *The Aspen Times*, 27 April 1939.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

binge drinkers spend their money and brain cells in "Dan's place." William Shaw's Sunday spree fit into the larger pattern of binge drinking in Ashcroft. The Ashcroft men, explained mine supervisor Carroll Coberly, were always on the look-out for potential drink-buyers, especially picnickers from Aspen. "[Picnic] groups always stopped at Dan McArthur's saloon," he wrote, "and in a short while the residents would begin coming, hoping to get in on the treats."¹⁰⁹ These "treats" included whiskey and gambling booty. In 1914, the recently hired cook at the Montazuma-Tam O'Shanter's bunkhouse lost his savings and his consciousness while playing poker and drinking in McArthur's bar. The cook began the evening winning hands and spending his jackpots "setting up drinks for the crowd."¹¹⁰ When he finally passed out, he was broke. Relieving binge drinkers of their cash reflected the dark side of the Ashcrofters' expertise. The men in Ashcroft collected mining gossip, read poetry, solved math problems, studied the weather, and fleeced inebriated outsiders. Their expertise ran the gamut from "high-brow" literature to the inside knowledge confidence men used to rob their victims.

The cook's binge bewildered and disgusted Carroll Coberly, the supervisor at the Montazuma-Tam O'Shanter mine. The cook walked into the saloon with four paychecks from his previous job. With a daughter to support in Aspen, the cook threw away money he needed to support his family. Coberly knew the men in McArthur's bar "would take [the cook] for a cleaning," but he could not convince his employee to leave the saloon.¹¹¹ Money, Coberly reported, "started a great conflagration" in his workers' pockets, and paychecks frequently evaporated during weekend binges of drinking and gambling.¹¹² Coberly

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Carroll Coberly, "Ashcroft," *The Colorado Magazine* 37 (April 1960), 95.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 98.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

garnished the wages of the worst binge drinkers working for him. He funneled their wages directly to their families, landlords, and grocers to prevent paychecks from falling into the hands of the regulars in McArthur's saloon.

Coberley frowned upon the miners' irrational "desires centered around liquor and gambling."¹¹³ Yet, when placed in the context of Ashcroft's shifting community of old men and transient miners, binge drinking took on meanings beyond fiscal irresponsibility. Coberley's cook lost his money in McArthur's saloon, but he also became the Ashcrofters' "friend." The old men in the bar happily accepted the cook's "treats" and took his money. But, after demonstrating their power by fleecing the cook, the Ashcrofters put him to bed and cared for him the next morning. "A man under those conditions," Coberley noted, "was never abandoned...everyone remembered how he had 'set-em-up' for the crowd the day before, so he was well taken care of."¹¹⁴ Through bingeing, the cook altered his status in the Ashcroft community. He "'set-em-up' for the crowd" and, in the process, joined the crowd. The price of this transformation was steep. The Ashcrofters stopped exploiting the cook only after he passed out. They initiated him into the community through a drinking ritual that reinforced the Ashcrofters' expertise by highlighting the cook's alcohol-induced stupidity.

McArthur's bar was the stage upon which the residents of Ashcroft ritually expressed and created power. The binge drinker was the ritual's catalyst. He bought the drinks and performed the role of the dupe/victim. The binge drinker's part in the booze operas was not a preferable one. Charles Armstrong, for example, swore off alcohol after binges that cost "him money that he needed." Why, then, did binge drinkers participate in a ritual that cost them money and cast them as fools? William Shaw's Sunday drinking spree in 1912 offers a

¹¹³ Ibid.

few clues to understand the behavior of binge drinkers in Ashcroft. Shaw's "visit with Dan McArthur" was a rite of passage. He stepped from adolescence into adulthood in "Dan's place." Transformation and becoming were the critical features of binge drinking in Ashcroft. The same ritual that transformed William Shaw from a boy into a man changed outsiders into insiders, strangers into friends, and poor old men into bust-town savants.

Binge drinkers bank rolled and accepted inferior roles in the rituals in McArthur's saloon in order to alter aspects of their identities. Most of these changes only lasted as long as the ritual. McLars Andeen and Robert Shaw, for example, reclaimed their status as middle-class gentlemen the minute they sobered up. The expert identities that the Ashcroft men crafted in the saloon, however, out-lived them and their strange community. The men's personas survived in visitors' stories, memoirs, and histories. In these narratives, the Ashcrofters performed the role of expert witnesses. They played the "old timers" and the "pioneers" who not only experienced a mythic frontier past but embodied this past by continuing to live as "prospectors" in an undeveloped mining town.¹¹⁵ The role of historian added another layer of expertise to the Ashcroft men's personas. They became the arbiters of town's past, and their stories became the building blocks of the town's "frontier heritage."

In 1947, *Rocky Mountain Life*, a magazine dedicated to selling the Rockies as a tourist destination, published one of the two surviving poems written by the most prominent arbiter of Ashcroft's past--Jack Leahy.¹¹⁶ Entitled "How We Built a Church at Ashcroft," the poem told the fictional story of the residents' disastrous attempt at founding a Catholic church. *Rocky Mountain Life* presented Leahy's poem as an antique. The piece was worth reading not

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ William R. Shaw's story of his trip to Ashcroft fits into this category. So do the similar stories of encounters with Ashcroft "old timers" in William L. Myatt, "Castle in the sky," *Trail and Timberline* 475 (July 1958), Len Shoemaker, *Pioneers of the Roaring Fork* (Denver: Sage Books, 1965), and Kathleen Krieger Daily and Gaylord T Geunin, *Aspen: The Quiet Years* (Aspen: Red Ink Inc., 1994)/

for its literary merit but because it “came out of the past” and from the pen of “the last citizen in the town of Ashcroft.”¹¹⁷ The poem, the magazine implied, was an old-timer’s yarn. The bawdy tale revealed the “talkative, fun-loving” personality of its author as well as the wildness of the old West he remembered.¹¹⁸ Leahy’s poem was funny; it was also deadly serious. The poem captured the ambivalent laughter that seemed to accompany most frivolous activities in Ashcroft. *Rocky Mountain Life* had handed its readers a complicated relic.

“How We Built a Church in Ashcroft” describes a community of role players obsessed with silver mining and respectability. One hundred men meet in “Paddy’s” saloon to discuss the “shocking” arrival of “one Madame Nobbs” and six prostitutes in Ashcroft.¹¹⁹ The men decide to erect a church in order to remind the miners to pay more attention to their “prospects up above,” and they elect six trustees to lead the church-building effort.¹²⁰ The trustees contact “Father Placid,” the priest at the state penitentiary in Canyon City. They convince him to visit Ashcroft and lend his spiritual advice to their “heavenly enterprise.”¹²¹ He does, telling the trustees that the church should not be built in Ashcroft but in Hunley’s Addition, a camp further up Castle Creek Valley, in order to service all the mining camps in the district. The trustees balk at this idea. Jim McCool, for example, promises to burn the church down if it is built at Hunley’s. The trustee’s reaction causes Father Placid to lose “his peaceful smile,” and he leaves town after warning the men “that when you get your just rewards on earth, I’ll see you in the pen.”¹²² Without Father Placid’s blessing, the trustees’

¹¹⁶ Jack Leahy, “How We Built a Church at Ashcroft,” *Rocky Mountain Life* 27 (september 1947), 30-31.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

fund drive falters. They collect enough money to build a rough frame, “but funds that were forthcoming are yet forthcoming still, and nothing more was ever done at St. Tim’s on the hill.”¹²³ The men, that is, do nothing more. One night, Madame Nobbs, “she of scarlet fame,” and her employees “steel away the frame” to build a brothel “upon the sands of Castle Creek as if to mock the teachings of our Saviour, mild and meek.”¹²⁴

Up until this point, “How We Built a Church at Ashcroft” is a parody of frontier morality. Leahy first inverts the gender roles of the mythical “gentle tamers” of frontier towns. In the poem, women—Madam Nobbs and the six prostitutes—represent the threat to public decency. Elected in Paddy’s saloon, an unlikely wellspring of morality, the six male trustees will be the camp’s tamers. They will raise the funds for the church and secure Father Placid’s blessing. Events soon show, however, that the trustees are less than paragons of virtue. Their sins equal or exceed those of the prostitutes. Roaring Mike is a murderer; Jim McCool an adulterer; Billy Shale, the mining expert who informs Father Placid that “theology and geology go ever hand in hand”, worships science over God; and Deacon Perch, the least reprehensible trustee, is a “bibulous” drunk, willing to “take [his] drinks from the spigot or the bung.”¹²⁵ The unraveling of the trustees’ moral and religious pretensions creates the context for most of Leahy’s jokes. In the fifteenth stanza, for example, Jim McCool’s true character comically pokes through when he promises “to be a Christian soldier, by my colors standing true, to do unto others just what I wish to do.”¹²⁶

The laughs in “How We Built a Church at Ashcroft” come at the trustees’ expense. They are the poem’s fools, appropriating a social role—church founder—they have neither the religious devotion nor the moral character to perform. Jack Leahy devotes most of the poem

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

to exposing the absurdity of murderers, adulterers, blasphemers, and drunks erecting a church in order to protect their “immortal souls” from a group of prostitutes. The poem, however, swerves sharply from the absurd in its conclusion. Leahy tacks on a final stanza that punishes “that mocking crowd of light and erring folk, who thought on the failure of our church to perpetuate a joke.”¹²⁷ He has a snow slide demolish Madame Nobb’s brothel, killing her and burying her “gay crowd.” For most of the poem, Leahy exploits the failure of the Ashcrofters’ church in order to perpetuate his own jokes, but, in the end, he destroys the prostitutes and their customers for their “mocking” laughter. The concluding avalanche makes “How We Built a Church at Ashcroft” ambiguously funny. The poem becomes a long joke with a punch line that discourages laughter.

“How We Built a Church in Ashcroft” contains references to Ashcroft’s turn-of-the-century community. The church trustees, for example, are elected and “empowered” in a saloon--the site of the ritual transformation of identities in the real Ashcroft. The poem also re-produces the role of the “old timer,” the eye-witness to a mythic frontier past. Jack Leahy incorporated himself into the poem. He is one of the “we” in the poem’s title who attempt to build the church. In his poetry as in his life, Leahy played the part of the town’s historian. Along with the disreputable trustees, he survived the avalanche to tell the story of Ashcroft’s ill-fated church.

Long after William Shaw visited McArthur’s saloon, Ashcroft continued to attract outsiders. These outsiders searched for “old timers” to tell them stories about the town’s past. The “old timers” were the architects of Ashcroft’s history. Led by Dan McArthur and Jack Leahy, the unmarried men living in the ruins leftover from the town’s boom constructed the mythic frontier past ghost town enthusiasts would celebrate and

¹²⁶ Ibid.

memorialize when they began visiting Ashcroft in the 1940s. Stories became the Ashcrofters' chief legacy. Most of these tales were of the "fun loving" variety. But, as Jack Leahy's poem exemplified, in Ashcroft, the frivolous and the serious (like "theology and geology") often went hand in hand. During William Shaw's visit with Dan McArthur, for example, the men "drifted off into early days of Ashcroft," telling Shaw about the house with gold wallpaper Horace Tabor built for his second wife, Baby Doe, and about the time Lillian Russell came to Ashcroft to talk to the miners for five hundred dollars.¹²⁸ Neither of these stories were historically accurate or significant, but in telling them the men in McArthur's saloon confirmed their identities as experts as they created a mythologized past. With each tale told, history and identity became more intertwined. When tourists seeking an encounter with the past in a "ghost town" traveled to Ashcroft after World War II, they found a place and a history shaped by the men in McArthur's bar.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ William R. Shaw, interview by Ramona Markalunas, 13 September 1973.

CHAPTER III

“HERE IN THE MOUNTAINS ALL THINGS LIVED AND DIED”¹

On a summer day in 1939 ghost town enthusiasts Muriel Sibell Wolle and Merrill Beckwith motored into a dead-end valley. The car carried the women past a "skeleton mill" and mine buildings rotting in a meadow.² Further up the valley, a ski lodge marked the site of Highland, a dead mining camp. Later, the women passed the carcass of a one-room cabin and the decaying timbers of a livery stable. Then, after a bend in the road, Wolle and Beckwith spotted their destination: "the little group of weathered buildings at foot of the Elk Mountains"--Ashcroft, Colorado.³

When Muriel Wolle wrote of her visits to mountain landscapes, lumber turned to bone, cabins changed to cadavers, and towns became ghosts. A professor of fine arts at the University of Colorado, Wolle toured, sketched, and researched western ghost towns as a "hobby." Enthralled by these fragments of "the Old West," she spent her vacations hunting for places "full of echoes, and memories, and history."⁴ Ashcroft lived up to Wolle's morose expectations. Knee-high grass grew in the streets; false-fronted stores tilted on decaying foundations; and empty cabins slumped in a meadow that had "once teemed with life."⁵

¹ Perry Eberhart, Guide to the Colorado Ghost Towns and Mining Camps (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1959), 13.

² Muriel Sibell Wolle, Stampede to Timberline: The Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of Colorado (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press-Swallow Press, 1949), 228.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 228.

Deer flies, Wolle reported, were the only things teeming in Ashcroft in 1939. The "lonely and unspoiled" town had died long ago.⁶

Muriel Sibell Wolle built a successful career as an artist, teacher, and writer on her ability to see death in western places. From 1926 to 1977, she visited and sketched over a thousand mining towns and wrote six ghost town guidebooks. For the towns, a visit from Wolle resembled an encounter with the grim reaper. With a few strokes of a black crayon, she could turn the liveliest communities into "skeletal shells."⁷ Wolle based her morbid vision of the West on a talent for sensing the "mood" or the "quality" of a place.⁸ To her, most mining towns looked, and more importantly, felt dead. Through her sketches, travels, and guidebooks, Muriel Wolle promoted a funereal approach to site-seeing. Her books urged tourists to see death in places which, to other viewers, exhibited abundant signs of life.

Wolle misread Ashcroft's vital signs. Those lonely cabins decomposing in the meadow made some pulses race in the summer of 1939. Anger, recriminations, and greed swirled around one cabin in particular, shattering the illusion that Ashcroft rested in peace. Jack Leahy died in April, 1939. His death sparked a feud between Leahy's heirs and the Highland Bavarian Corporation (HBC), owner of the Ashcroft town site.⁹ In 1935, Leahy sold most of his land to Thomas J. Flynn, a representative of the HBC, for five thousand dollars.¹⁰ "Judge" Leahy retained ownership of a cabin on a small plot North of town along with several mining claims, but he promised Flynn that the HBC could relocate his cabin to the town site after his death. The HBC needed to clear Leahy's land in order to secure the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ For information on the Highland-Bavarian Corporation and its attempt to build a ski resort in Ashcroft see Annie Gilbert Coleman, "Re-creation through recreation: Aspen Skiing from 1870 to 1970," unpublished paper, 1995.

right-of-way along the Aspen/Ashcroft road and to make room for a hotel that the corporation wanted to build on the site. Suspecting that Flynn had cheated his brother, James Leahy--Jack's principal heir--refused to trade the "homestead" for a plot in Ashcroft. With his sons and several cases of beer, James moved into the cabin for the summer, and the Leahys began prospecting Jack's old claims.¹¹

Far from moribund, Ashcroft inspired a battle over its future in 1939. The Leahys championed a return to Ashcroft's past. They poked around in Jack's mines, but spent most of their inheritance—the five thousand dollars from the Jack's Ashcroft land—on beer and blasting caps. Through their carousing, Jim Leahy and his sons resurrected memories of Ashcroft's saloon culture. They celebrated prospecting and alcohol, recalling the strange community of old men and itinerant miners in which Jack had played such a prominent role. While the Leahys envisioned Ashcroft's future as a continuation of its boozy past, Tom Flynn and the HBC advocated a far different blueprint for the town's development. Convinced they could build a ski area that rivaled St. Moritz on nearby Mt. Hayden, the HBC hired New York architect Ellery Husted to evaluate Ashcroft's potential as a base village. Husted suggested the HBC restore the mining town and develop the whole project "along those lines which would be indigenous to the country and interesting to all Americans."¹² Picturing Ashcroft re-born as the "Williamsburg of the Old West," Husted was "extremely keen" on the publicity value of a western theme.¹³ "A jail that held Jesse James, a barroom with gun shots...as well as a lot of other buildings," he advised HBC

¹⁰ Thomas J. Flynn, Washington D. C., to Father Patrick McSweeney, Aspen, 1 May 1939. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹¹ James Leahy, Cascade, Idaho, to Father Patrick McSweeney, Aspen, 15 August 1940. Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹² Theodore S. Ryan, "The Beginnings of Alpine Skiing at Aspen: The 'Highland-Bavarian' Story," interview by George W. Madsen, Jr., 23, 26, 30 March 1965, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

director Ted Ryan, "might have more possibilities for publicity than a Bavarian or a Swiss village."¹⁴

Ellery Husted and the Leahys tailored Ashcroft's history to suit their competing visions of the town's future. The Leahys invoked the tradition of drinking, mining, and role playing to feebly counter the HBC's power and money. Ellery Husted, on the other hand, envisioned a tourist mecca built on an "indigenous" past filled with six-guns and outlaws. Thomas Flynn attempted to synthesize these visions. He offered the Leahys a place in the "new village" where their rowdy behavior would only add to the western flavor of the ski resort.

The feud between the HBC and the Leahys continued for three summers. Neither faction won. Pearl Harbor derailed the HBC's plans. Government financing for the ski area--a seven-hundred-thousand dollar loan from the New Deal's Reconstruction Finance Corporation--evaporated; the steel for the tramway to Mt. Hayden went to the war effort; and the directors of the HBC dispersed to serve their country.¹⁵ After the war, the momentum for founding a ski resort in the Elk Mountains shifted to Aspen. The largest land owner in the upper Castle Creek Valley, the Highland-Bavarian Corporation continued to lobby the United States Forest Service and the Colorado state government to help fund and issue permits for a major ski area on Mt. Hayden. In 1973, the Forest Service designated Mt. Hayden a wilderness "study area."¹⁶ The first step in making Hayden a "roadless wilderness," this designation finally ended the HBC's plans for the peak. The story of the Leahys is harder to follow. James Leahy refused to relocate the cabin. He and his sons,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

however, spent the remainder of Jack's five-thousand-dollar inheritance in the early 1940s and sold the homestead to the Highland Bavarian Corporation. Ultimately, Jack Leahy's cabin conformed to Muriel Sibell Wolle's morbid vision of Ashcroft. Empty and disheveled, the cabin stood as a monument to the past.

The past recalled by Jack's cabin depended on the expectations of the tourists who peeked into its windows and carved their initials into its logs. Guidebook writers like Muriel Wolle encouraged tourists to perceive a life cycle at work in towns like Ashcroft. They endowed mining towns with the ability to live and die. In 1939, Muriel Wolle applied this life cycle metaphor to Ashcroft. She declared Ashcroft dead and placed it in a metaphoric bone yard that included over two hundred mining towns in Colorado. The life cycle analogy, however, coexisted with other interpretations of towns. The HBC and the Leahys and the HBC offered two: a resort future based on a mythic western past and a prospector future embedded in local traditions of mining and drinking. Mining towns "died" when the life cycle metaphor supplanted competing interpretations of a town's past and future.

True ghost towns exist in the imaginations of the people who hunt for them. They are the product of a cultural viewpoint--a way of perceiving places--which emerged full blown in Colorado after the second World War. The war changed Coloradans' relationship to the state's most iconic landscape--the Rocky Mountains. In the 1940s, Colorado's population increased by more than 200,000 people.¹⁷ The cities on the Eastern plains grew the most. By 1950, Denver and its adjacent counties contained 42.5 percent of Colorado's

¹⁶ U. S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, White River National Forest, Ski Area Chronology: Chronologies of the Ski Areas on and Adjacent to the White River National Forest, Colorado, by Paul Hauk, Glenwood Springs, CO, 1979.

¹⁷ Carl Ubbelohde, Et. Al., A Colorado History (Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing Company, 1988, sixth ed.), 334.

population. While the Front Range boomed, rural and mining counties lost population. In the 1950 census all of Colorado's mountain counties reported fewer residents.¹⁸

After World War II, most Coloradans lived in cities on the Front Range and experienced the mountains as tourists, not workers or inhabitants. Ghost town guidebooks targeted this audience. "From Denver, head West on highway..." was a omnipresent phrase in the guides.¹⁹ The authors assumed their readers would start their trips from points on the urban Front Range. Beyond a common West-bound orientation to the mountains, guidebook writers and their audience shared ambivalent attitudes towards tourists and tourism. Authors wrote guidebooks to demonstrate their inside knowledge of western places, and readers used guidebooks to rise above the status of mere tourists. Although they looked and acted like tourists when they visited the mountains, ghost town enthusiasts struggled to carve out and inhabit an intermediate category between "tourist" and "local." Front Range men and women, often recent arrivals in Colorado, wrote guidebooks, formed ghost town clubs, immersed themselves in town histories, and traveled to abandoned mining camps to establish their credentials as Westerners and Coloradans. Thus, ghost towns served as portals of identity in post-war Colorado. They transformed the tourists that strolled through them into virtual-natives.

Muriel Wolle's life-long quest to become a Westerner exemplified how newcomers remade themselves through "ghost towning." Born in Brooklyn, Wolle moved to Colorado in 1926. With degrees in advertising, costume design, and art education from New York University and the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, she taught color and design at the University of Colorado and used her vacations to explore the West. Soon after her

¹⁸ Ibid., 335.

arrival, she "discovered the Indians of New Mexico."²⁰ More precisely, she discovered the Indians' belongings. Material objects were the windows through which Wolle peeped to view, understand, and appropriate Native American religions and cultures. Zuni and Hopi kachina masks, for example, revealed a cosmology in which "Gods were personified as animals, nature forces, and symbolic creatures."²¹ Wolle treated the human beings who wore the masks with less reverence. She gave speeches, wrote articles, and raised funds for St. Christopher's Mission, an Episcopalian organization dedicated to christianizing New Mexico's Indians. At the same time she worked to understand and preserve Native American material culture, Wolle supported Christian missionaries who undermined the religious meanings of the objects she investigated.

Muriel Wolle's ideas about art, history, and culture marginalized people and reified objects. Wolle advocated an approach to painting dedicated to both recording the "authentic" appearance of objects and catching the "mood and quality" of kachina masks, Zuni pottery, and abandoned buildings.²² According to Wolle, good painters enhanced the authenticity of the objects they depicted. Like photographers, painters generated "graphic records" of objects.²³ But, unlike photographers, they filtered artifacts through their "mind's eye" rather than through the lens of a machine.²⁴ The painters' ability to portray the invisible contexts which surrounded objects made them the perfect recorders of history and culture.

¹⁹ For examples of West-bound bias of ghost town guidebooks see Robert L. Brown, Colorado Ghost Towns: Past and Present (Caldwell, IO: The Caxton Printers, 1973), and Perry Eberhart, Guide to Colorado Ghost Towns and Mining Camps (Athens, OH: Swallow Hill Press, 1959).

²⁰Muriel Sibell Wolle, "Writing Creative Poetry," speech given to the University of Colorado English Department, undated. Western History Collections, Denver Public Library, Denver, CO.

²¹Muriel Sibell Wolle, "Pictorial Preservation of the West: Indian's Culture and Mining Towns" speech given at "alumni of the Century Series," 21 October 1976. Western History Collections, Denver Public Library, Denver, CO.

²²Muriel Sibell Wolle, Stampede to Timberline: The Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of Colorado (Athens, OH: Ohio Univeristy Press-Swallow Press, 1949), 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Wolle saw her art as an act of preservation. Her drawings, sketches, and paintings preserved not only the appearance of artifacts but the cultural "mood" attached to them. When Navajos became Episcopalian, therefore, the world did not lose their traditional religion. Wolle had already "preserved" their culture in her drawings.

Like Indian artifacts, mining towns triggered Wolle's preservation instincts. In 1925, she visited Central City on a sightseeing tour. Her first encounter with a mining town, Central City impressed Wolle with its run-down appearance. Central's deserted buildings, empty stores, rusty mills, and Victorian houses (both occupied and unoccupied) oozed history. "The place itself," Wolle noted, "seemed to cry out for a pictorial rendering."²⁵ To answer the town's cry, Wolle had to work quickly. The town that had "witnessed Colorado's pioneering achievement" was disappearing fast.²⁶ "Someone should record it," she wrote, "before it decayed or was restored to twentieth century needs."²⁷ Wolle returned in September to begin sketching the town, and she "returned again and again until [she] had Central City on paper."²⁸

Central City launched Wolle's ghost town hobby, and the account of her initial reaction to the town revealed key assumptions which drove her twenty-two-year project to record Colorado's mining towns. First, residents of Central City, past and present, were conspicuously absent from her description of the town. The people who built, owned, and inhabited many of the buildings that "cried out" remained silent while their architecture yelped. Locals inhabited a nebulous place in Wolle's ghost town books. They surfaced in the text to give directions, tell stories, and, sometimes, behave like provincial nabobs. Wolle,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

however, omitted locals from her "pictorial records" of their towns. During her career, she sketched over nine-hundred mining towns; not one human being appeared in her drawings.

Second, Central City's stores, mills, and houses embodied a romantic past in which pioneers discovered mother lodes, built towns, and endured "insuperable hardships."²⁹ This past, however, had no connection to the present. It was dead. Only the buildings "witnessed" the epic achievements of the pioneers. Muriel Wolle approached history in the manner of a collector of antiques. She gathered scattered items from the past--newspaper articles, opera programs, tall tales, and anecdotes--to give her guidebooks "verve, variety, change of pace and local color."³⁰ For Wolle, historical sources were like bric-a-brac. When placed together, they helped conjure the "mood and quality" of the romantic era she wanted to preserve.

Third, in order to preserve Central City, the town had to be put on paper. Wolle did not advocate the restoration of buildings. Like her drawings of Indian artifacts, her ghost town sketches were improved substitutes for the real things. They faithfully reproduced a town's appearance while capturing the mood of the past. Muriel Wolle created texts which mediated tourists' experiences. She converted her experiences in locating and investigating ghost towns into a text. Tourists then purchased her texts in order to experience ghost towns themselves. Wolle's ideas of art and preservation, however, complicated this process. She sketched ghost towns in order to preserve buildings on the verge of disintegration. Yet, if the preserved buildings only existed on paper, tourists wanting to explore ghost towns on their own had few reasons to buy her guides.

Tourists, however, did eventually purchase Wolle's texts despite the guides' tendency to direct readers to towns they could no longer visit, buildings they could no longer explore,

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

and sights they could no longer see. The inability of tourists to follow Wolle to all of the sites she described and depicted in her books underwrote the textual identity that she created through authoring ghost town guides. Wolle crafted an identity as an expert and a Westerner based on her early encounters with the buildings, people, and towns that had disappeared since she began her ghost town hobby in the 1920s. By getting into the skeletal shell game early, Wolle sketched buildings and talked to old timers that had disappeared or died by the 1950s. If tourists wanted to see these buildings and encounter these old timers, they had to consult Wolle's guidebooks. Within the guides' pages, therefore, Muriel Wolle became the "old timer" who had seen and experienced a golden age of ghost towning that, like the frontier, had vanished.

In 1933, Wolle published a booklet of sketches and history. *Ghost Cities of Colorado: A Pictorial Record of Central City, Black Hawk, and Nevadaville* sold poorly (it took Wolle ten years to dispose of 100 copies) and angered many of the towns' residents who provided her with lodging, anecdotes, and directions during her sketching trips.³¹ "We hardly approve of the book...", the editor of the *Central City Register-Call* wrote Wolle, "[Central City and Blackhawk] are far from being 'Ghost Cities' as the young lady author well knows through her many visits here."³² Other residents complained that Wolle illustrated "only the old and dilapidated buildings" in town and that she deliberately "made walls lean crazily."³³ Wolle answered her critics by suggesting that they could not see straight (or crooked in this case)

³⁰ Muriel Sibell Wolle, "Writing Creative Poetry."

³¹ Ibid.

³² Muriel Sibell Wolle, *Stampede to Timberline: Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of Colorado* (Athens, OH: Ohio Univeristy Press-Swallow Press, 1949), 40.

³³ Ibid.

and that the locals had missed the point of her project. "My whole thesis," Wolle wrote, "was to preserve the past rather than record the present."³⁴

The logic of Wolle's thesis escaped more people than the inhabitants of Central City in the 1930s. Yet, despite the failure of *Ghost Cities of Colorado*, she continued her project. From 1934 to 1947, she scoured the mountains, sketching towns, and irritating many locals. In 1941, Wolle visited Victor--a mining community in Southeastern Colorado--only to discover that another artist who shared her funereal vision of mining towns had already "painted the town" and infuriated some residents.³⁵ She recorded one terse conversation she had with a Victor man in *Stampede to Timberline*, the guidebook she published in 1949:

You're another one of these artists, aren't you? ...there have been a lot of them here lately. One fellow came up a few weeks ago...a picture that he painted here was printed in the Denver Post and was called "Ghost town." We didn't like that. We're no "has been" place....you should hear our high school band!³⁶

Seeing and hearing, however, were talents Muriel Wolle claimed for herself and denied to locals. A blast from the high school band would not have disturbed the dead calm she was determined to perceive in the towns she visited.

For Wolle, sound betrayed a place's deadness. Ghost towns contained "no people, no sounds."³⁷ As historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has noted, the significance of silence in ghost town guidebooks emerges from the tendency of their writers to contrast descriptions of quiet and stillness with departed images of noise and activity.³⁸ In 1945, for example, Wolle visited the site of Maysville, a short-lived town in South-central Colorado. Maysville was a "vanished town," no buildings remained. With nothing to sketch, Wolle wrote about

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 463.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 226.

the town's silence. To draw a contrast with Maysville's stillness, however, she used the image of a "whistling," "chugging," "tooting" train that "rattle[d] by" the town site while she watched.³⁹

This contrast between sound and silence, life and death, fit nicely with Wolle's ideas concerning the mood and quality of dead places. Discussing quiet in contrast with noise conveyed a sense of absence and loss. This contrast between life and death, provoking an emotion akin to mourning, Patricia Limerick argues, explains the attraction of ghost towns. Tourists traveled to dead towns for "the opportunity to stand at a spot where humans once lived in numbers and to contemplate the overpowering fact of their absence."⁴⁰ Muriel Wolle created this sense of absence in her drawings as well. A sketch artist, she interacted with the places she visited as much with her eyes as her ears. Through the illustrations in her books, Wolle communicated a double sense of loss. Her sketches mourned the passing of some towns while predicting the demise of others.

While sound confirmed some towns' deadness, sight indicated other towns' down fall. Muriel Wolle portrayed a world on the verge of collapse in the sketches that illustrated her guidebooks. Buildings, stovepipes, telegraph poles, and church steeples did indeed lean crazily in her drawings. Had Wolle placed humans in her ghost town art, viewers would have been overcome with the urge to cry "Watch out! You are about to be squashed."

No one was physically injured in Wolle's portraits, but her sketches did bruise the feelings of the residents of some towns. In 1949, Wolle published an article in the *Ford Times*, a travelers' magazine, that included a watercolor painting of St. Elmo, at one time a

³⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure," *American Art* 6 (Fall 1992): 37.

³⁹ Muriel Wolle, *Stampede to Timberline*, 162.

⁴⁰ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure," *American Art* 6 (Fall 1992): 162.

substantial town in Southern Colorado dependent on summer tourists for its survival in the 1940s. The painting was the opening salvo in the "Stark-Wolle feud," an thirty-year dispute in which seeing played a central role.⁴¹

Annie Stark and her brothers, Tony and Roy, operated St. Elmo's general store. After the *Ford* article came out, ghost town aficionados began writing Wolle that the Starks were livid about her painting. The Starks accused Wolle of misrepresenting St. Elmo's appearance and falsely labeling the town a ghost, thus ruining their summer tourist business.⁴² One ghost town enthusiast reported to Wolle that Annie Stark "said you'd made the picture in the *Ford* magazine with the chimney falling off their store when they were using the chimney every day."⁴³ Besides the chimney, Stark complained that "[Wolle] had left off the post office sign" and made the sidewalk appear "all wavy and ghostly looking."⁴⁴ Wolle bristled when locals challenged her artistic license. Years later, she retaliated against the Starks. She published rumors that their store smelled funny, that they sold inferior goods, and that a Stark brother had once threatened to shoot a group of tourists. The Starks' minds, she implied, were as off-kilter as their town.⁴⁵

Wolle frequently noted that people living in mining towns perceived their world incorrectly. When the residents of Central City accused Wolle of making "walls lean crazily," she suggested that their eyes had grown accustomed to their tilting town. Walls that looked straight to them, she argued, were actually crooked. Sometimes, though, Wolle converted locals to her way of seeing. In Leadville, the janitor of the County Courthouse watched as she sketched a pot-bellied stove in a court room. The next day she returned to finish the

⁴¹Muriel Sibell Wolle, Timberline Tailings: Tales of Colorado's Ghost Towns and Mining Camps (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press-Swallow Press, 1977), 120.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

drawing and the janitor commented: "I didn't like that drawing you made yesterday. You made that stovepipe crooked and I didn't like that. So this morning I went in there and I looked at the thing and be-danged if it isn't crooked."⁴⁶

Muriel Wolle's vision of history distinguished her from locals. Unlike the residents of mountain towns, she focused on the slow decay and disintegration that pulled their towns towards the ground. Wolle sketches forecasted a future as well as preserved a past. She foresaw the locals' world--symbolized by their homes, schools, churches, and businesses--falling down around them. Her drawings of buildings anticipated their collapse, and the absence of humans in Wolle's sketches anticipated a mountain landscape in which only ghosts and their contemplators roamed. This morbid future, of course, held advantages for Wolle. As a guidebook writer, she sought to take the place of mountain residents as tourists' primary source of information. With locals pushed out of the picture, tourists had to turn to her for history, directions, and "local color." Yet, despite their erasure from her sketches, people did not vanish from the mountains. In fact, Wolle's project hinged on the humans living in or near historic mining towns. To acquire the information tourists wanted to buy, she had to ask a local.

Locals appeared everywhere in the text of Muriel Wolle's ghost town books. In the text, waitresses, gas station attendants, grocery store clerks, children, librarians, miners, old-timers, janitors, cowboys, and hotel managers directed Wolle to old mining towns and offered their stories about the places. The residents of mountain towns made it possible for her to write guidebooks. Without their cooperation, Wolle's ignorance and inexperience would have limited her career to writing guidebooks for wandering aimlessly in the mountains. Locals had power. Family, tradition, property ownership, and history rooted

⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

them in places Wolle considered fascinating and sacred. Wolle acknowledged locals' authority by casting herself as the western version of a dumb, clumsy outsider. She considered herself a "tenderfoot."

The activities and attributes which qualified Wolle for tenderfoot status included falling down, becoming lost, spraining ankles, forgetting the location of parked cars, admitting a fear of driving in the mountains, and working from within a "decidedly plump" physique which restricted her mobility at high altitudes.⁴⁷ To minimize the danger and embarrassment caused by her ineptness, Wolle recruited University of Colorado students to drive her to ghost towns. These "chauffeurs" became a literary device in the guidebooks.⁴⁸ Wolle wrote history as if she having a conversation with her drivers. She often introduced the stories, anecdotes, and tall tales that made up the guidebooks' historical sections with a rhetorical question from a chauffeur: "You wouldn't happen know anything about this place, would you?" A driver might ask her in the text. Wolle then quoted herself informing the chauffeur of the town's colorful past. This technique allowed Wolle to cast herself as a tenderfoot and an expert simultaneously. She needed a student—usually a young man—to help her travel to ghost towns, but Wolle's knowledge of history mitigated her greenhorn status.

Wolle's feet were tenderest in Central City during the 1920s. She first visited Central as part of a summer bus tour. When she decided to return to sketch the town, summer had turned to fall and the tour companies had closed for the season. Stranded in Boulder without a car, Wolle hired a taxi to transport her as far as Nederland, a town half-the-way to Central. In Nederland, she hitched a ride with a Blackhawk family in town to watch a baseball game.

⁴⁶ Muriel Wolle, Stampede to Timberline, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

The family dropped Wolle off at the Teller House in Central City where the owner of the town's lone hotel shared his dinner of cheese and crackers with her. After four days of sketching, Wolle rode home in the "Boulder bread man's" truck after he had completed his deliveries.⁴⁹

During this second trip to Central City, Muriel Wolle stepped into the "back regions" of a tourist attraction. Anthropologist Dean MacCannall defines back regions as the hidden spaces in an attraction that conceal the props and activities which might discredit the front or "contrived regions" intended for tourists.⁵⁰ In the 1920s, Central City had front and back seasons rather than regions. Tourists visited the town in the summer when tour companies supplied transportation and planned itineraries, and townspeople sold soda pop and opened the Masonic Lodge for viewing.

Wolle's difficulty in transport was the principal sign that the season for sodas and sightseers had passed. In the fall, no one thought about making the mountains accessible to people without cars. Wolle's dependence on chance encounters and hospitality were further indications that she had entered the locals' time and space. Her trip's success hinged on luck and the kindness of strangers. The Boulder bread man, the family from Blackhawk, and the owner of the Teller House drove her around, fed her, and told her stories about the town. Wolle's reliance on locals for transportation and information underscored her tenderfoot status. She had to cut her trip back from two weeks to four days because "as a greenhorn" she "had not realized how much warm clothing [she] should have brought for the mountain altitudes."⁵¹ Yet, while she remained a tenderfoot, Wolle was not a tourist during her excursion to Central City. The absence of tour companies to organize and control the trip

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ Dean McCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 94.

allowed her to experience the town in a role on the margins of insider. By traveling to Central in the fall, she encountered people tourists seldom met and gained access to the "back" spaces they seldom visited.

Wolle relied on locals to help her enter spaces off limits to tourists. The residents of mountain towns unlocked homes, churches, courthouses, and opera houses so that she could sketch their interiors as well as their facades. In Fairplay, the janitor of Park County Courthouse let her in to draw the building's courtroom.⁵² In Georgetown, the proprietress of the Hotel de Paris ushered Wolle into the private library of Louis Dupuy, the hotel's mysterious former owner.⁵³ In Baltimore--the not quite "deserted camp" north of Central City--a caretaker unlocked the opera house and the Baltimore Club, the town's cob-webbed saloon.⁵⁴ In Aspen, a man allowed her to sketch the interior of his Victorian house while he went fishing, asking her only to "shut the front door tight when [she] left."⁵⁵

Entering private homes, locked courthouses, and secluded rooms elevated Wolle above the status of tourist. The demands of the guidebook business, however, prevented Wolle from focusing on the exclusivity of her experiences too intensely. After all, the central premise behind guidebooks was to describe places readers could actually visit. Moreover, ghost towns attracted tourists because ideally they lacked both private spaces and locals. Defined by guidebook writer Lambert Florin as "a town completely abandoned by all business and permanent residents," the ideal ghost town had no "back regions."⁵⁶ Muriel Wolle shared Lambert's definition of "perfect ghost towns." She searched for abandoned sites with overgrown streets, listing buildings, and no residents. Her forays into the

⁵¹ Muriel Wolle, Stampede to Timberline, 16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

mountains, however, revealed ideal ghost towns for what they were--ideals. She met locals even in the most remote and isolated places.

In 1941, Wolle visited Gladstone, "a deserted town at the end of the road," at sunrise.⁵⁷ Gladstone fulfilled Wolle's criteria for a "true ghost town."⁵⁸ Frame houses lined the street; a picturesque school house stood at the lower end of town; and the massive concrete foundation of a demolished mill scaled the mountainside "like giant steps."⁵⁹ Gladstone offered another sure sign of its death--"not a sound was to be heard."⁶⁰ To Wolle's surprise, however, plumes of smoke began rising from the quaint houses. She knocked on the door of one house to find out about the place: "A man, his face covered with soap and his hands dripping, came in answer... 'yes, this is Gladstone,' said the man, and shut the door."⁶¹ The only flaw in the Gladstone's ghostly bearing were the grumpy people living in it, a defect Wolle remedied in her sketch of the town.

Most defunct mining towns Wolle visited failed to meet the demanding standards of the ghost town ideal. Summer tourists, miners, and even year-round families resided in busted towns. In the 1940s, Baltimore, Jasper, Gold Dirt, Lawson, Vicksburg, Windfield, and Tin Cup were what Wolle called "dark towns."⁶² Former mining towns turned into resorts, "dark towns" bustled with vacationers in the summer and reverted to ghost towns in the winter. Wolle found miners working and living in Kokomo, Gladstone, Turret, Lincoln City, Quartzville, North Star, and Summitville. She discovered families living in St. Johns, Crystal,

⁵⁶ Lambert Florin, Ghost Towns of the West (New York: Promontory Press, 1970), 1.

⁵⁷ Muriel Wolle, Stampede to Timberline, 417.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 4.

Alpine, Turret, Gold Park, Whitepine, Pitkin, Ohio City, Spencer, Camp Fulford, and Animas Forks.

There was, however, one kind of resident Wolle hoped to find in "deserted" towns-- "old timers." Old men with personal knowledge of mining and town histories, old timers were a coup for guidebook writers when they encountered them. Wolle met quite a few and heard about even more, but Gatewood Judd, the "man who stayed" in Gothic, and F. E. Gimlet, "the Hermit-of-Abor-Villa," fit the old timer stereotype best.

Wolle heard Judd's story from another "old timer" while visiting Gothic. According to her informant, Judd arrived in town during its boom in 1879 "like any other prospector."⁶³ He, however, believed in Gothic and stayed long after everyone else had left. Judd took his job as the "man who stayed" seriously. He assembled a scrapbook of Gothic's history and converted his cabin into "a regular pioneer museum" complete with a register for visitors to sign.⁶⁴ In 1928, the "Fox Film Company" made a short movie about his life.⁶⁵ When Judd died, his friends and admirers in Crested Butte his ashes on the streets of Gothic.

Frank E. Gimlet was a writer and a misogynist who took up residence in Arbourville after the mining town had been abandoned. Under the pen-name "hermit-of-Arbor-Villa," he wrote diatribes against women with titles like "Modern Women Found Wanting in a Christian World" and "The Futility of Loving Vagarious Woman."⁶⁶ Wolle met Gimlet in 1941 and found him "startling to behold."⁶⁷ With long hair and a "massive beard," he looked

⁶³ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Robert L. Brown, Colorado Ghost Towns-Past and Present (Caldwell, IO: The Caxton Printers, 1973), 7.

⁶⁷ Muriel Sibell Wolle, Timberline Tailings: Tales of Colorado's Ghost Towns and Mining Camps (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press-Swallow Press, 1977), 131.

like a hairy stowaway from another time.⁶⁸ Gimlet, however, was an author with a flare for acting. He lived in Arborville with his wife and survived on donations from tourists and the proceeds from *Over Trails of Yesterday*, a nine volume account of his "hermit" adventures in West.⁶⁹ The guidebook writers loved Gimlet. He exemplified the "local color" they all wanted to capture in their books.

Frank Gimlet fit guidebook writers' preconceptions of old timer appearance and behavior. Crazy, shaggy, and full of "spicy" stories, the Hermit-of-Arbor-Villa was the kind of character Wolle and her readers wanted to meet in ghost towns. Except for towns with hermits, however, the places ghost town enthusiasts coveted most were ones with skeleton cabins, grass-grown streets, false-fronted stores, and no living humans (besides themselves) in sight. Wolle visited a few "perfect ghost towns."⁷⁰ Leavick and Eureka qualified. So did Ashcroft, proving that even Wolle's "perfect ghost towns" could be far from moribound. Wolle, however, did discover a true "perfect ghost town" in the Holy Cross City, a deserted town west of Leadville. She sketched Holy Cross City in 1942. A group of picturesque cabins rotting high above timberline, the town was "breathtaking" and totally devoid of humans.⁷¹ Wolle did not tarry long in Holy Cross City. The town was empty for a good reason: It was situated in the middle of the 10th Mountain Division's bombing range. Wolle had to get special permission to visit the town, and she pursued this authorization doggedly. She had to preserve Holy Cross City before the Army ruined a perfect ruin.

Holy Cross City epitomized the urgency that drove Wolle's ghost town hobby. Her sketches "preserved" places threatened by demolition or disintegration. Wolle, therefore,

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Robert L. Brown, *Colorado Ghost Towns-Past and Present* (Caldwell, IO: The Caxton Printers, 1973), 7.

⁷⁰ For Wolle's ghost town classifications see *Stampede to Timberline*, 2.

⁷¹ Muriel Wolle, *Stampede to Timberline*, 251.

"never...put off sketching anything of historic value."⁷² The urgency of Wolle's mission, however, created strange guidebooks. She described and sketched many sites her readers would never see--except in her guidebooks. Holy Cross City also embodied the problems with the ghost town ideal. To find a truly deserted ghost town, Wolle had to visit a bombing range. Ideal ghost towns rarely existed in Colorado in the 1940s--except, that is, in Wolle's guidebooks. Her sketches depicted "perfect ghost towns" with skeleton buildings and no people.

The war that placed Holy Cross City in cross-hairs of the 10th Mountain Division's mortars transformed Muriel Wolle's career. Wolle first rode in a jeep in 1947. Sold to the public at Army surplus auctions after World War II, four-wheel-drive jeeps turned old mining roads into sources of fun. The war also shifted the state's demographics, creating a market for ghost town guidebooks on the urban Front Range. Wolle had written two ghost town booklets in the 1930s, on Central City and Leadville, which no one bought. In 1949, she published *Stampede to Timberline: The Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of Colorado* with her own money. *Stampede to Timberline* eventually went through fourteen printings. Wolle's success spawned imitators. Dozens of ghost town guidebooks appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, citing Wolle's "magnificent and monumental" guide as inspiration.⁷³

To be fully equipped, advised guidebook author Robert L. Brown, ghost town hunters needed a jeep, accurate maps, extra cans of gas, a sleeping bag, emergency rations, and a copy of *Stampede to Timberline*.⁷⁴ The placement of Wolle's guide in this list reflected a change in Coloradans' attitudes towards the Rocky Mountains and their inhabitants, a shift Wolle both exploited and helped create. Ghost town enthusiasts entered the mountains with

⁷² Ibid., 18.

⁷³ Robert L. Brown, *Ghost Towns of the Colorado Rockies* (Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, 1968.), 8.

their own food, lodging, transportation, and directions--necessities once provided solely by locals. The copy of *Stampede to Timberline* supplied legends, anecdotes, and "local color." Wolle, thus, had replaced locals as the expert on defunct mining towns. In the process, tourists transformed Wolle into a Westerner. She became the "old timer," the interpreter positioned between them and dead places.

Muriel Wolle helped create a new regional identity in post-war Colorado, an identity based on visiting, researching, and authoring "texts" about quintessential western places. The thousands of newcomers that moved to Colorado during and after the second World War could never become natives, but some could rid themselves of the outsider label by visiting, studying, and becoming experts on Colorado's ghost towns. Founded in 1958, Ghost Town Club of Colorado (GTCC) met in Denver once a month "to study, visit, perpetuate and otherwise concern ourselves with ghost towns, mining camps, and allied subjects and their history."⁷⁵ To accomplish these goals, the GTCC planned trips, printed a newsletter, invited guest speakers to lecture at meetings, and encouraged its members to present slide shows and give talks. From 1958 to 1970, the club's membership hovered around two hundred. Its members came from a variety of occupations. Engineers and employees of the Denver Public Schools predominated, but club member occupations ranged from "stove repairman" to "paleontologist."⁷⁶ While many Colorado natives joined the GTCC, the club appealed to recent arrivals to the Front Range the most. The GTCC's first president, Dr. Gerald Coon, was a newcomer who "had just moved to Denver and was the only one without an excuse for not being president."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Robert L. Brown, *Jeep Trails to Colorado Ghost Towns* (Caldwell: The Caxton Printers, 1976), 12.

⁷⁵ *Ghost Town Gazette*, 14 March 1968.

⁷⁶ The *Ghost Town Gazette* published short biographies of all its members from 1958 to 1970.

⁷⁷ *Ghost Town Gazette*, March 1964.

Jane and Gene Holden joined the ghost town club in 1961. The Holdens had recently moved to Denver from California. They grew up vacationing in the Sierra Nevadas and had developed a love for mountains. They hoped the GTCC would help them "transfer this strong rapport to the Rockies."⁷⁸ The Holdens never gave a presentation at a meeting, but they were "continually astonished at the talent displayed by the club members in the talks."⁷⁹ Through the ghost town club, Jane and Gene Holden "obtain[ed] a quiet sense of belonging" and "a vast amount of satisfaction in being close to people who, if they were not an integral part of the state's history, at least sat on the top step of the front porch."⁸⁰

The Holden's porch metaphor summarized the aspirations of many club members. As newcomers, the Holdens were not an "integral part" of Colorado's history. Like Muriel Wolle, the Holden's subscribed to an antique collector's view of history. The past was dead, therefore, newcomers--and maybe even locals--could not take part in it. But, through the ghost town club, the Holdens associated with people whose interest in the ruined 'homes' of the state's romantic past elevated them above the category of outsider. Ghost town club members distinguished themselves from other newcomers by cultivating their expertise in Western Americana. Members presented lectures and slide shows on topics like "Extra Legal Governments and Law in Pioneer Colorado,"⁸¹ "A Trip into Navaholand,"⁸² and "Colorado Ghost Towns Through the Seasons."⁸³ They screened Hollywood westerns and documentary films (Gary Cooper movies were their favorites). Members even participated in "quizzes" that tested their knowledge of ghost towns and Colorado history. In 1964, the *Ghost Town Gazette*, the club's newsletter, included this announcement:

⁷⁸ *Ghost Town Gazette*, 14 March 1968.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Ghost Town Gazette*, May 1968.

⁸² *Ghost Town Gazette*, August 1964.

Start cramming, Spooks, the "final" will be given on June 11 at 7:30 p.m. This will be the most entertaining exam you've had since last year. A prize will be given to the top three who identify the most ghost towns.⁸⁴

Through quizzes, movies, and lectures the members of the GTCC acquired and displayed their expertise. The true test, however, of their virtual-native status came when the club ventured as a group into the mountains. During their field trips to ghost towns, club members tried to convince the locals that they deserved their place "on the top step of the front porch."

The ghost town club hit the road four times a year. The Labor Day and the July Fourth weekends generated the largest expeditions. Members organized and led the trips, and the club visited as many as six ghost towns in a day. Field trips were serious undertakings, at least for the club's leaders. In 1962, the club's president admonished some of its members for their inattention during trips. "Let us save," he wrote in the newsletter, "our visiting, comments, and miscellaneous chit-chat until after our program is over."⁸⁵ Some club members' behavior, however, continued to frustrate and disappoint their leaders. In 1966, the president printed a code of conduct in the newsletter to combat rule breaking and souvenir collecting on trips: "1. Obey leaders! 2. People must have proper transportation! 3. No Free-lancing! 4. No souvenir collecting!"⁸⁶ The rules of etiquette were necessary to protect the club's reputation. If club members behaved badly, the locals might mistake them for "mountain recreationists."⁸⁷ Only tourists, the president implied, scavenged for souvenirs and attempted to traverse mining roads in two-wheel-drive cars.

⁸³ Ghost Town Gazette, 14 February 1963.

⁸⁴ Ghost Town Gazette, June 1964.

⁸⁵ Ghost Town Gazette, March 1962.

⁸⁶ Ghost Town Gazette, October 1966.

⁸⁷ Ghost Town Gazette, April 1966.

The leaders of the GTCC tried to persuade the members to see themselves as "ghost towners" as opposed to tourists. The GTCC issued special "ghost tags" for the license plates of members' cars. With these tags, members took on the responsibility to behave as if the gaze of mountain residents were always on them. "The temptation to pick up likely looking souvenirs," reported the president in 1966, "has earned us a bad name with the miners of Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties."⁸⁸ That same year, the president wrote that "at the visit to the Cache Creek Cemetery ...several members could have appeared to outsiders to be collecting souvenirs."⁸⁹ The opinions of "miners" and "outsiders" meant a great deal to the GTCC leadership. Why did an urban social and history club feel compelled to measure up to the expectations of the local inhabitants of the mountains?

Ghost town aficionados used uninhabited places to feel more at home in the West. "Perfect ghost towns" promised newcomers an encounter with the state's mythic pioneer past, even if this encounter was as ephemeral as a mood. Perfect ghost towns, however, rarely existed in reality. Miners, old timers, tourists, families, and caretakers lived in most "deserted" towns. Muriel Wolle acknowledged the presence of all kinds of locals in the text of her guidebooks. She then erased them from her sketches after acquiring the access to "back spaces," the anecdotes, the directions, and the "local color" she needed to become an expert. Wolle transformed herself in the process. She became, in the judgment of those who viewed her books as scripture, a Westerner, or at least a non-tourist. The members of the Colorado Ghost Town Club followed Wolle's example. They became experts on ghost towns through the lectures, tests, and slide shows they gave to one another. When the club members visited ghost towns, they hoped mountain residents would accept them as virtual-locals, a type of Westerner hanging-out on the front porch of the home the locals inhabited.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

The demographic transformation of Colorado after the second World War changed the relationship between Colorado's center and periphery. Mountain communities on the periphery lost population while the urban Front Range boomed. Armed with guidebooks and driving four-wheel-drive jeeps, the new arrivals to Colorado's urban center journeyed to periphery in order to create "Western" identities. Guidebook writers and ghost town club aficionados re-defined the periphery as place where "all things lived and died." These newcomers claimed the region's dilapidated buildings, abandoned towns, and defunct communities as historical touchstones. Ghost towners created an imagined community of Westerners in the ruins.

⁸⁹ Ghost Town Gazette, October 1966.

CHAPTER IV

ON YOU HUSKIES

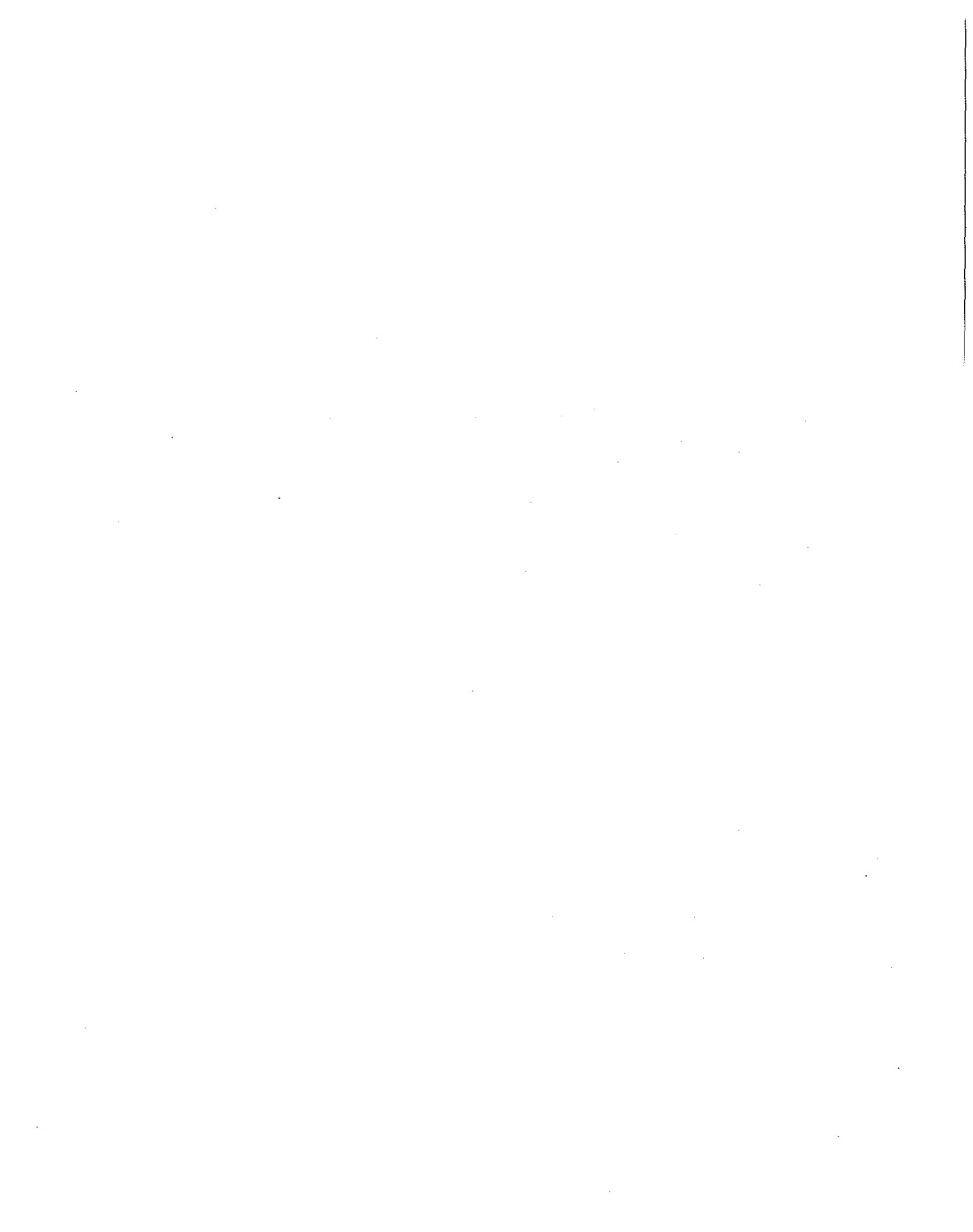
Stuart Mace slid towards Ashcroft on a “beautiful sunlit day” in the winter of 1948. Thirteen huskies pulled him through the “unbroken snow.”¹ Tethered to the steel-shod sled with aluminum airplane cable, the dogs moved easily across the powdery terrain. During World War II, Mace, a lieutenant in the Tenth Mountain Division, oversaw the Army’s experimental program in breeding and training huskies for winter rescue missions. The offspring of those original Army huskies, the sled team winding its way up the Castle Creek Valley in 1948 had “snowshoe” paws as well as uniform looks and color. Their consistent pelage and wide pads distinguished Mace’s “toklat” huskies from the small-pawed mongrels bred to traverse the packed snow and ice of the Arctic tundra.²

The upper Castle Creek Valley was as deserted as the Arctic in the winter of 1948. Pitkin County snow plows kept the Castle Creek Road open only to the Highland-Bavarian Lodge, six miles north of the Ashcroft. Selective breeding and a lightweight sled allowed Mace to glide above a roadway buried in three feet of fresh mountain snow. As he neared the town, however, Stuart Mace slid towards Ashcroft emotionally as well as physically. Coming up over Graveyard Hill, the site of the town’s long abandoned burial ground, he spotted Ashcroft and “instantly fell in love with the place.”³ A “uniquely beautiful” town

¹ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

² Neil M. Clark, “Huskies are Something Special,” Saturday Evening Post 21 August 1948: 22-24.

³ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.



valley and the ghost town against vandals, cattle ranchers, mining corporations, housing developers, snowmobilers, and Hollywood film crews. He taught classes, conducted tours, and gave interviews that encouraged visitors to love the ghost town and the valley as much as he did. Mace claimed the authority to speak for Ashcroft and the upper Castle Creek Valley by virtue of his residence there. The ghost town and its beautiful setting became his “beloved home.”⁷

Topophilia defined Mace’s life in Ashcroft. Coined by landscape geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, topophilia is “all of the human being’s affective ties with the material environment.”⁸ Some environments, Tuan argues, evoke stronger positive responses than others. Rural landscapes, seashores, and mountain valleys, for example, tend to arouse feelings of delight, well-being, and awe. Most tourist sites in the United States are topophilic. They conform to the culture’s aesthetic ideal: they are “beautiful” places.⁹ Topophilia, however, reaches beyond the “fleeting pleasure” of aesthetic appreciation.¹⁰ Humans create enduring “affective ties” to their material environments through their labor and their history. Humans physically alter their environments through labor, and many form deep attachments to the places they transform. Yi-Fu Tuan offers small farmers’ “intimate contact” with the land as the ultimate example of labor linking humans to places.¹¹ Like labor, history binds humans emotionally to environments. Some places serve as “the locus of memories” for groups and individuals.¹² Homes, neighborhoods, and graveyards, for instance, anchor people in place.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 93.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 96.

¹² Ibid., 99.

They provide a “home ground” with a past, and the “awareness of the past is an important element in the love of place.”¹³

Stuart Mace’s affective ties to Ashcroft combined all three levels of topophilia. He appreciated the beauty of the alpine landscape; he transformed the ghost town and the valley through his labor; and he re-interpreted Ashcroft’s history to include a cast of predecessors (pioneers and miners) who shared both his work ethic and his love of nature. Born in Denver in 1919, Mace had no prior connection to Ashcroft. His “locus of memories” was a lower middle-class neighborhood in Littleton, a suburb of Denver. When Mace moved to Ashcroft in 1948, he began the process of making this peripheral place his “home ground.” His huskies and love of the mountains prompted the initial move; the kennel and a myriad of secondary business ventures allowed him and his family to stay there. Mace’s labor transformed an isolated place into a home, and this process underwrote his identity as the town’s advocate and caretaker. Mace became a “local,” and this designation made him the principal interpreter of the town’s past. Mace protected, preserved, and refurbished Ashcroft’s oral history as well as its historic structures. His version of Ashcroft’s history became the “frontier heritage” that tourists encountered in the restored ghost town. Topophilia anchored Mace in Ashcroft emotionally, physically, and historically. And, as Mace shaped and interpreted Ashcroft, the ghost town changed and redefined him.

An eclectic education and a stint in the Army’s Tenth Mountain Division contributed to Stuart Mace’s choice of an abandoned mining town as his ideal home. Mace’s father, a staff photographer for the *Denver Post*, died when Stuart was four years old. An only child, he and his mother lived in his paternal and maternal grandparents’ homes in Denver. In 1928, he met Dave Stirling, a landscape artist. Stirling’s house was a stop on Mace’s magazine

¹³ Ibid.

delivery route. When he finished his deliveries, he watched Stirling paint and received lessons. Mace credited Stirling for awakening his "love for nature" and art.¹⁴ In 1931, Carl Melzer, a mountaineer whose life's project was climbing all the 14,000 foot peaks in North and South America, asked Mace, then twelve, to be his teenage son's climbing partner. Mace climbed with the Melzers for the next eight years. During that time, he scaled fifty-one of Colorado's fourteeners, all the fourteeners in the Sierra Nevadas, and Mexico's seven volcanic fourteen thousand foot peaks. After graduating from Littleton High School in Denver, Mace attended Grinnell College and majored in botany. A botany professor inspired Mace to try to become a plant geneticist. In 1941, he was pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Colorado when he was drafted.

The war changed Mace's life. He served in the army for four years and developed an aversion to bureaucracy. Mace protested his conscription. Years later, he described himself as a conscientious objector, but he never formally requested objector status at the time.¹⁵ He did, however, secure a series state-side assignments after informing his superiors of his beliefs. His pacifism endeared him to no one in the Army, but Mace, who paid his way through college with a florist shop job, won favors by sprucing up officers' yards and arranging bouquets for their wives.¹⁶ When he was not picking or planting flowers, Mace worked as a mechanic, a typist, and a hematologist. In 1943, he convinced his supervisor at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas to transfer him to the newly formed Tenth Mountain Division. His mountaineering experience with Carl Melzer qualified him to teach climbing, and Mace went off to Officer's Training School to meet the rank requirement for Tenth Mountain

¹⁴ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹⁵ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹⁶ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

instructors. At Camp Hale, Colorado, Mace answered a notice posted to a bulletin board asking for a junior officer to head up the Division's K-9 unit. Mace had never trained dogs, but he got the assignment—no one else applied for the job.¹⁷

Modeled on the Army's Dogs for Defense program which recruited and trained civilian pets to stalk snipers, guard bases, and carry messages, the Tenth's K-9 unit included sled, pack, and guard dogs.¹⁸ Mace was put in charge of the sled teams and their drivers. Few Americans owned huskies as household pets in 1943, so Mace traveled to Alaska and Canada to purchase teams and acquire breeding pairs for the program. At Camp Hale, the mushers and the huskies prepared for the invasion of Norway. When this invasion was called off, the unit transferred to Camp Rimini, near Helena, Montana. Rescuing downed pilots and equipment in the Arctic flyways became the teams' principal task. Mace designed a "husky parachute," and rescue planes dropped dogs, drivers, and sleds into crash sites.¹⁹ The parachute teams transported the survivors, the dead, and the downed planes' important equipment back to Arctic bases. During the last two years of the war, the sled dog unit rescued a hundred and fifty airmen, recovered over two hundred bodies, and salvaged several million dollars worth of equipment.²⁰

After the war, Mace returned to Boulder, Colorado with his wife, Isabel, and fourteen huskies. He purchased the dogs from the Army which had "liquidated" the Tenth's K-9 unit in the post-war rush to demobilize.²¹ Mace worked in a florist shop and bred huskies. He earned extra money giving University of Colorado coeds dog sled rides in the winter. Later, when Mace recalled the decision to move to Ashcroft, he glossed over these

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Neil M. Clark, "Huskies are Something Special," Saturday Evening Post 21 August 1948: 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

years in Boulder. He never fully explained why he abandoned his academic career and chose instead to try to support a growing family with sled dogs. Mace offered a reason for leaving Boulder in 1947: irate neighbors, sick of listening to the howls of fourteen huskies, forced him out of town.²² But the larger decision to gamble his family's future on the dogs remains a puzzle. Isabel Mace's thoughts during these decision-making years in Boulder are impossible to gage. She forms a pocket of silence in the heaps of oral interviews, newspaper articles, and television documentaries that chronicle Stuart Mace's life. Portrayed as a dutiful wife, Isabel never voiced her feelings about Stuart, the dogs, or Ashcroft to a reporter.

In 1947, Stuart Mace met Herbert Bayer, Bauhaus architect and friend of Chicago industrialist and Aspen visionary, Walter Paepke. Aspen, Bayer told Mace, could use a man with a dog sled to give tourists rides in the winter. The Maces moved to Aspen in January, but Stuart soon tired of the "pony ride carnival aspect" of operating the sleds in town. While on a training run with the dogs, he saw Ashcroft and fell in love.

.....

Since 1939 when ghost town guidebook writer Muriel Sibell Wolle toured the town and described it as "lonely and unspoiled," Ashcroft's buildings had deteriorated further, but the town was still inhabited.²³ Only four buildings remained on a Main Street, and none of these had solid roofs. Several sound cabins, however, stood in the meadow away from Main Street. Joe Sawyer, a retired logger, lived in one of these cabins in the summer. Gus Nelson, known as "TheWhispering Swede," and Henry Fitzpatrick, "Old Man" James Fitzpatrick's brother, summered in two others. Sawyer squatted on land owned by the Highland Bavarian

²²Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

²³ Muriel Sibell Wolle, Stampede to Timberline: The Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of Colorado (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1949), 228.

Corporation within the Ashcroft town site. Nelson and Fitzpatrick owned small parcels of land just outside the HBC's property line.

One-Eyed Joe Sawyer was seventy four in 1948. He took up residence in Ashcroft while the HBC was not looking. The HBC owned a considerable chunk of property around Ashcroft, but the Corporation had no representatives living in the upper-end of the valley in the early 1940s. The HBC's staff stayed at the Highland-Bavarian Lodge, six miles north of Ashcroft on the site of the "vanished" mining camp of Highland. William "Billy" Tagart, a long-time Aspen resident and land-broker, looked after the HBC's property in the upper valley. Tagart had a soft spot for old timers, and he let Sawyer, a man one Aspenite described as "pretty good guy," squat in Ashcroft in the summer.²⁴ Sawyer returned to Aspen in the winter where he lived in a house near Shadow Mountain on the Northern edge of town. In Aspen, Sawyer, a life-long bachelor, played cards at Tiederman's grocery store and baby-sat his neighbors' children who considered him "like a Grandpa."²⁵ When he was younger, Sawyer worked as a lumberjack and as the foreman of Harry Koch's sawmill in Aspen where a flying wood chip injured one of his eyes.²⁶

Summers in Ashcroft allowed Joe Sawyer to spend some quality time with his horse. He built a corral, and he often hiked into the mountains with the horse trailing behind him.²⁷ The animal was one of Sawyer's sources of income. In the fall, hunters sometimes hired him to retrieve elk carcasses from the high country. For Sawyer, however, the prime attraction of Ashcroft was being recognized as an old timer. Aspenites and tourists frequently stopped by his cabin to drink coffee and listen to his stories about Ashcroft's early days.²⁸

²⁴ Kathleen Krieger Daily, Aspen: The Quiet Years (Aspen: Red Ink Inc., 1994), 589.

²⁵ Ibid., 591.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

²⁸ Kathleen Krieger Daily, Aspen: The Quiet Years (Aspen: Red Ink Inc., 1994), 587.

Joe Sawyer's advanced age qualified him for status as an old timer. Sawyer, however, was an old timer of Aspen, not Ashcroft. Born in 1872, he would have been twelve years old when Ashcroft boomed in 1884. His summer residence in the ghost town, however, transformed him from a man who worked in sawmills most of his life into an "old prospector." Sawyer did not possess first-hand knowledge of Ashcroft's past, but a life-time spent in the company of miners gave him plenty of opportunities to absorb Ashcroft stories. In the 1930s, for example, Sawyer cut timbers for the Midnight Mine, a silver mine located eight miles north of the ghost town.²⁹ An occupation usually reserved for men too old and infirm to labor underground, logging timbers offered Sawyer unmatched access to the oral history of Ashcroft. Working in the woods surrounding the ghost town with a gang of older miners, Sawyer gathered the stories that became the foundation of his "old prospector" persona.

.....

Unlike Joe Sawyer, Stuart Mace asked the Highland-Bavarian Corporation's permission before taking up residence in Ashcroft. After Mace "fell in love" with Ashcroft in the winter of 1948, he returned to the Highland-Bavarian Lodge where he, his family, and the huskies were staying while he operated the sled ride business in Aspen. There he learned that the HBC owned the town site. He contacted Theodore Ryan, the East Coast director of the HBC, and offered his services as caretaker for the upper valley in exchange for a piece of land. Ryan liked the idea of having a representative of the HBC in Ashcroft, but the Corporation had sunk into a legal quagmire since the war. Several original members had died, and Ryan did not possess the authority to sell HBC assets until the heirs of the original members sorted out the question of who controlled the Corporation's stock. Instead of

²⁹ Ibid.

ownership, Ryan could offer Mace a lifetime lease on an acre of land in Ashcroft. Mace jumped at the deal. He had little money, and Ryan had limited the rent on the property to a dollar a year for the rest of Mace's life.³⁰

In June 1948, Mace, Billy Tagart, and George Fulsom, "a very old man" who "in his own mind was a surveyor," traveled to Ashcroft to locate Mace's acre.³¹ Tagart recommended a site near Pete Larson's former "muleskinner's barn and hotel" on the northwest boundary of the town.³² The acre behind Larson's collapsed hotel, Tagart pointed out, would keep the Mace's home out of the wind. Plus, Stuart planned to build "a small [guest] lodge" as well as run the dog teams.³³ The site, Tagart informed Mace, would be historically apropos since Larson ran a lodge of sorts with animals (mules instead of dogs) associated with it. Living within the historical boundaries and traditions of the old town appealed to Mace. After returning to the site with Isabel the next day, the couple decided to build their home there.

With "very little money to build a building," Mace approached the construction of his home with "the pioneering spirit."³⁴ He performed most of the work himself. With a wheel barrow, a pick and shovel, a kerosene powered cement mixer, and the winch on a Dodge power wagon, Mace and three part-time helpers (two high school students and a Army rescue friend whom Stuart paid a "fairly low wage") dug, poured, and "cut" a foundation (the building rested on a giant rock that had to be leveled).³⁵ They hauled reject white marble to the site from quarries down valley and scrap red sandstone from a demolished school in Aspen. They logged a stand of aspens on the site for timber and

³⁰ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

bought more logs from a bankrupt mine nearby. With these "recycled" materials, the Maces constructed Toklat Lodge, named for the huskies. Stuart cut the marble and sandstone with a sledge hammer and stone mason's tools, using the sandstone to form the structure's first level and the marble for the second. Isabel, "quite pregnant" with the couple's third child, operated the winch on the power wagon the first summer and helped shingle the roof the next.³⁶ Toklat's roof was asymmetrical. The front was lower than the back to let the winter sun into the giant windows Stuart installed. Specially designed by the Libby Owen Glass Company, the thermopanes were the most costly feature of the Maces' home.³⁷

For Stuart Mace, Toklat was a symbol as well as a lodge. The building stood for the mountains that surrounded it. He designed Toklat to fit "the shape of the building into the valley."³⁸ The lodge's sandstone lower level recalled the mountains' bases. The white marble on the second floor symbolized their "snow covered peaks."³⁹ The asymmetrical roof mirrored "the angulation of the mountains."⁴⁰ From the start, Mace rejected building a log cabin that would mimic the structures in Ashcroft. But he did choose to shingle the roof with wood shakes because "the texture fitted the shingling on the old buildings of the ghost town."⁴¹

His home symbolized Mace's attempt to anchor himself in place aesthetically. All of the decisions that went into building Toklat had an aesthetic logic as well as a practical rationale. He picked the site based on its historical significance as well as its protection from the wind. He selected white marble and red stone for its resemblance to the mountains as

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 183.

³⁸ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

well as its low cost. He built a steep roof to shed snow as well as copy the angles of the peaks around them. Mace did not want to “offend the old town.”⁴² The rickety cabins in Ashcroft, however, could neither confirm nor deny his desire to “fit into the valley.” Instead, Mace looked to Ashcroft’s summer residents to welcome him and his home-made structure to the “community.”

Stuart Mace believed that the “pioneering spirit” he displayed while building Toklat endeared him to the old men in Ashcroft:

I could empathize with the [pioneers] who came in here with a pick and an ax and a lot of determination, but the old men who were still alive here in this town could also empathize with me in that they could see that I was trying to build something with my own hands and that I was having a good deal of struggle to do it, and so I gained some silent respect, even though they kept considerable distance...⁴³

Mace imagined an affinity between himself and the pioneers of Ashcroft. He could liken erecting a guest lodge in 1948 with founding a mining town in 1880 because he associated pioneering with labor. Like the men who founded Ashcroft, Mace transformed a place with his “own hands.” Manual labor helped Mace “empathize” with the first pioneers, but he also fantasized that a sympathetic relationship existed between him and the “old men still alive” in Ashcroft. The town’s summer residents—Joe Sawyer, the Whispering Swede, and Henry Fitzpatrick—were crucial to the ‘second-pioneer’ identity Mace built in his mind at the same time as he constructed his home. Mace assumed that the old timers in Ashcroft had witnessed both the founding of the town and the building of Toklat. He assumed wrongly. None of the town’s summer residents in 1948 had been in Ashcroft during its heyday. Yet, it was through their eyes that Mace imagined such disparate activities as town founding and lodge building as “pioneering.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

Joe Sawyer, the Whispering Swede, and Henry Fitzpatrick kept their "considerable distance" from Mace and Toklat for most of that first summer. When the old timers finally approached him in August, their behavior suggested that they had a few assumptions of their own. Joe Sawyer invited Stuart to dinner.⁴⁴ Reminiscent of the meals mine surveyor Charles Armstrong served to his friends in 1900, Sawyer cooked a stew of venison, potatoes, and wild onions. He also offered Mace a "Mule Skinner's Delight," a cocktail made with brown sugar, blackberry brandy, boiling water, and sour-mash whiskey.⁴⁵ Gus Nelson, the Whispering Swede, welcomed Mace to Ashcroft with a bouquet of wild flowers.⁴⁶ Like Sawyer, Nelson was an life-long bachelor who resided in Aspen in the winter. The Whispering Swede had a nasty reputation in Aspen. Nicknamed for his soft voice, the Swede sold bathtub gin and second-hand guns from his home on Main Street in Aspen during the 1930s.⁴⁷ Nelson approached Mace in the fall of 1948. While working on Toklat's roof, Mace spotted the Swede walking across the town site with his hands clutched to his chest. Thinking that the old man was hurt, he ran to meet him. Nelson then surprised Mace with the gift he carried so carefully, a bundle of Alpine Forget-Me-Nots.⁴⁸

The behavior of Joe Sawyer and Gus Nelson recalled the all-male community that existed in Ashcroft at the turn of the century. In this community, older men like Charles Armstrong, Dan McArthur, and Jack Leahy provided the comforts of home to itinerant miners who traveled through the valley. This behavior did not threaten their masculinity. In fact, it enhanced their status. Charles Armstrong could bake a cake in the morning and work in his mining claim in the afternoon without questioning his status as a man, a gossip broker,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Krieger Daily, *Aspen: The Quiet Years* (Aspen: Red Ink Inc., 1994), 659.

and an expert. Joe Sawyer memorialized Ashcroft's all-male community in the stories he told to visitors. The setting of most of his tales was McArthur's "Blue Mirror Saloon," (the name was Sawyer's invention) and his favorite stories involved "Ashcroft's poet," Jack Leahy.⁴⁹ Sawyer's and Nelson's bachelorhood linked them to past Ashcrofters, and their memories and stories of the Ashcrofters' community preserved fragments of the traditions of drinking, expertise, and domestic manliness on which that community thrived.

Stuart Mace, however, gleaned from the old timers' stories only the traditions he wished to emulate. Jack Leahy was an iconic figure to Mace. Joe Sawyer told Mace about Leahy, adding his own flourishes to the "Judge's" already colorful life. Sawyer spun tales about Leahy's intellect and his refusal to perform manual labor. Leahy, Sawyer informed Mace, once cut a hole in his front door and punched another hole in his wood stove so that he could continuously feed tree limbs into his fire without chopping them.⁵⁰ Mace, a fan of Robert Service's poetry, discovered a few of Leahy's poems and later had one engraved on the welcome sign of the refurbished ghost town. In Mace's re-telling of Sawyer's tales, Leahy was Ashcroft's "poet laureate."⁵¹ The town's one-person "intelligentsia," Leahy "wanted to set himself apart" from the other miners in Ashcroft.⁵² He, said Mace, had another miner build his cabin in a meadow a half-mile from the town site, and Leahy had two large windows installed so that he could think and watch the sunset. In Mace's version of Sawyer's stories about Jack Leahy, the "poet" loved Ashcroft and the Castle Creek Valley like Stuart

⁴⁸ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

did. "In the broader emotional sense," Mace told one interviewer, "I'm like Jack Leahy...who just fell in love with the valley and wanted to live here regardless of the consequences..."⁵³

Stuart Mace transformed Jack Leahy into the forefather he would have liked to have preceded him in Ashcroft. Leahy's love of place, poetic sensibility, and willingness to sacrifice to live in Ashcroft meshed with Mace's topophilia. Mace interpreted the old timers through a world view that combined aesthetics, labor, and history. As he built roofs that mimicked mountains and also shed snow, he constructed two types of Ashcroft forefathers--poets and pioneers. Some loved the valley poetically while others transformed it through their "grit" and "determination." Mace incorporated the multiple levels of topophilia in his fanciful descriptions of Joe Sawyer. One-Eyed Joe, according to Mace, operated a sawmill in Ashcroft during the town's boom.⁵⁴ He was one of the town's founders. In his old age, Sawyer lived in Ashcroft with his horse. The horse was Sawyer's source of income and transportation. The horse was also—in Mace's words—Sawyer's excuse to hike up to "one of the most beautiful little hanging meadows" above the town in order to "restore his spiritual battery."⁵⁵

Joe Sawyer, however, arrived in Ashcroft only a few years before Mace. He was not Mace's forefather. Nor was he a founder of Ashcroft. He was Mace's contemporary in terms of residence in Ashcroft. Not only did Stuart Mace and Joe Sawyer come to the town around the same time, they both engaged in the same activity of incorporating themselves in Ashcroft's history. Sawyer basked in his status as an old timer, telling stories that connected him to the town's past. Mace listened to Sawyer's tales and used them to construct a lineage

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of pioneers and poets that echoed his topophilia. Both newcomers to town, Mace and Sawyer fed off each other's desire to fit into the Ashcroft's history.

Stuart Mace and Joe Sawyer created pasts that anchored them in place. Mace established a kinship with Ashcroft's old timers through the tales he told about them. Jack Leahy and Joe Sawyer, he argued, lived in Ashcroft for the same topophalic reasons he did. The affinity between the old timers and Mace, however, only went so far. Mace had a family to support whereas Joe Sawyer had an old horse to feed. To live in the place he loved, Mace had to scramble for money. By 1956, the Mace family had seven members—Stuart, Isabel, and five children. The single men that had inhabited Ashcroft since 1884 adapted to the town's meager economy by limiting their dependents. Bachelors lived in Ashcroft because only one person could hope to survive on the paltry incomes the provided by the mining economy. Stuart Mace followed the exact opposite strategy: he put his large family to work. Isabel ran the kitchen, cooking meals for the family and lodgers. Stuart cared for the dogs, assembled mail order gift boxes and jewelry, and built furniture from exotic wood (woodworking being one of his numerous avocations). The children helped both parents and received more tasks as they grew older. During the summer, for example, the Mace children led hundreds of fee-paying tour groups through the dog kennels. The Mace family worked harder than Ashcroft's bachelors ever did. The labor they invested in Ashcroft bound them to the place. Their struggle to make a living in a ghost town strengthened their "affective ties" to the valley and the town.

When Stuart Mace moved to Ashcroft in 1948, he thought the huskies would support the family by carrying tourists into the back country. The Maces, however, soon discovered that they labored for the dogs as much as the dogs labored for them. Except for a period of four years in the 1950s, the husky teams never paid for themselves. In interviews,

Stuart claimed that he always knew this would be the case. The huskies, he argued with considerable hindsight, were "a labor of love" intended to re-create an "arctic adventure" in Ashcroft rather than turn a profit.⁵⁶ But, after World War II when the Maces first purchased the dogs from the Army's K-9 unit, the unprofitable future of the husky business was not immediately apparent. The Maces tried everything to earn money with the dogs. The wildest experiment involved spinning the fur the dogs shed in the spring into yarn and knitting sweaters with it.⁵⁷ The Maces sold the husky fur pull-overs for a hundred dollars apiece, but it took three years to collect enough hair to knit thirty sweaters.⁵⁸ Besides pull-overs, they tried to sell puppies, market sleds and equipment, and hire out teams for rescue work.⁵⁹ None of these side ventures were profitable.

The Maces opened Toklat Lodge in 1949 to support themselves, their growing family, and forty dogs. They operated the lodge successfully for ten years, closing it when the work load and the birth of two more children made lodging guests too difficult.⁶⁰ After the lodge, Toklat, at different times over the next forty years, was a health food store, a restaurant, and an art gallery. The Maces ran a mail order business selling hand-made jewelry and gift boxes out of their home for a time, and they built and operated a Toklat restaurant in Aspen for seven years in the 1970s.⁶¹

The huskies did, however, earn their keep from 1950 to 1954. The dogs "paid off a few mortgages" by providing Americans with an "arctic adventure" every thursday night at

⁵⁶ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁵⁷ Eva Hodges, "The Shaggy Dog and the Sweater," The Denver Post, 8 February 1950.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Neil M. Clark, "Huskies are Something Special," Saturday Evening Post 21 August 1948: 24.

⁶⁰ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁶¹ Ibid.

seven-thirty.⁶² "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" debuted on CBS in September 1955. The story of a mountie and his dogs fighting crime in the Yukon gold rush towns of Dawson and White Horse, "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" plugged Ashcroft into American popular culture. After Sergeant Preston mushed his dogs down Ashcroft's Main Street, the town became an even more complicated place. The TV series added another layer of make-believe to a place already bearing a startling load of myths, fantasies, half-truths as well as a few whole truths.

Stuart Mace and the huskies attracted Hollywood to the Castle Creek Valley. Mace first worked in the movies when the producers of *Those Red Heads From Seattle* hired him and the dogs for a sled ride scene.⁶³ The producers became his agents and introduced Mace to Charles E. Skinner, the producer of "The Lone Ranger" series on television.⁶⁴ Skinner owned the rights to "Sergeant Preston," a popular radio show in the early 1950s, and he was searching for huskies as well as a snowy location for a TV version of the radio serial. Mace's dogs and Ashcroft suited Skinner's needs perfectly. While isolated, Ashcroft was closer to Hollywood than the locations Skinner had scouted in the Canadian Rockies.⁶⁵ From Ashcroft, the crew could drive down valley to the Aspen Airport and ship film daily to Los Angeles for editing.⁶⁶ The ghost town looked rustic, and the small number of buildings allowed the set designers to replicate the appearance of the "Sergeant Preston" studio set in Hollywood where the close-up and interior footage for the series was filmed. The crew erected several false fronts (unlike the false fronts the miners attached to their log cabins in the 1880s, these facades had no buildings behind them) on Ashcroft's Main Street in the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁶⁴ "The Yukon King in the Rockies," The Denver Post, 20 January 1991.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

midst of the historic structures.⁶⁷ Besides these facades, the crew erected telegraph poles to give Sergeant Preston the connection to the outside world the residents of Ashcroft never had.⁶⁸

Mace and the huskies were the prime attraction of filming in Ashcroft. The sleds were hard for novices to drive, and the dogs had to be taught to hit their marks, attack bad guys, and lovingly slurp the hero. Only Mace could handle the sleds and coax the proper thespian behavior out of the animals.⁶⁹ Against the rules of the Screen Actors' Guild, Eddie Drew, the director of "Sergeant Preston," dressed Mace in the mountie costume, and Stuart--not the show's star Richard Simmons--played Sergeant Preston in most of the series' location footage.⁷⁰ Mace even grew a rakish mustache to resemble Simmons.⁷¹

Stuart Mace pretending to be Richard Simmons pretending to be Sergeant Preston in a Colorado ghost town dressed up to look like a Yukon mining camp was one of the less confusing situations that arose when the cameras rolled in Ashcroft. The layers of illusions reached their zenith when Mace convinced Joe Sawyer to play an extra in several episodes.⁷² Sawyer portrayed a crusty prospector, the same role he had mastered in Ashcroft. One-Eyed Joe's presence augmented the show's apparent authenticity. "Sergeant Preston's" publicist highlighted the appearance of a true "Colorado pioneer" on the program.⁷³ Along with the ghost town, the huskies, the mountains, and the snow, Joe Sawyer helped make Ashcroft and the Castle Creek Valley credible substitutes for Dawson, White Horse, and the Yukon

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "TV Remakes Ashcroft," The Denver Post, 29 September 1955.

⁶⁸ For the story of Ashcroft's ill-fated telegraph see Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 86.

⁶⁹ "The Yukon King in the Rockies," The Denver Post, 20 January 1991.

⁷⁰ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 202.

⁷¹ "The Yukon King in the Rockies," The Denver Post, 20 January 1991.

⁷² Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁷³ "TV Remakes Ashcroft," The Denver Post, 29 September 1955.

Territory. Sawyer supported the show's claims for historic authenticity. In return, Sawyer received a small salary and further recognition as a genuine "pioneer."

The hiring of Joe Sawyer exemplified the tendency of the creators of "Sergeant Preston" to deliberately intermingle 'the authentic' and 'the fictional'. The set designer interspersed false fronts amongst Ashcroft's "real" buildings; the director hired Joe Sawyer, a "real" prospector, to be a member of the show's cast of actors; and the editor spliced location footage depicting real mountains, snow, and cabins into scenes shot on a sound stage with painted mountains, Styrofoam snow, and plywood structures. In Ashcroft, the creators of "Sergeant Preston" mixed the real and the fanciful to generate a credible illusion. TV audiences loved this combination. "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" remained a top-ten-rated program for three years, and the location footage filmed in Ashcroft, claimed director Eddie Drew, was pivotal to the show's success.⁷⁴ "Sergeant Preston" was the first TV series to be filmed in both black and white and color. Ashcroft's dramatic setting heightened the thrill of color television.⁷⁵

Beyond popularizing Ashcroft as a movie location, "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon" altered the history of the ghost town in a less tangible way. During the filming of the show, Charles Skinner and Stuart Mace hatched a plan to preserve the town. CBS promised funds to refurbish the buildings, and network publicists announced that "when filming is completed, the reconstructed Ashcroft is to become an official historic site and tourist mecca."⁷⁶ The United States Forest Service--which had acquired the town site from the HBC in 1952--nixed the "tourist mecca" idea, but the preservation plans of Mace and CBS represented the beginning of Ashcroft's transformation into a historic site. "Sgt. Preston of

⁷⁴ "The Yukon King in the Rockies," The Denver Post, 20 January 1991.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "TV Remakes Ashcroft," The Denver Post, 29 September 1955.

the Yukon” paved the way for Ashcroft’s designation as an National Historic Site in 1975 by emphasizing the ghost town’s authenticity. The television show incorporated Ashcroft into a strange definition of fiction and reality. “Sgt. Preston of the Yukon” was a fictional drama filmed in a “real” ghost town. The show’s falseness helped define Ashcroft’s historic authenticity.

Stuart Mace interpreted the Forest Service’s rejection of CBS’s offer to restore the ghost town as further evidence of the agency’s malign neglect of Ashcroft.⁷⁷ Mace had a stormy relationship with the Forest Service. The agency took over the ownership of Ashcroft in 1952. Thomas Flynn, the Highland-Bavarian Corporation’s local promoter, had promised the town site to the Forest Service in 1939.⁷⁸ In return, the Forest Service repaired sections of the old ore road to the town. In 1951, the Forest Service pressed the HBC to honor Flynn’s promise. Ted Ryan, the surviving member of the HBC’s board of directors, agreed to deed over the fifteen acre town site to the USFS. Stuart Mace, Jack Leighou, the superintendent of the White River National Forest, and Billy Tagart, the Aspen land broker who had been dealing in Castle Creek real estate for fifty years, met in Ashcroft and walked off the boundaries of the HBC’s gift.⁷⁹

Superintendent Leighou sent the boundaries he, Mace, and Tagart had scribbled on a map to the Forest Service’s lawyers in Washington D. C. Then, the mistake happened. The lawyers misread the map and prepared a deed for fifty-one acres rather than the fifteen Ryan had promised.⁸⁰ Ted Ryan signed the deed and did not discover his mistake until he had the Ashcroft property surveyed in 1963, the same year he acquired all the stock of the HBC. The

⁷⁷Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 204.

⁷⁸ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Forest Service and Ryan fought over the thirty-six acres mistakenly included in the deed for the next eleven years. In 1974, they ended the dispute. Ryan traded the Ashcroft property to the agency for a parcel of land near Woodland Park, Colorado.⁸¹

Stuart Mace's antipathy towards the Forest Service can be traced to this complicated land deal. When the Forest Service acquired Ashcroft, Mace lost his title as the town's official caretaker. He became the "self-appointed guardian" of Ashcroft and the upper Castle Creek Valley.⁸² For the most part, the Forest Service preserved the status quo in the ghost town. It ordered Mace and the "Sergeant Preston" crew to undo the changes they made to the town; it continued to permit Joe Sawyer to live in his cabin in the town site; and it allowed the buildings in Ashcroft to "decline gracefully."⁸³ These policies vexed Mace. He understood that the Forest Service had promised Ted Ryan in 1952 to refurbish the ghost town, a promise the Forest Service claimed it never made. The agency's inaction in Ashcroft, coupled with its decision to let the Pitkin Iron Corporation open an iron mine four miles above the town, convinced Mace that the Forest Service cared nothing for his beautiful valley.

The Forest Service's failure to rebuild Ashcroft was understandable given the agency's focus on timber management and the fact that it did not secure clear title to the ghost town until 1974. Yet, even if the USFS had shored up the town's sagging structures, it would not have satisfied Mace who had an expansive definition of restoration. He wanted to rehabilitate the town's environs as well as its buildings. In fact, Mace cared more about "restoring" the environment than he did the structures: "...the animals are part of the

⁸⁰ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 190.

⁸¹ Joanne Ditmer, "Ashcroft Area Deal Closed," The Denver Post, 30 October 1983.

⁸² Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁸³ Ibid.

restoration, I mean, that's more my interest in restoration; the animals and the plant life [rather] than the buildings."⁸⁴ Mace's idea of a rebuilt Ashcroft was a few rustic but sturdy cabins standing in a lush meadow teeming with wild flowers, cinquefoil bushes, coyotes, badgers, foxes, and eagles. A peculiar brand of environmentalism under-girded this pastoral vision. Mace based his philosophy of restoration on an environmental ethic that combined botany, spiritual ecology, and anthropomorphism.

Stuart Mace dived into spiritual ecology before Arne Naess defined the term "deep ecology" in 1973. A "more spiritual approach to Nature" that searches for answers beneath the "factual scientific level," deep ecology emphasizes (and reifies) the concepts of holism, balance, empathy, and interconnection.⁸⁵ Trained as a plant geneticist, Mace eventually rejected academic science in favor of deep ecology. In 1976, Mace likened his academic education to the chopping up of an orange:

You can call this piece zoology and this mathematics, and these pieces represents the other disciplines... Then you take one piece and take that apart—that's your graduate study. You chop the hell out of it. As you chop it apart, you suddenly realize that you've led yourself down a blind alley. You realize you know a whale of a lot about something, but you know nothing about what makes up the whole, about the interrelationships of all living things which make up the reality of life.⁸⁶

To penetrate the "reality of life," Mace proscribed long walks "in any meadow, forest or river bottom."⁸⁷ Only during these direct encounters with "Nature" would the "Family of Being speak to you of harmony, balance, empathy, humility, frugality, [and] gentleness."⁸⁸

Ashcroft served as both the inspiration and laboratory for Stuart Mace's ecological ideas. He communed with nature in the meadows, mountains, creek beds, and forests of the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 65.

⁸⁶ "Stuart Mace, teacher, of Toklat-at-Ashcroft," *High Country News*, 16 January 1976.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Stuart Mace, Ashcroft, to unnamed magazine, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

upper Castle Creek Valley. Yet, while he absorbed the mystical lessons of harmony and wholeness in and around Ashcroft, Mace thought the town site itself contained a dysfunctional “Family of Being.” He blamed the colony of ground squirrels that resided in Ashcroft’s meadow for the town’s unbalanced ecosystem. Without predators to limit their population, the ground squirrels had overrun their ecological niche. They destroyed the meadow with their numbers, eating the native buffalo grass and devouring the wildflowers. The “darned gophers” drove Mace “literally wild.”⁸⁹ Their eradication became part of his restoration plans. “I’m all for a balance,” Mace told an interviewer in 1974, “but ...if you want this to be a wildflower meadow, we’ve got to get rid of some of the gophers.”⁹⁰

The ground squirrels were problem children in the “Family of Being.” They overpopulated their home; they consumed natural resources at an unsustainable pace; and they marred the balance, the harmony, and the beauty of “Nature.” In many ways, the ground squirrels resembled another group of ecological malefactors Stuart Mace hoped to reform--human beings. Mace indicted most humans—all those people not living in isolated mountain valleys—for adopting “bankruptcy” as their core value. “We’re stealing from the past and not giving any flow amount back for the future,” he told students at a community college near Aspen in 1976.⁹¹ “The question is, can man with his facile mind learn to skim the crud off and get rid of the junk and learn what the core structure of the living world is all about?”⁹²

Stuart Mace “skimmed the crud off” his own mind in Ashcroft. After making a peripheral place his home, he discovered the “core structure of the living world” in this place and, thus, felt qualified to pass judgment on the center and its inhabitants. Mace’s

⁸⁹ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Stuart Mace, teacher, of Toklat-at-Ashcroft,” *High Country News*, 16 January 1976.

environmentalism grew out of his residence in a ghost town. Ashcroft was his refuge from the "bankruptcy" of modern society.⁹³ The town's geographic isolation and economic marginality allowed Mace to claim that he lived according to the "basic laws of nature."⁹⁴ Unlike most people, he never "abdicated wholeness in [his life] for this false thing called security."⁹⁵ He built a lodge and scrambled to earn money with sled dogs. Neither the lodge nor the huskies provided economic security. But, by living in a peripheral place both he and many inhabitants of the center identified as "Nature," Mace believed that he earned the right to speak for the "green world."⁹⁶

Stuart Mace's advocacy was wide ranging and strange. He often testified at public meetings, hearings, and forums. When county commissioners, Aspen town councilmen, or Forest Service superintendents asked him to state the constituency he represented, Mace answered: "I represent five million animals and ten million plants who could not be here to speak for themselves. That gives me a lot of prestige, you know."⁹⁷ One of Mace's animal constituencies were the beavers in the Castle Creek Valley. In 1961, the Pitkin Iron Corporation destroyed several beaver dams building a road to an iron mine in the upper end of the valley.⁹⁸ Mace protested the beaver evictions. He fought "the cause of the beavers" in the office of the superintendent of White River National Forest (the Forest Service owned the property surrounding the PIC's road). Mace confronted the head ranger and accused him of being a spineless bureaucrat: "if you're a superintendent...you could educate your

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Charlene K. Knoll, "Memories Worth Saving: The Story of Ashcroft," (M. A. Thesis, Western State College, 1977), 192.

employers, if you had the nerve, but you're too damn afraid of your pocketbook."⁹⁹ Mace considered the ranger's allegiance to his salary and his agency misguided and dangerous. Afraid to stand up to his bosses and the mining corporations, the superintendent abdicated his responsibility to the animals and the plants under his stewardship.

According to Mace, the superintendents of the White River National Forest continually abused Ashcroft and the upper Castle Creek Valley because the Forest Service continually transferred them out of the district before they could develop affective ties to the area.¹⁰⁰ The rangers lacked topophilia. Attached to a bureaucracy rather than a place, the superintendents never formed the emotional bonds to Ashcroft that might have caused them to confront their bosses and risk losing their jobs.

The love of place was central to Stuart Mace's radical politics. Mace died in 1993 after a long battle with cancer. A memorial service was held in Ashcroft's meadow, and Mace's family handed mourners a program of poems, letters, and newspaper articles that described Stuart's life and his environmental philosophy. Included in the program was an undated letter Stuart had written to an unnamed magazine.¹⁰¹ In the letter, Mace presented a five step process to environmental awareness and political activism. He advised readers to "start first with music."¹⁰² Brahms's *Pastoral*, Mahler's 9th, and, strangely, the albums of John Denver would "open [readers'] 'inner windows.'"¹⁰³ Poetry followed music. Mace recommended Wendell Berry's *The Wheel* and T. S. Eliot's *Choruses From the Rock* among other works.¹⁰⁴ Listening to music and reading poetry prepared would-be environmentalists

⁹⁹ "Stuart Mace, teacher, of Toklat-at-Ashcroft," *High Country News*, 16 January 1976.

¹⁰⁰ Stuart Mace, interview by Mike Kobey, 8 November 1991, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹⁰¹ Stuart Mace, Ashcroft, to unnamed magazine, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

to “comprehend some profound books” like Berry’s *Gift of Good Land* and Gregory Bateson’s *Mind in Nature*.¹⁰⁵ After subscribing to and perusing through “alternative” journals (Mace suggested *The Orion Quarterly* and *The Utne Reader*), students were ready to encounter “Nature” in peripheral places like Ashcroft, the final and most important step in the process.¹⁰⁶ During long walks in the woods, readers would learn the lessons of harmony, balance, empathy, humility, frugality, and gentleness. They would let their “spirit...propel [them] to action, not talk.”¹⁰⁷ Only after communing with nature in peripheral places would environmentalist convince others to “listen with their hearts and change.”¹⁰⁸

Stuart Mace endowed peripheral places—sites untouched by the “bankruptcy” of urban blight and economic exploitation—with the power to change human society and politics. People could encounter “truth” and “reality” on the periphery. In addition to “truth” and “reality,” visitors to Ashcroft hoped to encounter “history” on the periphery. The physical restoration of Ashcroft began in 1973. The town was designated a National Historic Site two years later. Ashcroft became an official periphery, legally protected from economic development. Stuart Mace helped lead the restoration, and he insisted that the town be “preserved” ecologically as well as historically. These goals were not always harmonious. Mace, for example, constructed a wooden walkway down the center of Main Street to protect the meadow from tourists’ feet. The boardwalk did keep visitors off the grass. But the miners and merchants who built Ashcroft in the 1880s (and who valued the safety of pedestrians) tended to place sidewalks on the sides of streets, not in the middle of them.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

In 1977, James S. Kane, a student of historic preservation at Colorado State University, wrote a report on the restoration of Ashcroft.¹⁰⁹ By 1977, four of the five original buildings in the ghost town had been repaired. Kane surveyed the work and identified some fairly serious problems. The boardwalk was one. The town's "aesthetics suffered" with the ahistorical boardwalk in the center of Main Street.¹¹⁰ Kane also critiqued the "warped roof" on one of cabins on Main Street and a false front on another cabin that did not "authentically portray the construction techniques of the original townspeople."¹¹¹ Kane, apparently, did not know that both of these cabins as well as two others in the town site were moved there during the restoration from a dude ranch thirty miles away from Ashcroft.

James Kane judged Ashcroft according to the exacting standards of professional historic preservationists. Quoting preservationist Orin Bullock Jr., Kane defined restoration as "...putting back as nearly as possible into the form [the building] held at a particular date or period or time. The value of restoration is measured in its authenticity."¹¹² The men and women who rebuilt Ashcroft, however, measured the value of their work by a different standard. Led by Stuart Mace, Ramona Markalunas, the director of the Aspen Historical Society, and George Morris, the superintendent of the White River National Forest, hundreds of volunteers from the Aspen area invested their money and their labor in the ghost town. They constructed a historic site that represented their vision of a "frontier past." They also built a town that symbolized their emotional attachments to a beautiful place. The restoration of Ashcroft did not follow a preservationist textbook but rather the dictates and the multiple forms of topophilia.

¹⁰⁹ James S. Kane, "Ashcroft, Colorado," unpublished paper, 1977, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

In the winter of 1973-74, a snow storm toppled the most picturesque building in Ashcroft. The Hotel View, a two-story Victorian structure on Main Street, collapsed in a heap. A favorite of tourists, photographers, and painters, the Hotel epitomized the aesthetic beauty of the town and its mountain setting. The Hotel's fall prompted Ramona Markalunas to approach George Morris. The director of the Aspen Historical Society (AHS) asked what Superintendent Morris planned "to do about Ashcroft, let it fall to the ground, then burn the wood to clear the space?"¹¹³ Morris, who had no plans for the ghost town, let Markalunas spearhead the restoration. She contacted Stuart Mace, and he walked representatives from the AHS and the Forest Service through the site in May when the snows melted. Mace convinced the group that their first priority should be repairing the sagging roofs on two other cabins before the buildings fell completely to the ground like the hotel.¹¹⁴ With these cabins preserved, the group could then tackle the more formidable task of rebuilding the Hotel View

That summer, fifty volunteers re-roofed the "Blue Mirror Saloon" as well as a "miner's cabin" that the volunteers moved from the meadow to the site of Joe Sawyer's hovel. The Forest Service had dismantled Sawyer's original cabin in 1960, the year "the old prospector" died. The agency demolished the structure in order to prevent an unnamed "friend" of Sawyer's from continuing One-Eyed Joe's illegal custom of squatting in the town site in the summers.¹¹⁵ Set on the concrete foundation Sawyer poured in the 1940s, the relocated "miner's cabin" received a new roof, chinking (material that filled the gaps between the logs in the walls), and windows. The volunteers also replaced the "Blue Mirror Saloon's" roof. James Kane praised the volunteers' restoration of the "Blue Mirror Saloon."

¹¹³ Joanne Ditmer, "Raising the Roof," The Denver Post, 18 April 1976,

¹¹⁴ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Their work preserved “the essence of a frontier mining town.”¹¹⁶ They salvaged the structure’s original “hewn” logs, and they rebuilt the roof and the floor in accordance with “correct building procedures.”¹¹⁷

That first summer, Ashcroft’s restoration stressed the first two forms of topophilia--aesthetics and labor. The aesthetic symbol of the town, the Hotel View embodied the haunting beauty of Ashcroft. The hotel’s collapse triggered an emotional response among Aspenites who appreciated this pastoral landscape. “Everybody is sentimentally attached to the hotel,” Stuart Mace complained to an interviewer in 1974.¹¹⁸ Ramona Markalunas recognized and shared this sentimental attachment. She initiated and organized the restoration, but Stuart Mace, the acknowledged expert on the town past, determined the priorities. Under his direction, fifty volunteers rebuilt the cabins Mace considered worth saving first. In the process, the volunteers, some of whom had never swung a hammer before, invested their labor in the ghost town. These volunteers formed “affective ties” to the place through their labor. Reminiscent of “barn raisings” when rural communities came together to accomplish tasks individuals had neither the money nor the labor to complete themselves, the “shingling bee” reconnected the town site to a community. This community of volunteer preservationists and ghost town lovers did not live in Ashcroft. But, through rebuilding the town, this community left an imprint on the site equal to the one left by the original inhabitants.

On July 30, 1977, a crowd of 1500 Aspenites gathered in Ashcroft to celebrate the town’s restoration and raise money for its operation as a tourist site. Four “dance hall girls” attired in polyester leotards and platform shoes performed the can-can in the rebuilt Hotel

¹¹⁶James S. Kane, “Ashcroft, Colorado,” unpublished paper, 1977, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

View.¹¹⁹ Francis Whitaker, an artist and blacksmith, set up his portable forge in a cabin on Main Street volunteers had relocated to the site from Woods Lake, a dude ranch and tourist resort, the previous summer.¹²⁰ In the “Blue Mirror Saloon,” a bartender with a fake handle bar mustache served Muleskinner Delights and lemonade.¹²¹ Organized by the Aspen Historical Society and Stuart Mace, “A Night in Old Ashcroft” raised over two thousand dollars for the ghost town.¹²² The “Hole in the Wall Gang,” four volunteers dressed as gunslingers, collected these donations by “holding-up” picnickers in Ashcroft’s meadow.¹²³

“A Night in Old Ashcroft” was a fitting conclusion to the restoration of Ashcroft. The event symbolized and completed the topophilia that bound people to the historic site. “A Night in Old Ashcroft” brought to life the mythic frontier past the restored cabins would represent. Filled with outlaws, dance hall girls, and Muleskinner Delights, this past connected volunteer preservationists and ghost town enthusiasts to the site by imaginatively repopulating Ashcroft with western stereotypes they knew and cherished. The men and women who donned western costumes and reenacted a mythic past in 1977 did not disturb Ashcroft’s historic authenticity. For over a hundred years, men and women had traveled to the meadow at the confluence of Castle and Express Creeks to create pasts which told them who they were in the present. Ashcroft’s history was a series of impersonations.

Long after Stuart Mace slid towards Ashcroft in 1948, people continued to “fall in love” with the ghost town and its mountain setting. Today, over twenty-thousand tourists visit Ashcroft every summer. These visitors encounter a place that conforms to most anyone’s standard of aesthetic beauty. Nestled between McArthur Mountain and Leahy

¹¹⁸ Stuart Mace, interview by Ramona Markalunas, transcript, Aspen Historical Society, Aspen, CO.

¹¹⁹ “Plans Made for Night in Old Ashcroft,” The Aspen Times, 21 July 1977.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Aspen Journal, 5 August 1977.

Peak, Ashcroft's rustic but sturdy cabins stand in a rolling meadow teeming with gophers (alas, Stuart Mace's nemeses outlasted him). Although signs discourage visitors from transforming Ashcroft with their own hands, the "resident ghost"—a caretaker and tour guide hired by the Aspen Historical Society—encourages tourists to imagine a historic connection to the place. On summer days, thousands of visitors add their imagined pasts to a site piled high with personal histories.

¹²³ Ibid.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Its dusk in Ashcroft and I'm reading, my back to the cabin's windows to catch the last light. The gas lantern hisses and glows, dim then bright, like ripples spreading across a beaver pond. The fire in the Eureka stove consumes a knot, flooding the cabin with the apple scent of aspen sap. Someone is watching me. I can feel his gaze on the back of my neck. Dropping my book, I whirl and catch two black eyes staring into the cabin.

For two summers I lived alone in Ashcroft, and my most frightening encounter with a non-human entity involved a mule deer peeping into my window. The episode was brief: I turned, and the buck bolted. But, in that moment our eyes locked, the deer and I lived the ultimate ghost town experience. Our hearts' raced, and our eyes' bulged. I yelped. He snorted. We scared the hell out of each other. During my two seasons as Ashcroft's caretaker, over twenty thousand people visited the ghost town, and almost everyone anticipated an experience similar to the one shared by the buck and me. People wanted to feel the stare of other-worldly eyes on the backs of their necks, and many expected me--the official "ghost"--to conjure up the requisite spookiness.

The ghost of Ashcroft is the summer intern who lives on site, conducts tours, answers questions, operates the gift shop, cleans the privies in the parking lot, and prevents visitors from carrying the place away in souvenir-sized chunks. The job demands a person half P.T. Barnum and half H.D. Thoreau. For eight hours a day, the "ghost" educates,

entertains, and polices the public. The rest of the time, he or she fights cabin fever. The Aspen Historical Society provides the housing, rent-free. The old miner's cabin which serves as the ghost's quarters, however, is also electricity-free, plumbing-free, and telephone-free.

Immersed in the rustic atmosphere of a bygone era, the summer intern would seem a likely victim for every spook, phantom, and poltergeist hanging around Ashcroft. I, however, never saw a ghost. During my first summer in the ghost town, a visitor from Aspen offered a theory about my inability to attract the non-living. The woman walked into Blue Mirror Saloon--Ashcroft's museum/gift shop--and announced that she felt the spirits of the departed all around her. "That's strange," I told her, "I've lived in Ashcroft for two months, and I have no psychic encounters to report." The woman looked at me and said: "well, you're a man." Apparently, the netherworld, like our world, observes gender divisions of labor. Spirits concentrate on haunting women, sub-contracting the men to the deer who sneak up behind them at dusk.

Ashcroft is a significant historic site because it encourages people to expect an encounter with the past. Ashcroft's history, however, is a tangled mess of myths, stories, and fantasies created by the crazy interaction of miners, boosters, gossip brokers, bust-town savants, guidebook writers, the Forest Service, the Mace family, the Aspen Historical Society, and tourists. Making sense out of Ashcroft's past is the ghost's job, and its not an easy one. The traditional method of unearthing facts and arranging them in a cogent pattern sheds little light on the significance of Ashcroft's history. Founded in 1880, the town boomed for three years. By 1887, half its population had left. By 1913, when the town's post office closed, only twenty-five people resided in Ashcroft. Until 1960, single, older men lived in the town during the summer. In 1948, Stuart Mace and his family opened a lodge and conducted husky sled tours until 1973 when Mace turned the husky business over to an

apprentice who relocated the kennels to Snowmass Village. These facts tell a story, but this story leaves out the most important elements of the town's past. Ashcroft remains a potent historical location because of the half-truths that have come to live there.

The image that captures this accumulation best could be found on the stove in Joe Sawyer's cabin. One-Eyed Joe, reported Stuart Mace, brewed an extremely potent cup of coffee. Sawyer made his coffee in a foot-tall pot with a dinner-plate-wide bottom. The coffee acquired its power from Sawyer's habit of never emptying out the grounds. With every new batch, he added more coffee grounds to the ones that had already accumulated in the bottom. By the end of Sawyer's summer sojourns in Ashcroft, the coffee pot was nearly full of grounds, and he consumed and offered to visitors the high-octane brew that boiled near the pot's spout.

Joe Sawyer's coffee pot resembles the history Ashcroft. The town's potency emerges from the stories and half-truths that have settled there since Charles Culver and W.F. Coxhead decided that the meadow at the confluence of Castle and Express Creeks looked like a good place to build a town. Ashcroft's boosters told half-truths to attract miners and investors to the site. When the town failed, men like Charles Armstrong, Dan McArthur, and Jack Leahy created identities that straddled the boundary between fact and fiction. In the 1930s, guidebook writer Muriel Wolle visited the town and saw death in a place that exhibited abundant signs of life. In the 1950s, Stuart Mace and Joe Sawyer told stories to one another that connected them to Ashcroft's history but bent the truth to achieve this connection. As Ashcroft's ghost in the 1990s, I conducted tours of the ghost town which combined elements of this century of creative story telling, and the visitors swallowed my tales as the visitors before them swallowed Sawyer's potent brew.

The assumptions that have guided the historic preservation of Ashcroft have also worked against understanding the town's history as a continuous process of accumulation. The restored cabins in the ghost town are supposed to represent an authentic past. The National Registry of Historic Sites, the Aspen Historical Society, and the Pitkin County Historic Preservation Office all vouch for Ashcroft's historical accuracy. Indeed, these agencies can justify investing tax-payer money in Ashcroft only because of town's historic authenticity. Yet, this need for authenticity has seriously distorted Ashcroft's history. It has over-emphasized the brief period when Ashcroft was a successful mining town. From this perspective, the ghost town offers tourists the opportunity to encounter a timeless ruin that faithfully represents a nineteenth-century frontier past.

Ashcroft's history, however, is the story of the continuous and complex interplay of identities and peripheries. The town's history did not reflect a single, all-important "frontier" period, but a shifting relationship to the nation's centers of economic, social, and political power. Ashcroft remained a significant site of identity creation for a over hundred years because it remained a cultural and a geographic periphery. In the 1880s, prospectors and merchants crafted incipient middle-class identities in Ashcroft. These Victorians used the town's newspaper to advertise their mines and their social respectability. When the mines failed to pay off, the town became the center of a community of older, single men and transient miners. Ashcroft's gossip brokers created there extravagant identities in the town's saloon. Through ritual performance, these men cultivated reputations as experts and story-tellers.

Ashcroft's geographic isolation declined after World War II. The Forest Service completed a new scenic road to the town in 1938. The next year, Muriel Sibell Wolle followed this road to Ashcroft. Wolle encouraged her readers to perceive death in

abandoned mining towns, and she left Ashcroft convinced that the town had perished long ago. Wolle placed Ashcroft among the hundreds of mountain towns she considered true ghost towns. In the process, she created an identity as an expert and a westerner through the texts she authored and the pictures she sketched. Ashcroft, however, was far from “dead.” Joe Sawyer moved to the town in the early 1940s, and, in 1948, Stuart Mace “fell in love” with the place. Mace supported a family and forty huskies on the periphery of Aspen’s burgeoning tourist economy. Topophilia, the love of place, anchored Mace in Ashcroft and the upper Castle Creek Valley despite the area’s sporadic tourist trade. Stuart Mace constructed an identity as an advocate and a guardian of this peripheral place. By 1975, Ashcroft was no longer geographically isolated, but its economic marginality and undeveloped appearance prompted a local movement to preserve the site as an official periphery. Protected from economic development, Ashcroft became a place its “frontier” inhabitants would recognize but scarcely understand.

I received a crash course in the complicated workings of time, place, and myth while serving as the “ghost” of Ashcroft. For two summers, I lived alone in the ghost town, conducting tours, answering questions, and preventing visitors from carrying the place away in souvenir-sized chunks. Most tourists arrived in the ghost town expecting to discover a ruin untouched since the nineteenth century. The parking lot and privies at the entrance of Ashcroft served as obvious, if ignored, reminders that the finger prints of recent human activity blanketed the place. I helped construct the town’s illusion of timelessness with my tours and ghost identity. In the parking lot, I worked equally hard to destroy this illusion by cleaning the privies and replenishing the supply of toilet paper.

Scrubbing those privies convinced me to apply to graduate school. The speed and ease with which visitors switched from the romantic past to convenient present—and my

supporting role in this transformation disturbed me. By leading tours, playing the “ghost,” and providing tourist amenities, I encouraged people to drive away with their assumptions intact. I spoke for antiquarianism rather than analysis. If I had been thinking as a historian rather than a guide, I would have inspired a moment of reckoning between the ghost town and the parking lot. This thesis was my attempt at creating such a moment. I remain convinced that history should haunt those that confront it and that there is no better place to be haunted by history than a ghost town.

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