

# Brecht CANDIES

## HISTORICAL STUDIES JOURNAL

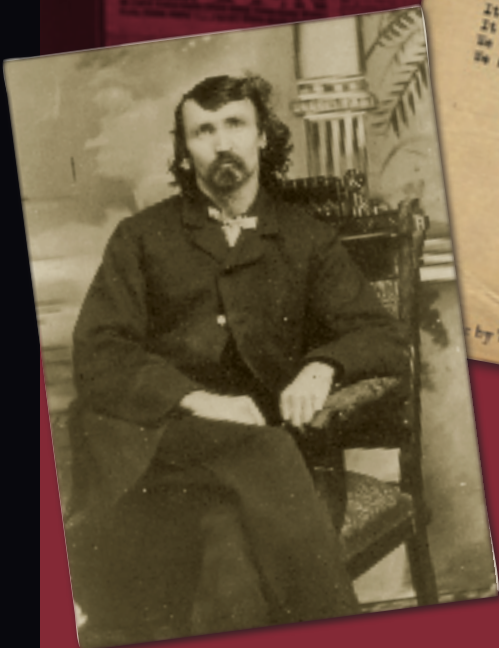
Spring 2011 . Volume 28

"make  
Life Sweet

BRECHT



DOCK



### THE GREAT DUST STORM

On the 14th day of April of 1935,  
There struck the worst of dust-storms that ever filled the sky,  
You could see that Dust Storm coming,  
The Cloud looked death-like black,  
Led through our nighty gates it left a dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City to the Arizona Line;  
Dakota and Nebraska to the Lazy Rio Grande,  
It fell across our city like a certain of black rolled down,  
We thought it was our Judgment, we thought it was our doom.

The radio reported - we listened with alarm,--  
The wild and windy wailers of this great mysterious storm,  
From Gilchrist and Cizua, and all New Mexico,  
They said it was the blackest that they had ever seen.

From old Dodge City, Kansas, the dust had wrung their knell,  
And a few more corpses sleeping on top of old foot hills,  
From Denver, Colorado, they said it blew so ~~black~~ strong,  
They thought that they could hold it out, but didn't know how long.

Our relatives all were huddled into their oil beam shacks,  
The children they were crying as ~~and~~ whistled thru' the cracks,  
The family it was crowded into their parlor room,  
They thought the Lord was coming, they thought it was their doom.

This storm took place at sundown and lasted thru' the night,  
When we looked out next morning we saw a terrible sight,  
We saw outside our window where wheat fields they had grown,  
Was now a rippling ocean of dust the wind had blown.

It covered up our fences, it covered up our barns,  
It covered up our tractors in the wild and windy storm,  
We loaded our jalopies and piled our family in,  
We rattled down the highway to never come back again.

This is a song about the worst Duststorm  
in anybody's history book, and I was in  
town of Pampa, Gray County, Texas, sixty  
miles north of Amarillo, ~~in~~ along  
towards sundown on the afternoon of  
April 14, 1935. This is an original  
song. W. W. STEWART, March 1940

by Woody Guthrie. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Archives



University of Colorado  
Denver

# HISTORICAL STUDIES JOURNAL

Spring 2011 . Volume 28

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface .....	v
PASTURES OF PLENTY: Woody Guthrie in the West.....	1
<i>Craig Leavitt</i>	
FROM EXCLUSION TO SAKURA SQUARE: A Chronicle of Japanese-Americans in Denver, 1942-1976.....	23
<i>Ross Webster</i>	
RiNo: From Then to Now .....	37
<i>Brandy von Kaenel</i>	
FIVE ALLEGED VICTIMS .....	47
<i>Michael Andersen</i>	
PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION OF HISTORIC GHOST SIGNS IN COLORADO'S FRONT RANGE .....	53
<i>Abigail Sanocki</i>	
Notes .....	67
Bibliographies .....	77

## PREFACE

When I tell friends that I am a history graduate student, inevitably they tell me that they:

- A) loved history
- or
- B) absolutely hated history in school.

The B group proceeds to tell me that the found memorizing dates and names dull drudgery. The five articles in this edition of the University of Colorado *Historical Studies Journal*, break through that stereotype of history as uninspiring and would convert even the staunchest member of the second group. These articles show how diverse the study of history can be. Craig Leavitt sheds light on the political power of music while Abigail Sanocki and Brandy Von Kaenel focus on the preserving the built environment. Michael Andersen deals with the societal lenses of a famous court case which ended with the famous, but non-factual judicial pronouncement: “they was siven Dimmycrats in Hinsdale County, but you, you voracious, man-eatin’ son of a bitch, yah eat five of thim!” Ross Webster explores the role of the once ostracized Japanese in the successful revitalization of Denver’s skid row Japan Town as Sakura Square and the rebirth of the surrounding downtown.

For 28 years, this Historical Studies Journal has proudly showcased the work of CU Denver History undergraduate and graduate students. On behalf of the editorial staff, we would like to thank the University of Colorado Denver History Department faculty for their continued support of the *Historical Studies Journal*. Thank you to Professor Alison Shah and Professor Tom Noel for your guidance, and unwavering support. Thank you to Shannon Fluckey at Clicks! Copy & Printing Services who creatively designed this journal. We want to add a special appreciation to the authors who worked to write and refine the manuscripts. It has been a privilege to work with you.

I would like to add a personal thank you my fellow student editors. I am truly honored to have had such a great staff. Without your tireless effort, this edition of the *Historical Studies Journal* would not have happened.

**KATHLEEN BARLOW**

Editor

## PASTURES OF PLENTY: Woody Guthrie in the West

Craig Leavitt

*“And there on the Texas plains right in the dead center of the dust bowl, with the oil boom over and the wheat blown and the hard-working people just stumbling about, bothered with mortgages, debts, bills, sickness, worries of every blowing kind, I seen there was plenty to write songs about.”<sup>1</sup>*

Though folk singer Woody Guthrie mythologized himself, he cannot be accused of mythologizing the West. Guthrie was more social agitator than entertainer. With the phrase “This Machine Kills Fascists” etched into his guitar, Guthrie sang of the West as a venue of class conflict, the local theatre of a global war between workers and capitalists. His use of explicit political commentary and critique in a popular music format opened up new possibilities for socially conscious song craft and anticipated the revolutionary musical subcultures of the 1960s and beyond. As scholar Richard Aquila points out, Guthrie’s populist songs of struggle and suffering in the West ran against the current in the 1930s and 1940s, decades which “witnessed the triumph of the mythic West in popular music.”<sup>2</sup> While artists like Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the Sons of Pioneers dominated the charts with songs that “portrayed the West as an exotic land where one could find freedom or happiness,” Guthrie’s compositions reflected his belief that “much of the mythic West was an illusion designed to distract people from the realities of American society.”<sup>3</sup>

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*Craig Leavitt is a first year graduate student in the UCD History Department. He has worked in a variety of fields, including stints as a political fund-raising director and a mortgage broker. Craig studied writing at The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado and holds a B.A. in English Literature and a minor in History from Metropolitan State College of Denver, where he was also employed as writing tutor. His interdisciplinary essay “On the Road: Cassidy, Kerouac and Images of Western Masculinity” was published in the Routledge Press anthology “Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West” in 2001.*

Guthrie worked feverishly to expose those harsh realities. His association with the Communist Party, the Industrial Workers of the World and other leftist groups gave Guthrie a built-in audience and simultaneously informed his compositions with a scathing critique of American society. Nonetheless, a strain of idealistic optimism for America and the West accompanied social criticism in his work, as his under-examined Columbia River Basin song cycle demonstrates. The ideological and thematic importance of these songs within the Guthrie cannon deserves more scholarly attention. His vision of homesteading Okies in the shadow of the Grand Coulee Dam—renewed and reoriented to their rightful place in society as Jeffersonian farmer-citizens by the healing Columbia waters—ought to be understood as the natural and desirable resolution to the doleful image of helpless migrants on the run with which his career is so closely associated.

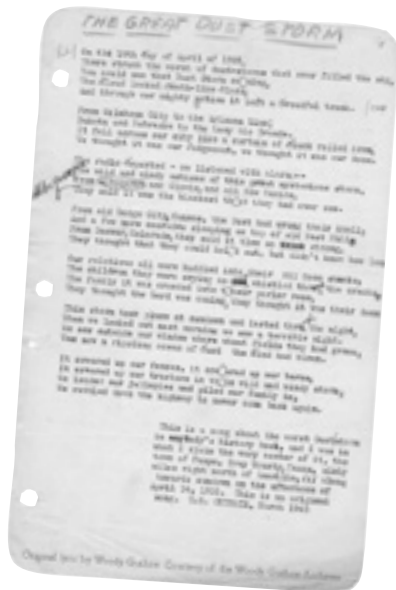
The persona Guthrie cultivated to lament the plight of the Okies and rail against the oppression of the common man was deeply rooted in American folklore, history and musical tradition. But it also cleverly leveraged emerging modern media such as radio, cinema and mass-market literary publishing. Guthrie expanded not only his audience but the meaning of his songs by refracting author John Steinbeck's imagery of Okie suffering portrayed in film and print through his own musical compositions. Yet Guthrie never "sold out" to Hollywood or Madison Avenue; his persona as a rustic, rambling bard from parts West made him an icon to sympathetic contemporaries and sustains his cult-like popularity today.

A series of ecological and economic disasters particular to the American West drove Woody Guthrie and hundreds of thousands of other migrants from the plains in the 1930s. Low farm prices, drought, poor farming practices, unprecedented dust storms, and the burgeoning worldwide depression all contributed to the general catastrophe in the heartland that became known as the Dust Bowl. Agricultural economist Paul Taylor was the first to identify what came to be known as the Dust Bowl migration. According to historian James N. Gregory, Taylor observed a "significant demographic transformation" between two visits to the San Joaquin Valley in 1933 and 1935. Writing in the July 1935 edition of *Survey Graphic*, he described the "westward movement of rural folk from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and the adjacent states...to California.' He told of them fleeing 'drifting dust clouds' and called them 'Drought refugees,' a term which other writers transposed into 'Dust Bowl refugees.'"<sup>4</sup> To most Americans, they were known simply as "Okies," even if they were not from Oklahoma. Woody Guthrie sang of the apocalyptic impact on his community of a particularly powerful "drifting dust cloud" in his song "The Great Dust Storm" (also known as "Dust Storm Disaster").

On the 14th day of April of 1935,  
There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky.  
You could see that dust storm comin',  
The cloud looked deathlike black,  
And through our mighty nation,  
It left a dreadful track.



From Oklahoma City to the Arizona line,  
Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio Grande,  
It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down,  
We thought it was our judgment, we thought it was our doom.<sup>5</sup>



Guthrie became the bard of the refugees, writing and performing songs lamenting their plight and promoting communitarian, anti-capitalist solutions to their troubles. His evocative portraits of life in the early- and mid-twentieth century West – generally couched in political language ranging from radical protest to romantic utopian nationalism – have left an enduring legacy in American culture.

Guthrie was born in 1912 to Charlie and Nora Guthrie in Okemah, Oklahoma on land once set aside for the Creek Indian Nation.<sup>6</sup> Guthrie’s father was able to provide an upper-middle class standard of living for his family with a real estate business. “Papa went to town and made real estate deals with other people, and he brought their money home,” Woody would later write.<sup>7</sup> Guthrie’s autobiography would give the strong impression that Charlie Guthrie’s real estate deals often left those on the other side of the bargain feeling wronged. “Papa had to outwit, outsmart, and outrun a pretty long string of people to have everything so nice,” the younger Guthrie wrote. “Mama knew how dangerous the landtrading business was, and she wanted Papa to drop out of the fighting and the pushing and settle down to some kind of better life of growing things and helping other people to grow.”<sup>8</sup> Guthrie’s mother Nora inspired Woody’s fondness for music. Nora “taught us kids to sing the old songs and told us long stories about each ballad,”<sup>9</sup> according to Guthrie. But she was also haunted by some form of mental illness. Fire stalked the Guthries during Woody’s early years. Flames consumed one of their homes; subsequent fires killed Woody’s sister Clara and severely injured his father. Each conflagration was linked to Nora, who was eventually institutionalized.



But the gift of music that Woody received from his mother stayed with him. As his family broke apart from internal duress and under the pressures of the economic disaster which gradually engulfed the country, young Woody developed his songwriting ability and unique musical persona (more consideration of his childhood and adolescence follows in discussion of his autobiography, *Bound for Glory*). His first break into show business came during a stint in Los Angeles. Woody's cousin Jack Guthrie invited Woody to join him on the air at KFVD, where they performed on air together as the "Oklahoma and Woody Show," a campy cowboy program very much of a piece with "a West that existed only on Hollywood's back lots."<sup>10</sup>

In Los Angeles, Woody made friends in radical circles and began to fuse his own progressive social and political instincts with the leftist ideologies of the Communist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. As his political connections expanded, so did his opportunities at the radio station. When Jack left the show to pursue other opportunities, Woody recruited a female singer, Maxine Crissman, to join him, and gave her the whimsical, rustic on-air moniker "Lefty Lou from Old Mizzou."<sup>11</sup> Guthrie and Crissman's style appealed to the growing number of rural dust bowl migrants in California; by October 1937 they were receiving more than 400 pieces of fan mail per month from relocated Okies grateful for an audio oasis of familiarity. They eschewed the hokey cowboy shtick and "buckaroo ballads," preferring instead to "re-create in song a West that had vanished" by performing songs mined from authentic regional folk traditions of the West, the South and Appalachia.<sup>12</sup>

Scholar Peter La Chappelle notes that in the 1930s, commercial radio was still an "unevenly standardized form of mass communication that allowed a significant amount of political and populist discourse."<sup>13</sup> Guthrie used the freedom afforded by KFVD's loose format to push back against anti-Okie sentiment in California. Enraged by a *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* piece that slandered trailer camp Okies as "loafers" and "relief chiselers," Guthrie used his show – as well as his weekly column in the Communist *People's World* – to castigate the responsible journalist for months on end. Asserting that the anti-migrant piece was fictionalized by Kenneth Crist, the *Los Angeles Times* writer, Guthrie demanded to know why the paper failed to report attacks against the migrant camps in which the "Sherriff's Posse...set fire to th makeshift houses, raised hell on th little children – and drove th Shack Dwellers out of the river bottom... What these people want is a job – they want to pitch in and work an do there part to keep America the best nation on the globe...the rich crowd that you write for are concentrating their minds on how to git thru life with-out a worken."<sup>14</sup>

As Guthrie developed his socio-political discourse on air and in print, he likewise built up a body of songs that interpreted events in the West in terms of class struggle. Songs like "Ludlow Massacre," "Union Maid," and "Joe Hill," were written in the "Wobbly style" – using melodies from popular hymns and turning them into organizing songs.<sup>15</sup> Guthrie found subject matter for song in both history and current events. He turned the exploits of contemporary bank robber Pretty Boy Floyd into verse, creating one of his most popular and enduring songs.

Painting Pretty Boy as an Oklahoma Robin Hood, Guthrie openly celebrated his war on the banks, as well as his charity towards the country folk who abetted his flight from authorities.

But a many a starving farmer  
The same old story told  
How the outlaw paid their mortgage  
And saved their little homes.

Others tell you 'bout a stranger  
That come to beg a meal,  
Underneath his napkin  
Left a thousand dollar bill.<sup>16</sup>

By Guthrie's moral compass, the man who would rob bankers "with a six-gun" was engaged in an act of heroic resistance against cowards whose weapon of choice was the "fountain pen" that signed foreclosure notices. Guthrie defended the gunman's character both in song and in laconic, rambling patter captured between songs during his recording sessions for the Library of Congress: "[Floyd] was a mild-natured man the way I hear it, sort of a smiling easy going man...but then he did have something in his system that *fought back*...but that very seldom come out."<sup>17</sup>

Historian Jeffrey S. King notes that Oklahoma's state constitution of 1907 failed to provide for statewide law enforcement. In 1925 the state created a Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation, but its tiny, under-equipped staff was overwhelmed by the tactics of early 1930s bandits like Floyd. Uncoordinated individual county sheriffs struggled to cope with a wave of robberies led by Floyd and other bandits who took advantage of such technological innovations as the radio, the machine gun and automobiles capable of driving 100 miles per hour or more to elude the authorities. One hundred and forty-nine bank robberies were reported in Oklahoma between 1931 and 1933. The failure of state and local law enforcement to stop the crime wave led to the rise of J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation. Guthrie was not alone in his admiration of Floyd; more than twenty thousand mourners from twenty different states attended his funeral on October 28, 1934.<sup>18</sup>

Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd" ballad is among his sturdiest anti-capitalist statements; its sly humor and use of a familiar Robin Hood theme give it a durable sense of universality. It is interesting to note that the song's inciting incident, however, is not an act of economic injustice, but rather an insult to feminine dignity felt by Floyd when a deputy sheriff curses him out in front of Floyd's wife. The lawman's "vulgar words of anger," delivered in "a manner rather rude" cause Floyd to slay the deputy with a log chain, compelling him to flee to the "trees and timbers" and begin his campaign of bank robbery.<sup>19</sup> Guthrie's perception of personal contempt by authorities and the wealthy for common people drives the song just as much as the inequity of the larger socio-economic structure the song critiques. Archivist and folklorist Alan Lomax heard the "people's idiom" in "Pretty Boy Floyd," prompting

him to invite Guthrie to record for the Library of Congress after hearing him play the ballad in March of 1940.<sup>20</sup>

The Diaspora of plains folk driven West by the Dust Bowl remained the major topic of Guthrie's songwriting through the 1930s. His depictions of the plight of Dust Bowl refugees were influenced not only by first hand experience but also by ties of friendship and kinship to those who had lost everything and journeyed West. Literature and popular culture also influenced the singer's compositions. Like millions of readers and movie-goers, Guthrie was deeply affected by the phenomenon of *Grapes of Wrath*. John Steinbeck's novel and the John Ford film adaptation were critical and commercial hits that seared indelible images of the suffering of Okie migrants into the collective American imagination. President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed "[t]here are 500,000 Americans living in the covers of that book."<sup>21</sup> Literary critic Howard Levant has called *The Grapes of Wrath* "a summation of national experience at a given time."<sup>22</sup> The collective national suffering of the Depression – and in particular the Dust Bowl – found its symbolic embodiment in the trials of the fictional Joad family. Guthrie heard of the novel and its author, John Steinbeck, and was introduced to him by friend and radically-inclined actor William Geer.

According to biographer Ed Cray, Steinbeck asked Guthrie to serve as an uncredited musical advisor for the film adaptation of *Grapes of Wrath*. "John Ford asked for a song that the majority of Dust Bowl migrants might know; Guthrie immediately suggested one he had first heard from his Uncle Jeff."<sup>23</sup> "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad" was used for the migrant dance scene in which federal camp managers outwit the tough guys who had come to start a fight as pretense for a police raid. The song's theme of miserable wandering fits the film's story of troubled exodus to a false promised land. Woody was less than thrilled with the song's performance in the movie, however, "because 'they slowed it down and made it too doleful.'"<sup>24</sup>

More than once, Guthrie wrote songs that used Steinbeck's characters and images as a symbolic vocabulary to describe the real-life situation of the migrants. "Vigilante Man" decries the attacks of self-described "patriots" – often simple hired thugs – who attacked and harassed the migrants to break their labor unions on behalf of large farm owners or simply drive out an "undesirable" transient population. These vigilantes were often undeterred by the supposed protection afforded the migrants by federal Farm Security Administration camps. Historian Walter J. Stein reports that the "most significant grower attack upon FSA camps" took place in 1938 just north of Bakersfield, California, where an "Okie surplus camped in the San Joaquin Valley."<sup>25</sup> A grower's group known as the Associated Farmers armed itself for conflict with the bedraggled migrants. The president of the Mariposa County Associated Farmers said in 1939, "[t]hey call us vigilantes and you know that term has a familiar ring in the ears of the old-timers and we rather like the term, for vigilantes were organized to drive the outlaws out of the state."<sup>26</sup>

Guthrie didn't like the term at all. Decrying the violence and inhumanity of the vigilantes, Guthrie used the murder of Preacher Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath* to symbolize the cruelty inflicted by Americans on their less fortunate countrymen and women who had fled the Dust Bowl and sought a better life.

Preacher Casey was just a workin' man,  
And he said, "Unite all you working men."  
Killed him in the river some strange man.  
Was that a vigilante man?<sup>27</sup>

No explanation or overt reference to the film or book was included in the song, and none was needed. Using Casey's name in his song allowed Guthrie to invoke the sophisticated dramatic power of Steinbeck's epic, and in particular the fascinating story arc of Casey, who forsakes the old gods of Christianity and capitalism in favor of the organized workingman's struggle. The overwhelming success of the book and movie meant that Casey's name and story were already part of a shared vocabulary of depression grievance known to both singer and audience.

Guthrie's song "Tom Joad" paraphrased and summarized the entire Steinbeck / Ford story in seventeen verses. The climactic soliloquy seems as much at home in the format of a folk song as it is in Steinbeck's book or actor Henry Fonda's inspiring speech:

Ev'rybody might be one just one big soul,  
Well it looks that-a way to me  
Everywhere that you look in the day or night  
That's where I'm gonna be, ma  
That's where I'm gonna be.

Wherever little children are hungry or cry  
Wherever people ain't free  
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,  
That's where I'm gonna be, ma  
That's where I'm gonna be.<sup>28</sup>

Guthrie was so proud of the song that when it was published in the Communist *Daily Worker*, he glossed it "the best thing I've done so far."<sup>29</sup>

In other instances, Guthrie produced songs that had strong but essentially coincidental resemblances to *Grapes of Wrath*. "Do Re Mi" alludes to the so-called "Bum Blockade" that greeted migrants at California's borders in 1936. In *Grapes of Wrath* the border crossing scene was marked by the Joads' humiliation at hiding the deceased body of Ma Joad from border authorities, lest the surviving family members be turned back. Scholar James N. Gregory's *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Culture and Okie Culture in California* reports that by the mid-1930s, Okie immigration was putting a tremendous strain on state resources. When the federal government closed the books on the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1935, certain relief responsibilities were shifted to the states. As a result, the Federal Transient Service was shut down, leaving California to care for approximately 35,000 out-of-staters per month who had previously relied upon the federal government's services.<sup>30</sup> Anti-Okie sentiment soared in the Golden State. Okies were vilified in terms previously reserved for racial minorities; newspaper and magazine columns maligned Okies with

such terminology as “white trash,” “pauper labor,” “misfits,” “marginal people,” and irresponsible wandering hordes. Fearing radicalism, many Californians questioned the new-comers’ “Americanism.”<sup>31</sup>

Los Angeles authorities began demanding that the state take action to stop the migration. A bill designed to close the border narrowly failed in the state legislature. With the support of Los Angeles newspapers and public officials, Los Angeles police chief James E. Davis sent 125 city policemen to patrol California’s major border crossings, including those shared with Oregon, approximately 800 miles north of the city.<sup>32</sup> For six weeks in early 1936 – before national ridicule and an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit ended Chief Davis’ “Bum Blockade” – migrants were stopped, searched, humiliated and forced to prove that they had sufficient resources to stay off of relief rolls in California before they were permitted to enter. Those without the “Do Re Mi,” as Guthrie called it, were turned around.

Lots of folks back East, they say, is leavin’ home every day,  
Beatin’ the hot old dusty way to the California line.  
‘Cross the desert sands they roll, gettin’ out of that old dust bowl,  
They think they’re goin’ to a sugar bowl, but here’s what they find  
Now, the police at the port of entry say,  
“You’re number fourteen thousand for today.”

Oh, if you ain’t got the do re mi, folks, you ain’t got the do re mi,  
Why, you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas,  
Georgia, Tennessee.  
California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see;  
But believe it or not, you won’t find it so hot  
If you ain’t got the do re mi.<sup>33</sup>

Recent scholarship shows that Guthrie wrote Do Re Mi in 1937, refuting the claim made by earlier studies that it was composed in imitation of the “Bum Blockade” sequence in *Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>34</sup> Guthrie’s song shatters the myth of a welcoming “Eden” in the Pacific West; those who fled troubles in the East should expect to be treated as criminals if authorities sensed their loss of status due to the twin catastrophes of Dust Bowl and depression. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis was stood on its head. As one scholar observes, the fact that “white frontiersmen could be subject to a collapse in ethnosocial status as they traveled along Route 66 suggests something that Turner failed to predict: that the westering process could actually debase the social standing of the very people it was supposed to uplift.”<sup>35</sup>

Guthrie is the target of withering criticism for his cultural interface with Steinbeck and *Grapes of Wrath* in scholar Charles J. Shindo’s book *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*. In an argument organized around undermining Guthrie’s claim to be an authentic advocate for migrants, Shindo asserts that “[r]eformers and artists... relied on the authority of one another to bring authenticity to their representations of migrants as victims.”<sup>36</sup> The scholar finds the Guthrie-Steinbeck connection particularly objectionable, claiming that “Guthrie’s position,” as migrant

champion, was “validated not by other migrants but by John Steinbeck.”<sup>37</sup> Conversely, Guthrie “reinforced Steinbeck’s position as the Okie chronicler” by his musical embrace of Tom Joad and other *Grapes of Wrath* characters and tropes.<sup>38</sup> Shindo correctly notes that the Guthrie / Steinbeck image of the Okies “sought to center the migrant experience in the debate over American capitalism,” a position that the migrants did not choose.<sup>39</sup> Dust Bowl migrants were “politically conservative,” Shindo argues, and clung to an “ideology based on the idea of land ownership.”<sup>40</sup> They did not want to be collectivized into a rural proletariat, according to Shindo, but rather wanted to reestablish their lost status as independent land-owners. “Themselves displaced by circumstances, the Dust Bowl migrants found their voices displaced by the voices of these artists and reformers.”<sup>41</sup>

Shindo goes further, disqualifying Guthrie as a spokesperson for Dust Bowl migrants on the premise that Guthrie’s travels were a matter of choice, not necessity (a debatable point) and that while many Okies struggled to find consistent work in California, Guthrie had a job with the KFVD radio station. The fact that Woody obtained employment meant that he “did not experience the despair created by the migrants’ complete lack of options.”<sup>42</sup> Despite Guthrie’s use of his radio job to create a familiar cultural oasis for migrants in the unfamiliar environs of California, “[n]ot only his audience but Guthrie mistook the intimacy of radio for a direct relationship with these migrants.”<sup>43</sup>

There are significant flaws in the arguments presented by *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*. While it is not altogether unreasonable to ask questions about the “authority” of John Steinbeck to write about the plight of the Okies, his well-established reputation as a socially concerned novelist and keen observer of American life, validated by critical and public opinion, put him in good stead to weigh in on the contemporary tragedy of mass dispossession and forced migration. His choice to consult with Guthrie on music for *The Grapes of Wrath* film shows a savvy, mature artist using all available resources to portray his subject accurately and sympathetically, not an artistic carpet-bagger plundering someone else’s cultural turf, or leaning on the vision of another to compensate for his own inadequacies.

Questioning Guthrie’s authority to sing about the Okies and their hard travels West is ultimately a fatuous exercise. He was one of them. Guthrie did not need *The Grapes of Wrath* to create compelling artistic representations of the suffering of his fellow migrants. At the same time, there is no reason that Guthrie should *not* have responded to the vision of his culture portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and used it to amplify his own message. As scholar Louis Owens wrote, “*The Grapes of Wrath* is Steinbeck’s jeremiad, his attempt to expose not only the actual, historical suffering of a particular segment of our society, but also the pattern of thought, the mind-set, that has led to far more than this one isolated tragedy.”<sup>44</sup> Guthrie’s identification with *Grapes of Wrath* was natural and intuitive, hardly a grasping after “validation.” He had all the validation he could need from the overwhelming demonstration of approval and affection he received during his stint at KFVD, not to mention his frequent visits to migrant camps and “Hoovervilles” throughout the depression, which allowed him to sing for “his people” face to face.



Guthrie's response to the power of early mass media was strikingly modern, despite his relentlessly rustic musical persona. His interpretation of Steinbeck's material and participation in the creation of the *Grapes of Wrath* film represent a savvy adaptation to changing times and a recognition of the tremendous cultural resonance of the book and film. It is true that the *Grapes of Wrath* phenomenon afforded some additional exposure for Guthrie. Victor Records packaged his *Dust Bowl Ballads* LP in 1940, but sales were slow and it was discontinued from their catalogue until the folk revival of the 1960s created a new audience for Guthrie's music.

A valid point which can be drawn from *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* is that Guthrie and Steinbeck proposed solutions to the suffering of Okies that they themselves may not have seen, or which may have been foreign to their own belief systems. Their cultural traditions did not incline many of them towards collectivity or a critique of capitalism. Indeed, Walter J. Stein's *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* notes the "Okie's abiding indifference to collective action and hostility to radicalism."<sup>45</sup> Many Dust Bowl survivors saw the origins of their plight in otherworldly terms, and believed any deliverance from their troubles must also come from on high.

The pre-modern forms of Protestant Christianity that dominated most Dust Bowl states shaped many citizen and institutional responses to the depression and the Dust Bowl. Scholar Brad Lookingbill's essay "A God-Forsaken Place': Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl" records the religious fatalism inspired by the trying events of the 1930s. Reverend Gerald B. Winrod, a Kansas clergyman who led a group called Defenders of the Christian Faith, dismissed out of hand the concept of New Deal government relief to ameliorate the human suffering of the depression: "more religion," he asserted, "rather than more legislation – is the need of the hour."<sup>46</sup> Many lay believers shared this view with their religious leaders. Lookingbill reports one Texan as saying, "I think the drought was sent to us from God because of the wicked and perverse ways of the people today."<sup>47</sup> Another felt that God had brought on the depression, not low farm prices, predatory farm mortgages, or over-leveraged Wall Street speculation. "I go to church more for spiritual guidance and strength. My belief is that God is punishing us for the way we live."<sup>48</sup> As Lookingbill observes, "The folk culture accepted the dust, drought, and depression as part of a divine plan; they had been caused by God, and only faith in His will could deliver the region from trials."<sup>49</sup>

What Shindo's analysis misses is the fact that in "representing" the plight of the Okies, Guthrie and Steinbeck did not seek to simply mirror their beliefs, but to guide them towards solutions for their problems which their extant mores did not or could not provide. Just as importantly, they sought to arouse sympathy for the migrants amongst the larger American polity, especially those with the political power to foster much-needed relief for the destitute migrants. Guthrie was a revolutionary, an agitator, a visionary who wanted to change the way people saw their relationship to each other and the world around them. For Okies to fail to reconsider the larger economic and social arrangements that contributed to their misery, he believed, was



to continue to suffer while others prospered from their pain. Shindo's observation that many of Guthrie's views were out of step with his Okie fellows is correct, so far as it goes. But his repeated scolding of Guthrie for "failing" to grasp the desires and inclinations of many Okies misses the point entirely.<sup>50</sup>

Shindo's most perplexing accusation against the Guthrie-Steinbeck alliance is that it "displaced" the voices of the migrants. It is not surprising that seventy-odd years later, migrants or their descendants would prefer not to be remembered as a destitute refugee population, pitied by movie-goers and readers of paperback novels. Yet this does not change the fact that during the depression they were disenfranchised and had little or no voice to speak of in the national political discourse. The fact that their suffering was profound and that they were truly in need of the sympathy and assistance of their fellow Americans is beyond doubt; Guthrie and Steinbeck sought to give them a voice through media so that they might be helped.

Guthrie also encouraged migrants to make themselves heard directly, by the method most familiar to him. In a letter to radical friends in the East, he described his visits to migrant camps and the message of empowerment he brought to those he found there: "I made a little speech in each tent and said you folks are the best in the west, why don't you take some time out and write some songs about who you are, where you all come from, where you all been, what you was huntin' for, what happened to you along the way, the work you done...the things you want to do."<sup>51</sup> In his role as informal spokesperson and advocate for the Okies, Guthrie did not seek to "displace" the voices of his fellows, but to amplify them and to empower his community to express itself with confidence and dignity.



One of Guthrie's most important and fascinating projects spoke precisely to the central Okie aspiration that Shindo emphasizes: a return to agrarianism and the Jeffersonian ideal of citizen-farmer land ownership. Guthrie's Columbia River song cycle gave posterity some of his most familiar and cherished songs. It also championed American national power, asserted human dominion over nature through technology, and predicted a bright future for Dust Bowl refugees as land-owning farmers in a new Northwestern paradise.

Visionaries had seen the potential in damming the Columbia River for decades before Guthrie was hired to sing the praises of the Grand Coulee Dam. The Columbia River, though massive, is only the fourth largest in North America. Its considerable power, scholar Paul C. Pitzer notes, comes from its relatively steep descent to the sea. "From source to mouth," Pitzer writes, "it falls 2,600 feet" while in the state of Washington alone it "drops more than 1,000 feet over about 400 miles," meaning that it afforded excellent opportunities to exploit hydroelectric power.<sup>52</sup> Much of the

terrain of the Columbia Basin the river passes through is paradoxically arid. Farmers in the drier eastern regions of Washington had long been envious of the moister western half of the state. State and local government agencies spent almost \$100,000 between 1903 and 1915 on irrigation schemes for Washington's Big Bend country, but according to Pitzer, "produced no results."<sup>53</sup> America's involvement in World War I increased interest in hydroelectric power reclamation. In 1920, the goal of "harnessing of the Columbia River as a source of electrical power or irrigation water or both became part of the Democratic party's platform."<sup>54</sup> Both the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Reclamation produced reports outlining feasible plans for a Columbia dam in the 1920s, but debates over funding, precise location and priorities for the dam project keep it from becoming a reality.

A booster organization called the Columbia River Development League (CRDL) was formed in 1929 to promote the project.<sup>55</sup> The CRDL was led by a local farmer named James O'Sullivan, who "accepted low pay and hardship as the cost of realizing the dream of the dam," Pitzer writes. O'Sullivan "eventually sold his land to support himself, leaving him without any personal stake in the outcome of the debate."<sup>56</sup> Boosters like O'Sullivan were loudly opposed by a so-called "power trust" of private power companies. Along with their allies in government and the press, members of the power trust "were quick to brand the Grand Coulee scheme, together with public utility ownership in general, as 'socialistic' and 'a colossal fraud' being foisted on the taxpayer by hicks and crackpots."<sup>57</sup> O'Sullivan and his allies saw the project as "an exercise in democracy and a 'square deal' for the little people, arguments that won little support in the 1920s."<sup>58</sup> This rationale was remarkably similar to the way that hired federal propagandist Woody Guthrie later viewed the dam.

Despite dedicated boosterism and genuine economic need, the Northwestern vision for a great dam remained unfulfilled. Federal funding was needed for such a massive project, but the famously frugal President Herbert Hoover opposed large public spending projects. Seismic political and economic shifts resulting from the stock market crash of late 1929 brought the dream closer to reality. The so-called "power trust" of private energy companies that had eyed the Columbia for private development were hit hard by the crash. Some collapsed; others had been found to engage in "unethical practices and manipulations"; the result was the "discrediting of private power, and increasing acceptance of public power and public utility districts in Washington."<sup>59</sup>

Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal would eventually deliver the long-envisioned Columbia Basin dam. In his 1932 campaign for the presidency, Roosevelt visited the Northwest and touted a dam project on the Columbia. Water power belonged to the people, Roosevelt told an enthusiastic Portland audience on September 21. He advocated public power as a kind of "yardstick" against which consumers might measure the high cost of private power.<sup>60</sup> Roosevelt cannily failed to state exactly where a Columbia dam should be placed. "Washington people interpreted him as meaning Grand Coulee Dam and the Columbia Basin Project, while Oregon people knew he preferred the Warrendale/Bonneville site just east of Portland."<sup>61</sup>

It is impossible to know exactly to what degree Roosevelt's support for developing the river translated into votes, but he carried Washington, Oregon and Idaho on Election Day.

President Roosevelt approved the creation of the Grand Coulee Dam in 1933 by executive order. The project in many ways typified the philosophy of the New Deal: it created thousands of jobs, hastened economic recovery, and left the country with "a valuable product able to pay its own way."<sup>62</sup> In 1937, Roosevelt created the Bonneville Power Administration to sell excess power created by the dams.<sup>63</sup> After World War II began with Germany's 1939 invasion of Poland, Roosevelt deemed the dam a national security project, renewing its ideological justification and changing its priority from irrigation to the creation of electrical power.<sup>64</sup> Though the project took many years to build and was marked by delays, controversies and funding challenges, the strong hand of federal executive power in the West made the dam a reality. Roosevelt's bold stroke in authorizing the dam cut through a complicated tangle of conflict between public and private interests, between opposed elements of state and local governments, and even between federal agencies. "What happened to the Grand Coulee Project," Pitzer writes, "is an example of federal officials establishing authority over the waters of the West as a byproduct of those struggles."<sup>65</sup>

In 1941, Guthrie made the acquaintance of Gunther Von Fritsch, a documentary filmmaker employed by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), who had already created a film called *Hydro!* about the building of the first of a series of dams across the Columbia.<sup>66</sup> He was preparing to make another such film - this one was to be titled *The Columbia* - and had a "a vague notion of centering the documentary on a homespun, folksy character who'd explain all the benefits the dams were bringing to the Pacific Northwest."<sup>67</sup> A mutual friend knew just the man for the job, and recommended Guthrie. An initial meeting between Von Fritsch and Guthrie went well. Lacking other prospects and needing work, Guthrie piled his wife and kids into a station wagon and drove north from Los Angeles to Portland, where he presented himself at the BPA headquarters, ready to get to work. Von Fritsch and his superior, New Deal administrator Stephen Kahn took pity on the singer and arranged for him to be hired as a temporary employee for one month. Guthrie was paid \$266.66 by the BPA to write songs for *The Columbia*.<sup>68</sup> It was arguably the most artistically productive month's work of his life.

Guthrie was given an office, a typewriter and a chauffeur to help acquaint him with the area. The father of Guthrie's driver, Elmer Buehler, "had lost everything on Portland Electrical Company stock during the slump, and now Elmer evangelized for the BPA."<sup>69</sup> The pair's first visit, at Kahn's suggestion, was to the local "Hooverville." Kahn asked Guthrie to "think about how dam building would create jobs for the two hundred people there squatting under the Grand Avenue Bridge."<sup>70</sup> Buehler drove Guthrie on to other relevant landmarks in the area, culminating in a tour of the 550 foot high Grand Coulee Dam. On the return trip, the BPA's big black 1940 Hudson passed a caravan of fully-loaded jalopies carrying bedraggled migrants and their belongings. To Guthrie, they were "my people," come looking for a new start in the fertile land that the dam project would irrigate.<sup>71</sup>

The songs Guthrie wrote for the BPA were characterized by an exuberant patriotism, support for the New Deal and military mobilization, and a philosophy of benign management of Western resources by the federal government. In “Grand Coulee Dam” (also known as “The Song of Great Coulee Dam”), the singer lauds the dam as greater than the “seven wonders” of the world, and celebrates its possession by “the land I love the best.” The second verse praises the majesty and beauty of the river, while the third acknowledges the power of nature by remembering that “[m]en have fought the pounding waters and met a watery grave.” But in their battle to tame nature, men were given “dreams to dream / Of the day the Coulee dam would cross that wild and wasted stream.”

The song’s fourth verse implicitly praises Roosevelt’s initiative in authorizing the dam project early in his presidency:

Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of thirty-three  
For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me,  
He said “Roll along Columbia, you can ramble to the sea,  
But river while you’re rambling, you can do some work for me.”<sup>72</sup>

“Grand Coulee Dam” celebrates the collectivity of the New Deal philosophy that spawned it, linking farmers, industrial workers and “all of you and me” as part of an interdependent American community. The fifth and final verse links the dam to America’s role in the world struggle against fascism:

Now in Washington and Oregon you can hear the factories hum,  
Making chrome and manganese and light aluminum,  
And there roars the flying fortress now to fight for Uncle Sam,  
Spawned upon the King Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam.<sup>73</sup>

Once Guthrie had bashed Roosevelt as a war-monger; now he sang the praises of America’s armed forces and in particular the bombers built by the Northwestern war-time aircraft industry facilitated by the abundant electric power provided by the federally-funded dam.

“Pastures of Plenty” is perhaps the best-remembered song to come out of Guthrie’s brief tenure with the BPA, and frames the project in terms closest to Guthrie’s heart: the plight of migrants. Written in the first person and seemingly addressed to America collectively, the song begins with the singer describing the plight of the migrants and placing their journeys within a punishing Western geography:

It’s a mighty hard row that my poor hands have hoed  
My poor feet have traveled a hot dusty road  
Out of your Dust Bowl and Westward we rolled  
And your deserts were hot and your mountains were cold<sup>74</sup>

The migrants dwelled at the margins of society, and were welcome nowhere: “On the edge of the city you’ll see us and then / We come with the dust and we go with the wind.” Though they harvested every kind of crop under the sun, the fruits of their

labor belonged to others. Class consciousness came to the fore as Guthrie wrote of the better-off consumers who would enjoy the produce the migrants collected. The singer and his fellow migrant workers “cut the grapes from your vine,” only for someone else “[t]o set on your table your light sparkling wine.”<sup>75</sup>

But the Columbia Basin, in Guthrie’s vision, offered sanctuary and a chance at a new start. The dam would make “Green pastures of plenty from dry desert ground / From the Grand Coulee Dam where the waters run down.” Though “always we rambled, that river and I,” the singer sees an opportunity to cease endless travels in search of work. He would prefer to settle down and work the land, just as he had done in a Midwestern past wiped away by the Dust Bowl. “All along your green river valley,” the singer vows, “I’ll work ‘til I die.” The final couplet adds a note of militancy to “Pastures of Plenty”: “My land I’ll defend with my life if it be / ‘Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free.” The singer is prepared to fight for his new home, though whether against domestic capitalist enemies or fascism from abroad, he doesn’t say.

While Guthrie described the natural beauty of the Northwest as “paradise,” the songs he wrote for the BPA are not nature poems of the sort that the American West would inspire so many other singers and poets to write. Rather, they exult in the power of human beings, specifically the U.S. government, to harness nature’s power to human ends. They also celebrate the ability of average Americans to renew their lives through hard work. Songs like “Jackhammer Blues” (also known as “Jackhammer John”), “Grand Coulee Powder Monkey” and “Guys on the Grand Coulee Dam” praise the workers constructing the monolithic dam in much the fashion of an IWW song. “Roll On, Columbia,” named in 1987 the official folk song of the state of Washington, is a triumphalist Manifest Destiny anthem:

Tom Jefferson’s vision would not let him rest,  
An empire he saw in the Pacific Northwest.  
Sent Lewis and Clark and they did the rest;  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on!<sup>76</sup>

Later verses glorify military victories of American settlers over British and Native American opponents, including a verse that celebrates the murder of prisoners after battle: “We hung every Indian with smoke in his gun.” Uncle Sam paid good money for these songs, after all.

The nationalistic overtones in many of the BPA songs should not obscure the fact that to Guthrie, the Columbia River project was a model for a socialist America to come. “He saw it was more than a power or a reclamation or a navigation project, but something that could touch the lives of the people of four or five states,” Kahn said, “and set a pattern of how democracy could function in this country with the government doing something constructive to improve the conditions of the people.”<sup>77</sup>

Budget shortfalls caused by World War II held up production of the film; the BPA finally released *The Columbia* in 1948. By then, as historian Robert C. Carriker writes, “no one needed songs and celluloid to describe the impact of the BPA in the Pacific

Northwest.”<sup>78</sup> Only a handful of Guthrie’s songs made the final cut. The Eisenhower administration, having learned of Guthrie’s leftist connections, ordered all government-owned Guthrie recordings and copies of *The Columbia* destroyed in 1953.<sup>79</sup>

Guthrie’s dream of a migrant promised land in the Pacific Northwest never came true. When The Bureau of Reclamation began the process of parceling out more than 10,000 new Columbia Basin farms in 1948, it announced that “a family must have \$7,500 in cash to move onto a unit, and perhaps well over \$20,000 more to develop it”: as a result, “[a]ny remaining thought of relocating Dust Bowl refugees or poor veterans vanished.”<sup>80</sup> In “Columbia’s Waters,” Guthrie had imagined a very different scenario:

The money that I draw from workin’ at your Coulee dam;  
My wife will meet me at the kitchen door stretchin’ out her hand;  
She’ll make a little down payment  
On our forty acre tract of land.<sup>81</sup>

At the urging of folklorist and friend Alan Lomax, Guthrie began work on an autobiography in early 1941. *Bound for Glory* was published in 1943. Written in highly idiomatic language reminiscent of his folk songs, *Bound for Glory* focused most of its descriptive power on Guthrie’s hard-times childhood and adolescence in Okemah, Oklahoma. Guthrie portrayed Oklahoma in the 1910s and 1920s as a West wild still, full of violence and sharp economic swings that could quickly turn boom towns into ghost towns. Okemah was located near the sites of several valuable mineral deposits that drove the boom-bust cycle. Guthrie described the waves of settlers, prospectors and speculators who tried to strike it rich: “Then more settlers trickled West, they said in search of elbow room on the ground, room to farm the rich topsoil; but, hushed and quiet, they dug into the private heart of the earth to find the lead, the soft coal, the good zinc.”<sup>82</sup> Soon still more fortune seekers came to Oklahoma in search of another sort of extractable wealth.

“The oil was a whisper in the dark,” Guthrie wrote, “a rumor, a gamble. No derricks standing up for your eye to see. It was a whole bunch of people chasing a year or two ahead of a wild dream. Oil was the thing that made other people treat you like a human, like a burro, or like a dog.”<sup>83</sup> The “boomchasers” had come to Okemah. The men who came to town to work the oilfields made an impression on young Woody, and not always a positive one. “The religion of the oil field,” the laborers told him, “was to get all you can, and spend all you can as quick as you can, and then end up in the can.”<sup>84</sup> Hanging around the oil fields, Guthrie “picked up five or ten books full of the cuss words the mule drivers use to talk to each other, which are somewhat worse than the ones they use to cuss their teams into pulling harder.”<sup>85</sup> A massive oil fire in the nearby town of Cromwell gave the young Guthrie an opportunity to contemplate loss on a large human scale. Watching from a hilltop as the conflagration illuminated the night, Guthrie wondered “[w]hat could be left of a family caught asleep and choked down in the smoke? What could be left of a man that lost his family there? I forgot all about the cold dew and went to sleep on the top rim of the hill just thinking about it.”<sup>86</sup>



The boomchasers changed the social make-up of Okemah. Woody's reaction to the friction created by the influx either anticipated his later social attitudes or showed the older Guthrie reading his adult values backwards into memory as he composed *Bound for Glory*. The "gang-house" where Woody and his friends played was inundated by newcomers, upsetting the balance of their little democracy. "The gang-house kids made a law," Guthrie wrote, "that new kids coming in couldn't have any say-so in how the gang was run, so the new kids got mad."<sup>87</sup> Justice-conscious Woody sided with the disenfranchised newcomers and served as their messenger, delivering their manifesto and declaration of war to the captain of the old gang. "Most of us kids is new here in town and we ain't got no other place except at your gang house," their letter said. "You made us work but you didn't let us vote or nothing like that when it was time. The only way out is to let all of us kids own the gang house together...Both gangs has got to join up together and be one gang."<sup>88</sup> Refusal of the offer of reconciliation meant a "war" fought with sling-shots, flint, fire-heated rocks, a "cannon" made from an inner tube and the stump of a peach tree, and even "tanks" improvised from old wooden barrels, all described with earnest relish and intricate detail over sixteen pages by the adult Guthrie. His side won, of course, and the egalitarian fraternity of Okemah's youth was restored.

Inevitably, Okemah's bubble burst. After a brief sojourn to Oklahoma City in 1924, twelve-year-old Guthrie and his family returned to Okemah to find that the boomchasers had chased on down the road. "Oil field's went deader than a doornail," Woody's older brother Roy told him. "People has ducked out just like birds in the bushes. Nobody knows where they went. Okemah's all but a ghost town."<sup>89</sup>

Charlie Guthrie's real estate empire was a victim of the general economic collapse. "He was a lost man in a lost world. Lost everything. Lost every cent. Owed ten times more than he could ever pay....I'll cut it short by saying he that he fought back, but he didn't make the grade...No good to them. The big boys. They wouldn't back him. He went down and he stayed down."<sup>90</sup> Resentment of the financial "big boys" - the moneylenders who could make or break a man like Charlie Guthrie, the captains of industry who could break a strike or start a war - would animate the younger Guthrie's anti-capitalist views and rhetoric for the rest of his life.

Woody became a "Boy in Search of Something." He followed his father down to Pampa, Texas - another oil boom town. Charlie had a mail-order bride, who set up shop in town as a fortune-teller. The twenty-four year old Woody soon imitated her vocation. As the Pampa oil field died out, "[p]eople hunted for some kind of an answer. The banker didn't give it to them. The sheriff never told anybody the answer. The chamber of commerce was trying to make more money, and they was too busy to tell people the answer to their troubles."<sup>91</sup> Guthrie portrays himself using his status as fortune-teller to point people in the direction of the "answer" - a communitarian philosophy to replace the predatory capitalism that caused so much suffering and displacement among the working people around him. "This country won't ever git much better," he told a crowd of the unemployed, "as long as it's dog eat dog, ever' man fer his own self, an ta hell with th' rest of th' world. We gotta all git together, damn it all, an' make somebody give us a job somewhere doin' somethin'!"<sup>92</sup>



*Bound for Glory* is a fascinating document of Guthrie's life, but it is more an artifact of self-mythologizing than a proper autobiography. In terms of personal details, it entirely excludes Guthrie's first wife Mary and their children, as well as Guthrie's second marriage, to Martha Graham Company dancer Marjorie Mazia. Including such familial attachments would have served no purpose in Guthrie's literary project, which he constructed to portray himself as a rambling, rootless wanderer in search of truth in the musty boxcars and on the dusty roads of a dystopian America. *Bound for Glory* also totally obscures Guthrie's close ties to the Communist Party and to radical labor organizations such as the IWW. The book positively overflows with leftist rhetoric, but it is almost always presented as the product of Guthrie's own experiences, observations, and philosophy, rather than as an organized ideology based on the teachings of Marx and Lenin. Friends like Bill Greer and Alan Lomax, under whose tutelage Guthrie was pulled into the "movement," make no appearance in the book. The fact that Guthrie was associated with labor unions at all is alluded to only in the most oblique fashion, late in the book, in Guthrie's description of a railroad cop's interrogation of the singer and some other vagrants found in a box car.

"We know what you are."

"Well," I scratched my head in the rain, "maybe you're smarter than I am; 'cause I never did know just what I am."

"We do."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What am I then?"

"One of them labor boys."

"Labor?"

"Yeah, labor."

"I think I know what labor is--" I smiled a little.<sup>93</sup>

The only thing approaching a direct reference to the organized political philosophies that guided and permeated Guthrie's musical message is a single passage in the book's latter chapters, in which Guthrie speaks through "a young man with shell-rimmed glasses...his voice had the sound of books in it when he talked."<sup>94</sup> Yet the speech he delivers is pure Woody Guthrie: homespun, common-sense, plain-folks wisdom.

*"That's what 'social' means, me and you and you working on something together and owning it together....If Jesus Christ was sitting here right here, right now, he'd say this very same dam thing. You just ask Jesus how the hell come a couple thousand of us living out here in this jungle camp like a bunch of wild animals...He'll tell you we all just mortally got to work together, build things together, fix up old things together, clean out old filth together...Sure, they'll call it a bad ism. Jesus don't care if you call it socialism or communism, or just me and you."<sup>95</sup>*

Though Guthrie places the speech into the mouth of a throwaway character whose signifiers identify him as a bookish collegiate, perhaps a labor organizer, the speech itself is entirely of a piece with Guthrie's own language and philosophy, and its use of Jesus Christ as a model of progressive activism was a staple of many of his songs. It is interesting to note the only explicit invocation of communism or socialism must come through another persona, not Guthrie's own narrative voice. Guthrie won't "break character" as the untutored Okie; to do so would be to undermine the whole project of *Bound for Glory*.

The latter pages of the book drift farther and farther from the reality of Guthrie's life as recorded by biographers and other sources; instead they build the mythos of hayseed prophet and Dust Bowl messiah. Guthrie's fascinating stint with the BPA sadly garners only a single sentence, but the vision informing his Columbia River Basin songs is echoed in an overheard conversation between laborers at a migrant camp: "What do you think we're putting in this dam for, anyhow? To catch water to irrigate new land, and water all of this desert-looking country here... Thousands and thousands of whole families are going to have all the good land they need, and I'm a-going to be on one of those little twenty acres!"<sup>96</sup>

Guthrie pushed credulity past the breaking point in an episode in which he and his friend "the Cisco Kid" break off a singing engagement to rally strangers in defense of a Japanese-American business menaced by a violent mob in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack. "These little Japanese farmers," Cisco tells the mob, "these Japanese people that run the little old cafes and gin joints, they can't help it because they happen to be Japanese. Nine-tenths of them hate their Rising Sun robbers just as much as I do, or you do."<sup>97</sup> Guthrie and Cisco defended the Japanese-owned Imperial Bar by leading a motley crew of soldiers, sailors and old ladies in song. "Our singing hit the mob of rioters like a cyclone tearing into a haystack," Guthrie wrote. "They stopped – fell back on their heels like you had poked them in the teeth with a ball bat."<sup>98</sup> The idea that a crowd of native-born Americans would spontaneously band together and risk bodily harm to defend Japanese business owners in the days immediately following December 7, 1941, while laudable, seems highly unlikely. Biographer Ed Cray flatly labels the chapter a "fictionalized episode" and asserts that it was included as implied criticism of President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which sent more than a hundred thousand persons of Japanese descent into internment camps for the duration of the war.<sup>99</sup> In any case, the scene speaks poignantly to Guthrie's belief that the righteous power of song can unite people and combat injustice. This is precisely the thesis of *Bound for Glory*, and indeed, of Guthrie's entire career.

While not a truly accurate or complete record of his life, *Bound for Glory* succeeds on several fronts. In addition to articulating Guthrie's belief in the power of song, the book does an admirable job conveying the psychological scarring of Guthrie's rough-and-tumble youth. While the veracity of details is questionable throughout, the early portions of the book serve as a fascinating window on the passage of the "Wild West" into modernity. Guthrie's critique of the ever more rapacious forms of capitalism that drove this transformation, told in the idiom of the "plain-folks" people from whom he

sprang, is not so much a matter of any “bad ism,” but a visceral, individual response to human suffering on a massive scale.

At the same time, *Bound for Glory* seeks to establish Guthrie’s *bona fides* as a man of the people; the genuine article, not a drugstore cowboy; an “old hand” of the West. The book’s final chapter, entitled “Crossroads,” relates a real-life event: Woody’s gig at the posh Rainbow Room atop New York City’s Rockefeller Center with the Almanac Singers, an ad-hoc group of leftist folkies that included Guthrie and his friend Pete Seeger. Guthrie, the self-styled folk hero, arrived with a chip on his shoulder. “As soon as we walked out the elevator door,” fellow Almanac Singer Bess Lomax would later tell Guthrie biographer Joe Klein, “I knew Woody was going to do something awful.”<sup>100</sup> Offended by show business producers who approached the Almanacs, sizing up the commercial potential of the group if repackaged as a corny rustic act, Woody improvised a song bashing John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil to express his displeasure and sense of dislocation in the elegant marbled show room. “Well this Rainbow Room’s a funny place ta play / It’s a long way’s from here back to the U.S.A.”<sup>101</sup> Fleeing the skyscraper and escaping to the streets, Woody walked along the crowded sidewalks, playing his guitar and singing. “A Westerner,” he overheard a passerby to remark. “Possibly lost in a subway.”<sup>102</sup>

Guthrie privately called *Bound for Glory* an “autobiographical novel.” His friend and fellow Oklahoma radical Gordon Friesen asserts that the final segments of the book were “rewritten, changed, faked even, to round out a conclusion.”<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless, the book was presented to the public as a straight-forward record of Guthrie’s life. The singer was well aware of his own propensity for self-mythologizing. Quaint misspellings in his written works and a refusal to give up Okie dialect belied his relatively high level of intellectual sophistication. Library of Congress archivist Moe Asch claimed Guthrie’s accent would fall away when they were deep in conversation; singer Bess Lomax suggested he was “playing the primitive deliberately to hide his “hyper-literacy.”<sup>104</sup>

Guthrie’s authentic yet carefully cultivated image as a son of the Wild West made him a leader among his peers in the folk music movement. East Coast intellectuals deferred to him and imitated him. Elliot Charles Adnopoz, the son of a Brooklyn surgeon who grew up fantasizing about “horses, cowboys, and the mythical West,” transformed himself into “Ramblin’ Jack Elliot,” a “perfect mimic” of Woody’s repertoire and performing style, right down to the “rusty voice.”<sup>105</sup> Delaware-born actor took on the westernized persona of “Cisco” to become part of Woody’s posse. Western authenticity was Guthrie’s calling card and source of cultural power in the East.

The rightward turn of the country following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the beginning of the Cold War was a hard blow to Guthrie. The shared sacrifices of the war against fascism had failed to bring about the enlightened and unified peace he had imagined. His best work behind him, Guthrie wrote songs for his children, as well as increasingly doctrinaire political songs in which his rustic roots were less influential than before. Beginning in the early 1950s, a debilitating neurological disease, Huntington’s chorea, slowly robbed him of the ability to play, sing and speak;

scholars speculate that Huntington's was also the likely cause of his mother's own creeping insanity. Guthrie died at Creedmore State Hospital in Queens, New York on October 3, 1967.



Guthrie's legacy in American culture has continued to grow far beyond the limited impact the singer made in his own lifetime. Some of his songs have entered modern pop culture vernacular, but often without the radical resonance Guthrie intended. "This Land is Your Land" has become a familiar standard, but verses referencing hungry people standing in relief lines and turned away by "No Trespassing" signs are almost universally omitted, making Guthrie's ironic populist protest song into a banal celebration of the status quo. Schoolchildren learn to sing "Roll

On Columbia" as an expression of regional or state pride, but are less likely be taught of the New Deal philosophy behind the dam, or of Guthrie's broken dream of a new Okie homeland in the Pacific Northwest.

Mainstream country music has largely avoided Guthrie's legacy. The Okies who settled in southern California after the Dust Bowl were key constituents of the conservative "Reagan Revolution" which began in that state in the 1960s. The increasing identification of conservative political and cultural values with modern pop-country music would make the genre virtually unrecognizable to Guthrie today. But if some segments of popular culture have misunderstood, rejected or forgotten Guthrie, he is deeply revered in many of America's more liberal, bohemian subcultures. Guthrie's plainspoken protest songs continue to be adapted and performed by musicians working in genres as diverse as blues, R&B, punk rock and the many categories of self-styled "alternative" rock. Guthrie scored a posthumous triumph when American alternative rock band Wilco paired with the outspoken British socialist and neo-folk singer Billy Bragg to produce *Mermaid Avenue* (1998) and *Mermaid Avenue Vol. II* (2000). These albums set unpublished Guthrie lyrics to newly composed music. Resulting recordings like "California Stars" and "Remember the Mountain Bed" brought Guthrie's visions of the American West to a new generation of listeners. The superior musicianship, arrangements and recording technology of the *Mermaid Avenue* records enable modern listeners to encounter Guthrie in a more familiar and appealing setting than his own scratchy and primitive-sounding recordings allow.

Surely Guthrie's greatest and most important imitator was Bob Dylan. The very young Dylan closely emulated Guthrie's persona until his own musical identity came into sharper focus. The only original composition on Dylan's 1961 debut album was "Song to Woody," an earnest bit of hero worship in which the younger man finds his own tribute inadequate: "I'm a-singin' you the song, but I can't sing enough / 'Cause there's not many men that done the things that you've done."<sup>106</sup> 1963's "Last

Thoughts on Woody Guthrie” is Dylan’s only officially released non-musical spoken-word poetry performance. His exuberant rock and roll performance of “Grand Coulee Dam” at a 1968 tribute concert captured Guthrie’s missionary zeal for the national renewal project of the New Deal, as well as the natural might of the Columbia River. As recently as 2010, Dylan graced a Guthrie tribute album with a new recording of “Do Re Mi.” In a voice at once grizzled and world-weary, yet inexplicably sweet and tender, Dylan recalls the humiliation of the Okies faced by the “Bum Blockade” at the California border.

If you ain’t got the do re mi, boys, you ain’t got the do re mi,  
Why, you better go back to beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas,  
Georgia, Tennessee.  
California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see;  
But believe it or not, you won’t find it so hot  
If you ain’t got the do re mi.<sup>107</sup>

# FROM EXCLUSION TO SAKURA SQUARE: A Chronicle of Japanese-Americans in Denver, 1942-1976

Ross Webster



In 1976 the Japanese-American community of Denver gathered in Sakura Square to celebrate their history and the community bonds that had endured since the Second World War. The completion of the Square brought recognition to Japanese-Americans in Denver. Sakura Square revitalized downtown Denver and revived a sense of pride, accomplishment, culture and community for Japanese-Americans in Colorado. Sakura Square also brought recognition of the history of Denver's Japanese-American population. At the 1976 gathering, the community dedicated the erection of a bust of Ralph Lawrence Carr, the governor of Colorado from 1939 to 1943. Carr's career as governor was cut short when he spoke out against the internment of Japanese-Americans as a violation of their constitutional rights. More than that, Carr boldly invited the internees destined for Camp

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*Above: Sakura Square. Place between The statues and artwork in Denver's Sakura Square honor former governor Ralph L. Carr (right) and Japanese-American community leaders such as Minoru Yasui (center). Photo: Ross Webster*

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Amache, an internment camp in Granada Colorado, to stay and contribute to his state's war effort. He encouraged them to make new lives for themselves in Colorado regardless of wide-spread anti-Japanese sentiment in his state and the anti-Japanese platforms adopted by other Mountain States governors. Although Carr's contribution to the growth of Denver's Japanese-American population was rightly recognized, he was only a catalyst for the creation of a mostly self-made and self-sufficient community. Denver's Japanese-American community survived and endured wartime prejudice, postwar depopulation and urban-redevelopment due to the unique character of the intermountain states internment as well as the formation of networks of support within the un-interned Japanese community before the war.

In the historiography of the wartime internment of Japanese-Americans, significant attention is devoted to the experience of the internees in the camps and their implications regarding the fragility of American civil liberties during periods of war, crisis, and mass hysteria. Also common in the scholarship of the internment is the campaign for legal redress and public commemoration of the indignities suffered by the internees. Few historians devote their attention to the actual process and significance of internee resettlement during the latter years of the war and beyond. Most of the examinations of resettlement function as a narrative bridge between internment and redress.

A few historians, however, have focused specifically on resettlement. They have discovered aspects of the Japanese-American internment that link the event to other historical processes shaping of the western United States in the twentieth century. Now, it is possible with new research to expand their findings and demonstrate how Japanese-American resettlement in Colorado took a unique course in urban Denver with long-term implications for viability of the Japanese-American community there.

One of the most elaborate histories regarding Japanese-American resettlement has been conducted by Scott Kurashige. In *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese-Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles*, Kurashige links the resettlement of Japanese-American residents of Los Angeles to the second migration of African Americans into western cities, postwar suburban white-flight, and residential segregation of urban minorities. According to Kurashige, one of the most prominent myths to emerge in the wake of the internment was that the incarcerated Japanese-Americans came out of their experience as a "model minority," ready to join their white middle class compatriots on equal terms in suburban Southern California.

A major component of postwar resettlement according to Kurashige was the uprooting of the rural Japanese-American working class. Before the war, Japanese-Americans filled a large alcove of the West Coast's independent farm laborers, truck drivers, fish mongers, and merchants. When the internment began, most Japanese-Americans either sold off their businesses or had their property confiscated by the federal government. Kurashige states that since many Japanese-Americans believed that prewar segregation "had reinforced white prejudices and contributed to the case for internment, they embraced the dispersed settlement that white assimilationists and WRA officials had advocated."<sup>1</sup> While the majority of internees returned to the



West Coast, a sizable number of internees decided to remain in the Intermountain West. Their decision was due in part to weariness of long-standing white prejudice and the uncertainty of their future livelihoods on the West Coast.

Perhaps the two most complete historical studies on the Intermountain West Japanese-American population, both prewar and postwar, are "Leaving the Concentration Camps: Japanese-American Resettlement in Utah and the Intermountain West," by Sandra C. Taylor and "Persistence of Ethnicity: the Japanese of Colorado," by Russell Endo. Taylor's assessment of the resettlement story has some similarities to Kurashige's. The resettlement was facilitated and enabled by a diverse array of players including the Wartime Relocation Authority (WRA) who were federal custodians of the internees and the internees themselves, but the setting and historical circumstances have a substantial influence. For Taylor a wartime labor shortage held the greatest primacy in shaping the character of internment and the eventual resettlement in the Mountain States. The labor shortage enticed WRA officials to seek what many of them envisioned as an attractive alternative to postwar resettlement on the West Coast. A theoretical fear of the WRA was that its actions would turn was that the internees would become "permanent camp populations dependent on the federal government not only during, but after the war."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the WRA promoted temporary release for certain internees to take seasonal and later indefinite leave to alleviate the labor shortage. Rural employers who were otherwise wary about hiring enemy aliens were persuaded both by the WRA's public relations campaign and the diligence of the Japanese-American laborers, to open new employment opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Despite its efforts, the Intermountain WRA never succeeded in encouraging mass resettlement beyond the West Coast. The majority of internees, especially the older Issei generation who feared white prejudice, remained in the relocation centers until the war's end.<sup>4</sup> According to Taylor, internees were drawn to Intermountain cities such as Salt Lake City and Denver because they found them generally less hostile than small rural communities. Unfortunately for the Japanese-Americans, anti-Japanese sentiment eventually found its way into the cities in 1944 as more Japanese-American laborers received seasonal leave.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor credits the success of resettlement in the Intermountain West not only to the WRA. She also credits religious organizations such as the Christian, Buddhist and Mormon Church who "supported those released from camp as they made their way into the outside world and the small Japanese-American communities in Salt Lake City and Ogden served as way-stations."<sup>6</sup> Finally, she credits the Japanese-Americans themselves for "their hard work, their persistence, and the ultimate disgrace of the policy of internment."<sup>7</sup>

Russell Endo's study of Japanese-Americans in Colorado, "Persistence of Ethnicity: the Japanese of Colorado," is similar to Taylor's study focusing on Utah in regards to the rural labor factors that shaped the resettlement in the Intermountain West. Endo's presentation, however, differs considerably in that the WRA does not appear as a major institution in shaping resettlement. Governor Ralph Carr was credited for his welcome along with *The Rocky Mountain News*, which published generally favorable

editorials and advertised businesses, churches and social organizations lending public support.<sup>8</sup> Endo emphasized the importance of Japanese Coloradans themselves, not only the internees but also the prewar population. Although small, Colorado's Japanese-American population of "ranked fourth in size after Hawaii, California and Washington in 1909."<sup>9</sup>

Endo also centers on Denver's Japanese-American population before, during and long after the war. A solid community grew despite anti-Japanese sentiment and despite the distance from the larger Japanese-American communities on the West Coast. Endo focuses on the substantial growth of the community that reached a peak of 5,000 in 1945, and the upward social mobility of Denver's Japanese-Americans during the postwar period. Ironically, Endo states that by the time of his article's publication in the 1970s, upward social mobility threatened the Japanese-American community of Denver as Nisei and younger generations dispersed into the suburbs and assimilated further with white mainstream American society.<sup>10</sup>

An effective and accurate interpretation of the story of Japanese-American resettlement in Denver requires a synthesis of the three historiographical narratives in order to connect the resettlement story to the broader themes shaping the internment, the American West and American's changing urban environment. It requires an examination of the original accounts and documents of federal, state and municipal actors who laid down the conditions of resettlement. An additional requirement is the assessment of the challenges the former internees had overcome to maintain their identity and dignity as Japanese-Americans. Finally the study can only be fulfilled by examining testimonies of the former internees themselves in order to understand how the Japanese-Americans remembered the formation of their community and the challenges imposed on them by racial hostility, restrictive-mobility legislation, or housing segregation. The combination of these elements illuminate the unique character of internment in the intermountain states and its influence on Denver's Japanese-American community. With the assistance of support networks from the free Japanese, Denver's community survived wartime prejudice, postwar depopulation and urban-renewal. The development Sakura Square highlights and memorializes the success story.

The Japanese-American resettlement in Denver began in the first two months of the United States' participation in the Second World War. On February 19, 1942 President Roosevelt forever marked American history when he signed and issued Executive Order 9066. This executive order declared large segments of the United States' western seaboard as "military exclusion zones" which allowed the military to evacuate potential "enemy aliens" without trial or legal hearing. Although no specific nationalities or ethnicities were mentioned in the order, people of Japanese ancestry were suspect.<sup>11</sup> This was no small demographic. Of the roughly 127,000 pre-war Japanese-Americans, two thirds resided in the three Pacific seaboard states. In California alone there were 94,000. General John DeWitt, the head of the Western Defense Command, initially opted for relaxed terms of exclusion, favoring "voluntary resettlement" of Japanese-Americans at their own expense anywhere outside of the

Pacific states.<sup>12</sup> Although some Japanese-Americans resettled voluntarily, the plan was soon scrapped. The published documents of the War Relocation Authority (later renamed the War Agency Liquidation Unit) stated that between Pearl Harbor and evacuation, anti-Japanese sentiment “revived and multiplied to an intensity never before reached.”<sup>13</sup> This rise in overt hostility led to the creation of the war relocation centers. Most of these camps were located in the Interior West. In the case of Colorado, this meant the Granada Relocation Center at Amache, located in the arid southeast of the state. Despite the humiliation, betrayal and anxiety that persisted among the Japanese-Americans in Amache or with those who had voluntarily relocated earlier, a lone voice stood out in the wilderness. The unlikely voice belonged to Governor Ralph Lawrence Carr.

In March 1942, Ralph L. Carr announced that his state was ready to accept German-American, Italian-American, and Japanese-American evacuees and provide them with temporary quarters. Carr expressed faith that Colorado was “big enough and patriotic enough to do our duty.”<sup>14</sup> This was not what a majority of the governor’s constituents and state officials wanted to hear. In fact, a few days before Carr’s welcome, Robert E. Warren, the director of the State Advertising and Publicity Committee sought to arouse civic bodies against evacuation into Colorado. Warren’s fervor prompted his adherents to pressure Carr into action against evacuation. He called for supporters to “arouse ourselves and prevent these almond-eyed sons of the Orient from being dumped on our doorstep.”<sup>15</sup> Carr rebuked opposition to “alien” evacuation as a product of ignorance and an “unhappy interpretation which has been placed upon certain rumors.”<sup>16</sup> He also lambasted those who adhered to anti-evacuation sentiment for their “disinclination to co-operate in essential war efforts.”<sup>17</sup>

In April, Carr continued to disappoint Colorado’s xenophobic constituents when Dr. Milton Eisenhower, chief director of the WRA, summoned state governors of the Interior West to Salt Lake City to request their cooperation in the resettlement effort. Carr was the only governor to guarantee compliance with the WRA.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Wyoming’s governor Nels Smith proclaimed that should any Japanese-Americans arrive in his state, “I promise they will be hanging from every tree.”<sup>19</sup> Even as a Senate election approached and his popularity continued to plummet, Carr kept up his defense of the Japanese-American evacuees. In August, he addressed a labor union gathering and declared that he was not in favor of placing evacuees into concentration camps, citing that the Constitution “guarantees to every man, before he is deprived of his freedom, that there be charges and proof of misconduct in a fair hearing.”<sup>20</sup> Carr’s rhetoric and convictions eventually cost him both the United States Senate election to Edwin Johnson and later, a second gubernatorial term. He later ran again for governor in 1950, only to die in the middle of his campaign.<sup>21</sup>

Why Carr so outspokenly defended the Japanese-American evacuees at the expense of his political career is still not entirely understood. Available evidence in a letter correspondence with George H. Thompson, the mayor of Julesburg, Colorado, suggests that Carr understood that the West Coast exclusion opened an opportunity to replenish manual labor lost to the war effort.<sup>22</sup> While that is certainly probable,

other correspondences suggest that the primary reason came from his own convictions that discrimination and incarceration of the Japanese-Americans was immoral and unconstitutional. He expressed these sentiments in a letter addressed to United States Attorney Thomas J. Morris when asking for clarification over who had jurisdiction over the evacuees.<sup>23</sup> Although his ability to affect the conditions and livelihoods of the evacuees was limited by both his fleeting political power and the authority held by the WRA over the internees, Carr made the first crucial step in enabling the wartime growth of Denver's Japanese-American community with his simple welcome and refusal to adopt wartime hysteria for political gain.

The West Coast Japanese-Americans who took advantage of both General DeWitt's "voluntary evacuation" policy and Governor Carr's welcome gained the great fortune of avoiding mass deportation to the internment camps. Among those who had good reason to flee inland was Jimmie Omura, a San Francisco-based magazine publisher. Omura was a provocateur against mass removal of evacuees and against the Japanese-American Citizens League because of its collaboration with federal authorities. On the last day of mass relocation, Omura moved quickly. Upon arrival in Denver Omura's business manager "went ahead and procured a house, or an office, and refurbished it as best she could."<sup>24</sup> Recognizing the difficulty faced by his fellow refugees in obtaining jobs in Denver, Omura transformed his new office into a temporary placement bureau. He established contact with the governor's office for prospects. Omura even went down to Amache and signed up people for jobs. While most of the job offers were for domestic work with specific employer requirements as to the type of person, he did not charge a fee "because we thought that the eviction of Japanese from the West Coast was a racial crisis and that we all should pull the oars together."<sup>25</sup>

There was a small but stable Japanese population in Denver established as early as 1900. Since only the West Coast was declared a military exclusion zone, Denver's Japanese-Americans did not endure mass deportation to the internment camps. Many of the evacuees, especially those who had family members residing in Denver or with other organizational affiliations, had a greater chance of being quartered and receiving assistance in finding work.

Joseph Norio Uemura's father, who was a Methodist minister, came to Denver in 1929 after serving congregations in the Pacific Northwest. Many of the evacuees who sought Pastor Uemura's support had previously belonged to his congregations in Spokane, Washington and Portland, Oregon.<sup>26</sup> Among those former congregants who received his aid was the family of Minoru Yasui. Yasui later became one of the most prominent members of the Colorado chapter of the Japanese-American Citizens League. Joseph Uemura recalled that in regards to sheltering evacuees and former internees, "members of the church were very solidly behind 'em. And then, as I say, beyond the church, there were a lot of people who, if they knew about it, really came to our rescue."<sup>27</sup> Outside his father's congregation, Minoru stated "[T]he other Protestant churches kicked in with the National Council of Churches, they helped, they kicked in with help financially."<sup>28</sup> The networks of support, whether from religious organizations, such as Pastor Uemura's church or the employment center operated by Jimmie Omura, played a crucial role as more internees on leave settled in Denver.

Meanwhile, opponents of Japanese-American evacuation to Colorado mounted a legal assault against them. *The Denver Post* expressed strong sentiment against the Japanese-American presence. Early in 1943, *The Denver Post* attacked a plan for building a school for internee children at the Granada Relocation Center. In the news report, United States Senator Johnson accused WRA bureaucrats of “extravagant “spending that exceeded the spending on permanent schools in Denver. The article went so far as to suggest that the WRA would lobby for a permanent school structure.<sup>29</sup> Senator Johnson expressed hopes that his investigation would lead to “curbs on the ambitions of the ultra ‘socially’ minded bureaucrats, project directors and authority chiefs.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most important event covered by Colorado’s mass media regarding the Japanese-American resettlement was the attempt by the Colorado State Legislature to pass an amendment prohibiting “enemy aliens” from owning land.<sup>31</sup> The measure came about after Japanese-Americans purchased land in Adams County, north of Denver. According to *The Rocky Mountain News*, which generally portrayed Japanese-Americans in a positive light, only twenty-three people purchased land.<sup>32</sup> On February 8, 1944, *The Denver Post* rejoiced at the passing of the Alien Land Bill in the State House.<sup>33</sup> Although the bill was passed by a vast Republican majority, certain Republican State Representatives expressed concern that discriminatory legislation played into the hands of the Axis Powers.<sup>34</sup> Earl Man, a Republican and the only black state representative, voted against it “on behalf of 10,000 Negro soldiers.”<sup>35</sup> The next day a *Rocky Mountain News* front-page headline announced that the State Senate had killed the Alien Land Bill. According to the article, the vote against the bill emphasized the “dangers of racial legislation during wartime.”<sup>36</sup> Other Republicans in the Senate were divided in support for the bill. Republican State Senator Edgar Bray explained that not only was the land bill too discriminatory but it could have endangered “our boys who are prisoners of Japan.”<sup>37</sup> Curtis P. Richie, a Democratic State Senator, voted against the bill stating that its implications mirrored Hitler’s legal campaigns against minority groups.<sup>38</sup>

The proponents of the Alien Land Bill attempted to revive it for the November election. They formed the American League of Colorado which sought to hinder and discourage all undesirable immigrants and aliens from “remaining in the United States by lawful means and practices.”<sup>39</sup> Their efforts to pass a similar alien land bill were met with failure yet again.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the attempt to discourage Japanese-Americans from settling in Denver failed even before the land bill began. Due to the efforts of voluntary evacuees like Jimmie Omura and earlier residents with connections and community support like Pastor Uemura, the Japanese-American community of Denver grew at an unprecedented rate.

The hostility experienced by Japanese-Americans throughout the rest of the state also played a part in the growth of the Denver community. For many evacuees during the early war period, Denver was considered a “Mecca”. Other evacuees viewed the city as either stop-over on the journey east or a temporary haven until they could reclaim their livelihoods on the West Coast. The community was mostly contained within the boundaries of the Larimer district of downtown Denver.<sup>41</sup> According to

a study made in February 1944 by the Denver Bureau of Public Welfare, the newly grown Japanese population of Denver had swelled to 2,310, “a seven-fold increase over the 1940 census.”<sup>42</sup> Carolyn Takeshita, a former child internee at the Poston River Camp, recalled the diversity of the community her family found when her father found work in a munitions foundry in Denver.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the most striking aspects Takeshita remembers about Denver’s Japanese-American community was the presence of those who did not endure the indignity of internment. Takeshita recalled, “I would say half and half, people have camp in their experience, and fifty percent that maybe did not.”<sup>44</sup> *The Rocky Mountain News* reported positively on the rise of “little Japan” in Downtown Denver. Their report in November 1944 depicted a small, happy and mostly American-born population. The *News* emphasized their potential cultural contributions and commercial value with introduction of exotic Japanese food for the palates of Denverites.<sup>45</sup> The well-meaning attempt of Japanese-Americans to win greater acceptance among Denverites glossed over the harsher realities they once faced in their new “Mecca.”

Despite obtaining freedom from the camps, Takeshita acknowledged the darker reality of life in and around Larimer Street. She related, “[T]here was a certain area that you couldn’t cross over and you couldn’t buy property. It was pretty restricted at that time. So, it made it kind of nice. We kind of formed a ghetto, so to speak, but it was a safe one.”<sup>46</sup> Safe ghetto or not, housing segregation was a challenging factor of life for the Denver Japanese-Americans that persisted long after the war. The 1944 Denver Bureau of Public Welfare confirmed that the greatest concentration of Japanese in Denver was in the original business district. It noted that the neighborhood “is now a sub-standard rooming house district.”<sup>47</sup> Among 1,241 household heads interviewed for the study, 439 lived in house-keeping rooms, 563 in rooming houses, 195 in single unit houses and 42 in duplexes. Of those 1,241 heads of household, only 93 considered their standard of living above that prior to the war. There were 694 who reported that it was equal prior to the war while 454 considered their standard of living to be lower.<sup>48</sup>

The study offered a simple answer to the disparity within the Japanese-American population. It was caused by the influx of former internees from the relocation centers. According to a chart provided in the study, 210 households composed of 397 individuals (1.9 individuals per household) lived in Denver prior to the war. Of the voluntary evacuees, 354 households were composed of 755 individual (2.1 individuals per household). The largest Japanese-American group was the evacuees from the relocation centers. Of this group, 1,158 individuals represented 677 households (1.7 individuals per household). The chart reveals that voluntary evacuees often composed entire family units. These people were also able to move household goods from the West Coast and were more likely to establish themselves in Denver on a more permanent basis.<sup>49</sup>

Relocation center evacuees, on the other hand, usually did not make up complete family units.<sup>50</sup> “As a general rule,” the survey said the majority of relocation center migrants were “those in the younger age groups.”<sup>51</sup> These younger migrants were



less likely to remain in the Denver community as their postwar prospective was not centered around family ties. The study suggested that the disparity of living conditions for most Japanese-Americans was not a symptom of the city, but a product of the relocation problem. Since the majority of relocation center evacuees expressed desires to leave Denver, regardless of uncertainty in their ability to return to their West Coast homes, the study seemed to suggest that the Japanese-American housing problem was only temporary.<sup>52</sup> In late 1945 the Japanese-American population of Denver finally peaked at 5,000. This was remarkable compared to the prewar population of 323 in 1940.<sup>53</sup> As the Second World War drew to its conclusion, however, Denver's Japanese-American population dwindled as rapidly as it had grown.

According to the evaluations of War Agency Liquidation Unit officials, Denver's Japanese-American community faced great uncertainty in the postwar era. Chicago first eclipsed Denver as an evacuee haven and the subsequent re-opening of the West Coast triggered a westward exodus from the city that was "as rapid as its abnormal growth."<sup>54</sup> Of greatest concern to the remaining Japanese-American Denverites was the future of the inter-community economy. A reliable source of income and employment was leaving. Businessmen who remained had to adjust to catering to more whites, blacks and Hispanics and fewer Japanese-American clientele. Although many young Japanese-Americans were skilled, few were able to secure better jobs with Caucasian firms.<sup>55</sup> A report on minorities released in 1947 by the Mayor's Interim Survey Committee on Human Relations suggested that conditions had not greatly improved for Japanese-Americans in downtown Denver.

Of the 2,500 Japanese-Americans who remained in Denver, most had done so out of a preference for Denver over the West Coast. Despite their favorable disposition towards Denver, most were still subjugated to housing discrimination. As a result, 75 percent of Japanese businesses were confined to the area in and around Twentieth and Larimer Streets. Despite assurance from licensing authorities that wartime bans on business licenses had been lifted throughout the city, only two Japanese had filed for them.<sup>56</sup> The report denotes that past rebuffs against Japanese-American businesses "have probably discouraged them from trying to move out of the segregated area."<sup>57</sup> On a slightly more positive outlook, the report found that, although still strong, the extraordinarily high wartime prejudice against Japanese-Americans had declined.<sup>58</sup>

A report presented in 1954 by the Denver Commission on Human Relations revealed that living conditions for Japanese-Americans had improved somewhat. The report stated that Japanese-Americans used the Colorado State Employment Service less than other minorities.<sup>59</sup> The lack of use was attributed to the "fact that such workers desiring employment can usually find it without difficulty."<sup>60</sup> Although Japanese-Americans in Denver still faced housing discrimination, a survey of property realtors and owners indicated that 56 percent of owners would sell property to Japanese-Americans and Hispanics. Americans Jews scored highest at 67 percent while blacks were in the most disadvantaged position.<sup>61</sup>

A map of Japanese-American demographics in 1950 looked only slightly different from one made in 1944. While the main community in and around Larimer Street



was considerably less populous than it had been during the war years, only a few had dispersed into the further reaches of Denver County. The downtown remained the epicenter of the community.<sup>62</sup>



*The Rocky Mountain News emphasized their potential cultural contributions and commercial value with introduction of exotic Japanese food for the palates of Denverites. The well-meaning attempt of Japanese-Americans to win greater acceptance among Denverites glossed over the harsher realities they once faced in their new “Mecca.” Article: Frances Melrose, “Little Japan’ in Denver Rises as Result of War.” The Rocky Mountain News, November 18, 1944.*

In regards to housing in general, the report painted a grim assessment for minority groups in Denver. This same 1954 report from the Denver Human Relations Commission showed that from 1947, black, Hispanic and Asian Americans in Denver had a higher proportion of tenancy than home ownership when compared to white Americans. In the major areas of occupancy for the three ethnic groups, substandard living conditions prevailed.<sup>63</sup> The average age of homes was reported as “twice that of the city as a whole, almost twice as many dwellings are substandard and those sections of the city are overcrowded.”<sup>64</sup> Additional residences for the three minorities offered better standards, but were in older homes. The study added that housing problems frequently experienced by transient, migratory minority groups followed them even as they moved into areas from which they had once been excluded. Furthermore, the report found that over half of lending agencies avoided making housing mortgage loans to older portions of the city due to their deterioration.<sup>65</sup>

Two possible solutions to the downtown housing dilemma were presented in the report: public housing and urban renewal. The waiting list for public housing comprised of eleven percent of all racial minorities except Japanese-Americans.<sup>66</sup> A newly established Urban Renewal Commission pledged to assist individual owners in the rehabilitation of their properties and the surrounding neighborhoods as well as to make available new homes and low-rent units. The report speculated that these developments would be of great value to those living in substandard areas.<sup>67</sup>

In 1965 the Real Estate Research Corporation published a study on behalf of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority regarding land utilization and marketing prospects

for the impending Skyline Urban Renewal Project. Downtown Denver, like many Postwar American urban centers, suffered from the flight of industry and capital to the suburbs.<sup>68</sup> The mission of the Skyline planners and its proponents was to eliminate all traces of urban blight in order to revitalize the downtown. The project included 29 blocks of downtown Denver and encompassed everything north of Champa Street, east of Speer Boulevard, south of Market Street and west of Twentieth Street.<sup>69</sup> Included in this designation was the Japanese district of Larimer Street. The Skyline Project study described the periphery of Twentieth and Larimer Street as predominantly “mixed commercial and industrial uses of fair to poor quality.”<sup>70</sup> According to the study, an accurate residential population count could not be obtained due to the “highly mobile nature of the area’s resident population,” though research from the Urban Renewal Authority showed 500 out of 1,470 residents to be transient. Only 87 families resided within the boundaries of the Skyline Project.<sup>71</sup> A vacancy survey determined that at most, residential vacancy was estimated to be an “undesirable” twelve percent.<sup>72</sup> In an article in *The Denver Post* William Johnston, chief planner of the Skyline Project, stated that there were 29 hotels in the designated section. These hotels he described as “cubicles” or “flophouses” consisting of just a bed and a chair.<sup>73</sup> Half of the population in the designated section was over 50 years old. The education level of half of its residence fell below eighth grade.<sup>74</sup>

In its report, the Real Estate Research Corporation expressed confidence that the Skyline Project met the demands for new housing projects and provided solutions to the problem of downtown transients and the elderly poor. The assessment estimated that 600 or 700 guest rooms could be attracted to the project area.<sup>75</sup> In 1967, Denver voters approved the Skyline Project after nearly a decade of planning, research, advocacy and fundraising by DURA and city officials.<sup>76</sup>

As the project progressed, DURA set about the task of relocating the remaining businesses, individuals and families away from the construction and demolition area. According to a relocation report made in 1969, thirty two percent of the 550 remaining businesses in the designated Skyline area had either relocated or chose to go out of business.<sup>77</sup> The study documented 150 unrelated individuals relocated from 10 hotels acquired by DURA.<sup>78</sup> Most were reported to be over the age of fifty and living in squalid conditions for over ten years. The diets of these individuals were usually poor and meager. A third of the 150 individuals, the report said, could be “classified as ‘skid row’ alcoholics.”<sup>79</sup>

Japanese-Americans represented only three percent of the individuals relocated from the hotels, and only two families. When Carolyn Takeshita moved back to Denver from California, she found that conditions for the Japanese-Americans had improved since the war. As far as community mobility was concerned, Takeshita noticed that “[T]he housing restrictions were kind of lifted. So then the Japanese-Americans were financially more stable, so then they moved out and were able to buy homes.”<sup>80</sup> While this was certainly an improvement for Japanese-Americans, the dispersal into the suburbs signaled the decentralization of the community. When Takeshita returned to visit the old Larimer Street “Little Japan,” the Japanese-American “Mecca” had become skid row.<sup>81</sup>

In 1965, a sociology study on the Japanese community on Larimer Street was conducted by the University of Colorado on behalf of DURA. The purpose of the study was to assess the conditions of the Japanese-Americans in the area and their thought on the prospects of moving. Anthony Gorman who conducted the study documented his interviews with two denizens of Larimer Street referred to as Mr. K and Mrs. M. The study predicted that if the families needed to be removed, they had efficient personal and social resources to do so.<sup>82</sup> Mr. K, a restaurant owner, complained about the presence of beggars on Larimer Street and stated that, compared to Japan, “this is the worst country for begging.”<sup>83</sup> Mrs. M, a young hotel owner and longtime resident of Larimer Street expressed desires to move so that her daughter would not have to grow up around bachelor tenants.<sup>84</sup> Although Mrs. M recognized the advantage of moving to the suburbs, she expressed concern about the minority status and the loss of the sense of community when living there. Despite her concern for the demolition of her hotel, Mrs. M viewed urban renewal somewhat positively. She stated, “that’s the sacrifice you have to make in order to have a better Denver, I guess.”<sup>85</sup>

Over the course of the next two decades, the progress of urban renewal in Denver seemed worse than the disease of urban blight. Carolyn Takeshita reflected on urban renewal on Larimer Street saying, “it sounded like a good idea at that time. But I don’t think that we as a community realize that fifty years later, or at that time, that we would have lost our history in the Denver area.”<sup>86</sup> By the mid-1960s, the slow and undignified death of Japanese downtown Denver seemed to be at hand.

Fortunately for Japanese-Americans who still felt a connection and an investment in the old community, urban renewal moved slow enough for them to realize what they would lose. The old Buddhist Temple stood in the path of the project. Temple members were given the option to sell their property or buy and develop the entire block.<sup>87</sup> The slowness that it took DURA to pursue development allowed the Tri-State Buddhist Church and others to organize and form the Sakura Square Management Corporation.<sup>88</sup> Tri-State Buddhist Church Apartments Incorporated emerged with a board formed to head the development of the project. They saw an opportunity not only to preserve their beloved temple, but also to establish low rent housing for the elderly poor. On March 10, 1971, Sakura Square was purchased from the DURA for \$188,800.<sup>89</sup> J. Robert Cameron, DURA’s executive director, greeted the project with enthusiasm calling Sakura Square “an outstanding contribution to the new environment in downtown Denver.”<sup>90</sup> Cameron lauded the selection of Bertram Bruton, one of Denver’s finest architects, as the designer of the new Larimer Square facilities. The First National Bank of Denver provided a construction loan of 3.9 million dollars, while the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company provided additional long-term financing for the project.<sup>91</sup>

In 1973 Sakura Square was ceremonially dedicated by the city of Denver. The vitality of the development was enhanced by the Buddhist Temple which retained its importance as a community center. A variety of commercial venues such as Pacific Mercantile, Granada Supermarket, Sakura Beauty Salon, Nakai Gift Shop and Haws and Company also contributed.<sup>92</sup> Along with a refurbished Buddhist Temple and the

commercial shopping venues, the other centerpiece of the Sakura Square development was the twenty story Tamai Towers. Tamai Towers contained 204 government subsidized apartments for low-to-moderate income tenants.<sup>93</sup> Among the amenities listed in the brochure for Tamai Towers were fully paid utilities and a Japanese style garden for recreation.<sup>94</sup> For the first time, the Japanese of Denver had a community center that warranted respectability from both the greater Denver community and all generations of Japanese Coloradans.



*Denver Buddhist Temple. This remaining vestige of Japanese-American Denver galvanized community leaders to preserve the temple from the Denver Urban Renewal Association's onslaught and to revitalize the community. Photo: Ross Webste*

For Japanese Denverites like Carolyn Takeshita, the implications of Sakura Square were simple. She expressed, “We have Sakura Square, and that’s the only center, but everybody gravitates towards there.”<sup>95</sup> Although the majority of Japanese-Americans in Colorado dispersed into the suburbs of the Front Range, the re-emergence of the downtown center revived a shared sense of community and history. More than that, it was Denver’s Japanese-Americans themselves who rescued the district and their history from squalor and obliteration. For many of the former evacuees and their descendants, Denver was remembered as a place of salvation in a time when none was offered anywhere else in the country. It was only appropriate that in 1976 a bust was erected in Sakura Square, dedicated to the man who figuratively saved them, Ralph L. Carr. Carr certainly deserved his posthumous praise. His recognition of persecuted Japanese-Americans as American citizens resonated with those who accepted his welcome to Colorado. However, it was those first voluntary evacuees along with pre-war Japanese-American in Denver who were the ultimate heroes. They gave relocation center refugees the means to gather and rebuild lives and livelihoods that had been lost in their former homes and stilted in the camps. For those evacuees who stayed in Denver the memory of those wartime achievements encouraged them to stay despite the decay, demolition and eventual residential irrelevance of the downtown center. Finally, it was those evacuees who remembered the significance of the Denver community during the war, who organized and achieved the means to revive its importance, and who assured that the story of Japanese-American Denver would never be forgotten.

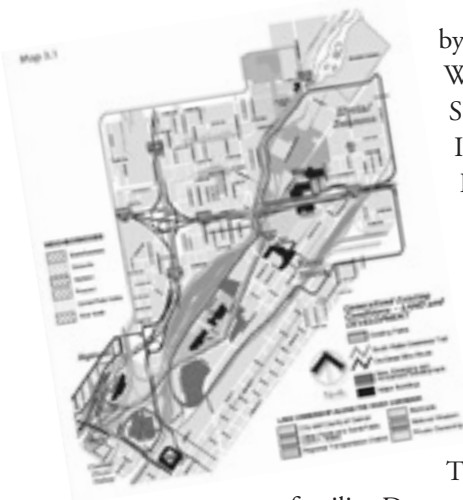
## RiNo: From Then to Now

Brandy von Kaenel

The River North Art District once played a crucial role in Denver's early industrial development. Ironically, it has also significantly contributed to some of Denver's major pollution issues. Yet, today the area instills a sustainable urbanist perspective which supports an innovative artist and work-live culture. The unique and significant historical structures that have survived contribute to both the present and future life of Denver.

The River North area is bounded by I-70 to the North, I-25 to the West, Park Avenue West to the South and Lawrence to the East. It is nestled amongst three major Denver neighborhoods: Globeville, Elyria-Swansea, and the Five Points.<sup>1</sup> The "RiNo" nickname (pronounced like "rhino") was coined by local artisans and residents. RiNo has been a center of recent redevelopment by local developers and visionaries.

This art community is becoming a more familiar Denver artisan "hot spot" as well as home to many interesting community events and architectural developments. RiNo's motto, according to their neighborhood website is "Where Art is Made."<sup>2</sup>



*Above: Current Neighborhood and RiNo Art District Configuration. Source: City and County of Denver – The River North Greenway Master Plan, “Generalized Existing Conditions – Land and Development.”*

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*Brandy is very passionate about sustainability, practicing and teaching design, and being actively involved in several professional associations including AIA, CPI and USGBC.*

RiNo itself is not currently a historic district nor does it contain any designated Denver or National Historic Register landmarks. In 1995 and 2006-2007, The Office of Historical Preservation and Archaeology had identified several buildings that were potentially eligible for National Register Designations. It is up to the community and interested people to pursue designations.

### **Opportunity in Denver**

Although the “RiNo” neighborhood in its current incarnation is fairly new, the area has a deep history. Until the 1858-59 Gold Rush, Denver was home to Native Americans and a few European-Americans who made a living in fur trapping and trading. In 1858, General William Larimer staked his claim for the city near the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek (now called Confluence Park) after the discovery of gold. The city was officially established on November 22, 1858.<sup>3</sup> The Pikes Peak Gold Rush brought thousands of people to Denver and the Rocky Mountain mining towns. In the 1870s, railroads arrived and brought thousands more immigrants, growing Denver’s population from 4,759 to 106,713 by 1890.

Denver’s position as a regional railroad hub allowed for transportation of passengers and raw materials on a mass scale, helping it to become a regional center of commerce and industry. This was evidenced by “breweries, bakeries, meat packing and other food-processing plants as well as farm and ranch equipment, barbed wire, windmills, seed, feed and harnesses,” according to one historian. After the silver depression in 1893 when Denver began to slowly build again, one could find the prevalence of “stockyards, brickyards, canneries, flour mills, leather and rubber goods, as well as the Denver Livestock Exchange, National Western Stock Show and local breweries”<sup>4</sup> The impact of the Silver Crash and World War II are evident in the RiNo area when looking at the “Original Year of Construction Map” produced for the Denver Assessors Records.<sup>5</sup> Buildings were either primarily built prior to the Silver Crash (1893-4) or after World War II (1940s and later), but rarely in-between those dates.

### **Opportunity in RiNo**

The history of the area that would become River North was largely influenced by railroads, the South Platte River and industry jobs. The flat land, river, and proximity to the rail road created a perfect area to grow the smelting industry.<sup>6</sup> Locals called this area the Smelter Districts. The closest smelter to the RiNo neighborhood was the Omaha - Grant Smelter Works, located at 41st and Cottage Ave (now known as Wewatta Street) in the St. Vincent’s Neighborhood Addition.<sup>7</sup> Men worked here and at other smelters for a mere \$1.75 wage for twelve hours worth of work.<sup>8</sup> The Omaha Smelter was founded in 1883 by James Benton Grant, former Governor of Colorado, who previously had an operation in Leadville. Grant was known for his technical knowledge of mining techniques and metallurgy and was well respected by Denverites. Additionally, he was responsible for signing the legislative bill to authorize the building of the Colorado State Capitol Building in Denver. *The History of Colorado*, published by the State Historical Society in 1927 states, “the manufacture



of ore milling and smelting equipment...grew to such proportions that it made Denver the Mecca's of metallurgists the world over." The ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Elyria-Swansea, Five Points and Globeville grew and developed as a result of these strong industrial influences. Their neighborhood histories provide background for the new RiNo development overlaying these older industrial areas.

### **Globeville**

The Globe Smelting Company created Globeville as a residential area for its workers around 1885. European immigrants such as Volga-Deutsch, Slovenians, Croatians, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Czechs and a few Carpatho-Russians settled in the area. Most of them worked at the Globe plant and their children attended the Garden Place School at 51st Ave. Germans, Russians and Italians created cabbage and beet gardens. This gave way to the name Garden Place, an early name for Globeville. The neighborhood fully took shape by 1910 and was annexed by the City of Denver.

### **Elyria-Swansea**

Elyria and Swansea are bounded by 52nd Ave, Brighton Boulevard, 54th Ave on the north, by the South Platte River on the south, by 38th Street and 40th Ave. on the south and Colorado Boulevard on the East, While York Street divides Swansea and Elyria. Both neighborhoods attracted Slavic immigrants in the mid-19th century who hoped to prosper working in nearby plants. Swansea was established in the 1870s around the smelting facilities.

Denver Planning Office records indicate that "Elyria was platted on March 29, 1881 by A. C. Fisk and C. F. Liner, President and Treasurer of the Denver Land and Improvement Company."<sup>9</sup> According to a neighborhood survey by the City of Denver done in the 1980s, three structures in Elyria are considered to have historical significance: the Stone House built in 1876 in the Riverside Cemetery, the Livestock Exchange building built in 1916 for Denver Union Stockyard Company, and the old Elyria Elementary school. Elyria is also home to The Denver Coliseum, located at 4600 Humboldt Street.<sup>10</sup> According to a cultural resource reevaluation form from the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, the Coliseum is currently a contributing structure and is eligible for nomination on the Historic Register of Historic Places.

### **Five-Points**

The Five-Points neighborhood is "bounded on the north by the South Platte River and 38th St, on the east by Walnut and Downing streets, on the south by Park Avenue West, and E. 12th Ave. and on the west by Broadway and 20th St."<sup>11</sup> Historically, this area was strong in commercial development, taverns, hotels, railroad and manufacturing facilities, schools, and churches. It was named for the intersection of five streets: Clarkson, 26th, Washington, Welton and 26th Avenue, The area of Five Points closest to RiNo, near 38th, is home to round houses, repair shops, control towers and the railroad lines and switchyards. This Union Pacific complex is a major barrier between the two sides of RiNo, cutting the site in half. The rail lines created



a “segregated district...commonly known as the Deep South”<sup>12</sup> which served as a physical barrier separating Anglos from African American laborers. To deal with racial issues, notable African-Americans in the area like Clarence F. Holmes Jr., a dentist who established his own practice in 1920, set up a local branch of NAACP. Hise house on Downing St. is a Denver landmark. The former residence of Dr. Justina Ford – An African-American doctor in the area - was designated as a Denver Landmark and renovated, becoming the Black American West Museum and Heritage Center at 3091 California Street. Five Points also became a twentieth century mecca for jazz, food and dancing.

### **Ironton**

The RiNo area to the North-West of the train tracks was originally called “Ironton,” a fitting name based on the industry based in the area at the time. Ironton was home to the 1890 Ironton School (now demolished), Colorado Iron Works, and the Orchards Products Company. Several other businesses were located within Ironton, including Atlas Coal Co., Rocky Mountain Fuel Coal and Feed, The Dryfoot Rubber Co. at 36th and Wynkoop, various lumber and milling companies, and the wholesale hay and grain companies at Wazee and 36th, along with several residences and later added gas stations.

### **RiNo's Gems**



*Colorado Iron Work today. Source:  
Photo taken by Brandy von Kaenel*

The Colorado Iron Works building was a foundry and machine shop, located at 3350 and 3390 Brighton Boulevard, on the Union Pacific line. It rested between both Case and Ebert’s Addition (Five-Points) and Ironton. The A. G. Langford and Co. Iron Works began in Denver in 1860, moved to Blackhawk in 1874, and was then renamed Colorado Iron Works. The company came back to Denver in 1874 and created several buildings at this location. Five of the seven buildings were burned in a fire in August of 1881. By September of 1881, a new permit was issued to create a new main structure, 125 x200 feet in dimension. Willoughby James Edbrooke, the architect older brother of famed Denver architect Frank E. Edbrooke, designed the structure. The

*Rocky Mountain News* noted on August 3rd, 1881 “The Ironton lots will adjoin the old and new Colorado Iron Works, just the place for an investment and a home.”<sup>13</sup> The company employed over 350 men by 1898. According to the Architectural Inventory form from the Colorado Historical Society, Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, this company supplied architectural iron work to many of the early Denver Buildings, including the Denver Dry Goods, the Brown Palace Hotel, and the Granite Hotel. The company also supplied mining and milling machinery to Colorado mines in addition to smelting machinery, boilers, engines and hoisting

equipment. The employees of Colorado Iron Works were innovators of cutting edge technologies, including steel tanks, ore gates and feeders, hydraulic classifiers, concentration mills, impact screens and dumping cars. The site still contains two sets of two large modern steel tank-like towers for holding concrete aggregate and cement, which lie behind the building next to the railroad tracks.<sup>14</sup>

From an exterior view, the building suggests two-stories, yet the interior is one expansive volume conducive to its industrial use. A visitor to the building can almost hear the past sounds of the workers echoing in this enormous interior. It has beautiful stepped and dog-toothed brick patterns, typical for its commercial style.<sup>15</sup> Yet, site visits conducted in April 2010 show the property has fallen into serious disrepair. The brick is crumbling away, a side is falling, and there is evidence of mold. It also appears to be used for shelter by squatters. Exterior bricks are spalling and eroded, windows are missing, damaged, or boarded up, and graffiti covers a large portion of the exterior. The OAHF records note that it is currently ineligible for nomination on the historic register of places (NRHP). Nonetheless, the building is a compelling potential candidate for adaptive re-use as a market, museum, or for artist work-live studios.



*Orchards Product Co. /Z-Wick, Source:  
photo taken by Brandy von Kaenel*

#### **Orchards Products Company AKA Z-Wick Place**

Another remarkable RiNo structure hugs the corner of Wazee and 36th Street at 3601 Wazee. It runs alongside an operational train track. The brick 19th century revival and commercial style building is decorated with Italianate Style elements. The first floor's window sills, trim and door frames have been painted bright green and salmon. Diamond-shaped windows made of a lighter colored brick accent the red brick. A black central painted band is situated at the middle of the building with the painted letters "Z Wick." The roof is flat and crowned by a stepped parapet.

According to the architectural inventory form at the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, conducted in 2006, this 1893 building at 3601 Wazee is eligible for the national register. This building has a rich history of varying uses. In 1924 it is listed as "No Water Cleanser Company" and in 1926 as home to 13 residents. Remnants of previous wall partitions are evidenced on interior walls. Vacant in 1927, in 1928-1929, it became solely the residence of WM.O. and Mary B. Cox. From 1929-1953, it became the "Orchards Products Company" a jam and fruit packing company. In 1956, it was listed as the "Tecon Corporation," a sheet metal company, and in the 1970s and 80s, as "Armitage Sales and Services."<sup>16</sup>

The current owners report that when they obtained the property at 3601 Wazee Street in the late 1990's, it had no electricity, no water and little heat. It was completely vacant and the windows and doors were bricked in. It took one year to complete renovations for the current resident artist. Colorful French country light fixtures,

pictures, books, artwork, glazed and decorate ceramic tiles, and eclectic furnishings enrich the space. The original tin ceiling and molding details are painted silver and the original brickwork, exposed lath and plaster, and paint enhance the interior. The ceiling contains both old and new timber, triangular trusses and original tie rods for the beams. Upper windows look out onto busy, bright, bumble-bee colored Union Pacific trains below.

### **Denver Fire Clay Company.**

The Denver Fire Clay Co. building located at 3225 Blake Street opened in 1885 for this fire brick and metallurgical supply company. The 1885 *Colorado Business Directory* reported that “The Denver Fire Clay Co. offers fire brick, muffles and crucibles.” This two story L-shaped building was constructed of brick over steel framing. The five course common American bond on the building suggests a veneer versus a solid structural masonry wall. The building’s cornice and façade contain stepped brick work and brick pilasters that reflect the masons’ skills. Metal stars on the façade anchor rods bracing the brick walls. The Denver brick ordinance enacted in 1864 due to the Denver fires would explain the construction methods used for this industrial building. This complex was determined locally significant because of its relationship to the industrial history and is eligible for the national register.

This building was converted to residential lofts in 2008 by architectural firm Van Meter Williams Pollack. The architect’s website mentions that the Fire Clay lofts complex is about “Adapting Forms and Materials Revitaliz[ing the] Industrial Corridor.”<sup>17</sup> Internal courtyard spaces create a secure outdoor community space for residents. Black steel balconies were made to match existing elements. The architect describes the renovation style as “Contemporary Attached Urban Residential.”

RiNo includes new structures along Blake which reference historic forms from the surrounding context, The developer for the Fire Clay loft project, Urban Ventures, LLC won an award from the Urban Land Institute for “creative financing, unique construction methodologies, strong public/private partnerships and replicability to achieve workforce housing affordably.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Silver Engineering AKA Silver Square Lofts**

The Silver Square complex located at 3309 to 3377 Blake St. was part of the H. Witter Addition. The 1903 Sanborn maps show a complex of several buildings including a pattern shop, sheet metal works, machine shops, and an office at Blake Street and 34th Ave. The original buildings were constructed of brick and timber framing for fabrication of mining and milling machinery by William Orr and his brother with the W.O. McFarlane Company. A letter M in relief was fashioned in brick on some of the buildings. <sup>19</sup> The Sugar Machinery shop houses fourteen 24” diameter turbines along the south slope roof ridge. The forward half of the roof ridge line contains a corrugated metal barrel shaped belvedere in profile. The buildings were constructed between 1898 and 1908. In 1910 they were sold to William Box. His “Box Iron Works” manufactured mining equipment and Denver fire truck sirens.

The plant was hit hard during the 1930's Depression and Box died of alcoholism. Ownership of the structure reverted to Fred H. Roberts who employed Harold Silver, an inventor from Wyoming, to run the plant. Harold Silver invented an innovative sugar beet piler machine in 1933 and soon became co-owner of "Silver-Roberts Ironworks." Later Silver bought out Robert's share to become full owner, converting the name to "Silver Engineering". At the nearby Pattern Shop, wood patterns were created for sand molds that could then be founded in iron and used to manufacture parts. Silver later built a large steel construction foundry at 3377 Blake St. in the 1940s. Silver, a mechanical and business genius, organized several Denver businesses, and designed WWII ships for the Roosevelt Administration in this building. Harold Silver died September 13, 1984.<sup>20</sup> Currently, the gabled roof Pattern Shop building is owned by Rex and Sharon Brown who bought and redesigned the space as an art studio, gallery and loft-type residence in 1991. This project involved David Owen Tryba Architects, Alan Eban Brown Architects, and developer Urban Ventures LLC. Every month the Browns host a First Friday art event here displaying local artists work as well as their own, and open up the Pattern Shop.

### **Brighton Boulevard**

The main corridor through RiNo both historically and currently is Brighton Boulevard. This northern extension of Broadway was originally named Wewatta Street and. It turns northeast at Denargo Road and 29th Street to follow the Burlington Northern tracks toward Brighton, Colorado. Wewatta Street was re-named Brighton Boulevard after 1924 when Broadway was extended from 20th Street and the Broadway viaduct was built over the railroad yards.<sup>21</sup> Originally this area housed a sewer line that emptied into a swamp and was therefore primarily vacant, with a few homes and businesses scattered throughout. In 1895, the South Platte was improved, the swamp filled and a sewer line added. According to Denver's River North Plan, in 1893 Brighton Boulevard was primarily residential and slowly became more of mixed-use neighborhood by 1931.<sup>22</sup> By 1939, Denargo Market was in place as a produce market with businesses, such as the John Marr Grocery Co., soda bar creameries, drug stores and physician's offices. Conagra Foods arrived in the 1940s on Wynkoop, just one street off the Brighton corridor. In 1953, the Pepsi Bottling Company opened at the corner of 38th and Brighton. After the 1950s and to its present day, Brighton Boulevard has served as one of RiNo's major industrial truck and cab thorough-fares into Downtown Denver from I-70. Today this strip is an eclectic blend of new-urbanist multi-family development, industrial Art-Moderne styled buildings and a few sandwiched-in historic residences.

### **The Environmental Movement**

In the 1970s and 80s, the modern RiNo area began to coalesce into a new neighborhood. This time the area's growth was based not on industrial development, but environmental concern. Industrial waste, toxins, contaminants, traffic pollution and highway dust were harmful to residents along the River North corridor as well as

to local ecology. For many years, local industry abused the river as a back yard dump. The Vasquez and I-70 site – once home to smelters – is now an Environmental Protection Agency superfund site and remediation is necessary to mitigate toxins from the soil and water.<sup>23</sup>

Low property prices and rents attracted artists who found economical, large light-industrial zoned spaces to create live/work studios and galleries. Artists found support from the City and County of Denver and the Greenway Foundation who were interested in cleaning up the South Platte River. The Greenway Foundation, formed in 1974, began with the creation of Confluence Park at the once unkempt junction of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River. With considerable city support, the Greenway Foundation began building other riverfront trails and parks. According to the Denver City and the Greenway Foundation's River North Greenway Master Plan from 2009, "over 200 sources of pollution in the River" have been removed as a result of the clean-up.<sup>24</sup> Since this time public parks, open spaces, trails and investment have continued to develop along the greenway. "The River North Greenway Master Plan seeks to continue the great success of public investment along the South Platte in order to realize the many benefits of a healthy, connected and attractive urban waterway."<sup>25</sup>

### **Current and Future Development in RiNo**

The attractions of RiNo are its mixture of uses, architectural styles, and several urban-isms (new-urbanism, everyday urbanism, and sustainable-urbansim to name a few). Someone may live next door to a fabrication lab, art studio or within a work-live studio. Yet even despite this eclectic mix, RiNo's local culture and industrial gritty character remain intact. In RiNo, one has freedom to dream, grow, adapt and choose their lifestyle. These approaches instill the ideas of sustainability, diversity, opportunity, and community. RiNo's neighborhood website has a section called "Feed the RiNo" which includes policies, suggestions and strategies for developers and residents. This includes: 1% of any capital improvement project undertaken by the city be set aside for art, buy local, provide a stipend when exhibiting an artist, create artists spaces, invest in the environment, build LEED and engage the community.<sup>26</sup> The focus here is and should continue to be: connection, community and sustainability.

### **TAXI**

Visionary developer Mickey Zeppelin of Zeppelin Development has embraced the idea of the river as an amenity, or "the spine" of the neighborhood as he calls it. His innovative ideas illustrate how to successfully approach sustainable projects in industrial areas like RiNo. Zeppelin Development's greatest achievement thus far is TAXI. Zeppelin purchased the site in 1990 with a vision to convert the former Yellow Cab offices and maintenance shop into something new. The original modernist taxi cab company building of the late 1940's – early 1950's is along Ringsby Court on the West side of the River, next to the current Regional Transportation District bus center. Zeppelin collaborated with the local urban planning and landscape firm Wenk

Associates and Colorado Architecture firm Alan Eban Brown <sup>27</sup>to create artist and business offices, community spaces, and a popular local coffee shop, Fuel Café. <sup>28</sup> The site hosts several green aspects including brown-field redevelopment (remediation of a contaminated site), storm water runoff treatment, use of raw materials and recycled materials from the site such as crushed concrete plaza, and the reuse of storm water pipes for planters and site benches. The interior corridors of the main TAXI building are adorned with Susan Wick's beautiful and whimsical ceramic art, concrete blocking, vivid paint and translucent panels. Zeppelin's philosophy on community-based development is evident in his sustainability initiatives and inclusion of community gardens and outdoor spaces. The TAXI center involves several phases including plans for over 18 acres of mixed-uses. In 2008 TAXI 2 was completed, a cluster of work-live units surrounding the old cab building. TAXI has won numerous American Institute of Architects and American Society of Landscape Architecture awards. Its Fuel Café won Denver magazine *5280's* editor's choice award. <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> The projects have involved several architecture and sustainability-focused firms including: Alan Eban Brown Architects, Will Bruder, Harry Teague and David Baker as well as contractor M.A. Mortenson Company. Mickey, Zeppelin. RiNo's lead proponent believes that it is important to support and celebrate the area's industrial heritage, and "the history of the working man and woman."<sup>31</sup> So often, preservationists focus on saving residences but this industrial area should be regarded as one of Denver's birthplaces.

### **Denargo Demo**

In 2008 the Denargo Market site was demolished, to make way for a new re-development project initiated by Cypress Real Estate Advisors, Design Works urban and landscape firm, with encouragement from the City of Denver. Design Workshop received an American Society of Landscape Architects honor planning award in 2009 for the design.<sup>32</sup> Market studies for Blueprint Denver anticipate that by 2022, the area will consist of 900 single-family attached units, 675 multi-family units, open space, and 200,000 square feet of retail space. The river is viewed as an amenity and building heights are more limited (75 feet max) at the South Platte River edge.<sup>33</sup>

### **Transit Oriented Development**

A Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) project at 38th and Blake as part of an East RTD corridor light rail FasTracks extension is in development stages. This project includes the development of a pedestrian bridge connecting TAXI to the neighborhood on the East side of the River. This will increase permeability from disconnected neighborhoods such as Five-Points to the rest of RiNo. Transit-oriented development will also assist people without vehicles in nearby neighborhoods and create new jobs. The idea is to create a walk-able community and revive some of the historic infrastructure that existed prior to the demolition that came with 1960s urban renewal. Lastly, the River Greenway projects will also continue by creating more parks, bike and pedestrian paths.



## Adaptive Re-Use

RiNo is notable for adaptive re-use projects such as the Dry Ice factory, the Rail Yard Lofts, Denver Fire Clay, Silver Square Lofts and several Walnut Street warehouses from the 1940s. Zoning within RiNo is largely Industrial (I-1) or RMU (Residential Mixed Use) allowing for this eclectic blend of use. The future fate of RiNo might include a historic district to protect individual buildings as well as control new development. Another idea could be to create a local commission to review and regulate changes to the historic architecture. As the news spreads, tourism is also emerging as a RiNo achievement especially for heritage and art enthusiasts. Rehabilitation and adaptive use would be optimal, while also creating a local ordinance relating to management, perhaps noting that local farmers and vendors, restaurants or gallery spaces, are retained in these older structures, as opposed to allowing upscale franchises from taking over the buildings.

The industrial buildings within RiNo are cultural icons that deserve just as much recognition as residences and churches. They are a critical part of our cultural landscape. The RiNo neighborhood itself has become a prototype which proves again and again that innovative thinking, perseverance and passion not only pays off, but can result in something intriguing, achievable, and evolutionary. This once polluting and disconnected area is now becoming one of the major centers of sustainability and connection in the city, a sustainable post-industrial district.

### My Tribute to RiNo: "From Then to Now" – By Brandy von Kaenel



*RiNo Tracks, Sketch by  
Brandy von Kaenel*

*Clank, fire crackling, train whistle, bustle,  
Working, manufacturing, and industry hustle.  
Progress, movement, civilization,  
In this new western town with a strong foundation  
Men working hard in these trying times,  
He and she saw the future in their eyes.  
Various ethnic backgrounds worked together as one,  
Smelting gold and silver from ore in a small town  
called Ironton.  
Future lead to change and vision sparked a new place,  
Workshops readapted to art studios and living space,  
A special new culture rose and formed creating a  
collective vibe,  
A wondrous place along the Platte River called RINO,  
home to the artists and a working tribe.  
This place has strong roots that continue to grow,  
The sounds of trains whistle by and the energy flows.  
Artists and creators pursue their dreams,  
In a place that echoes the past, lives build along the stream*



## FIVE ALLEGED VICTIMS

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*Michael Andersen*



When historians examine events of the past they do so with blinders on. These blinders are often the result of historians' own personal experiences which hinders their ability to view circumstances as they truly took place. Similarly, judicial system participants naturally don their blinders when examining the evidence that supports or undermines criminal cases. The findings of juries resulting in either guilty or not guilty verdicts are often heavily influenced by social and personal experiences that jurors bring from outside the court room equally as much as the proceedings of the court itself.

Over the last one hundred and forty years, the Alfred Packer case gained a significant following.<sup>1</sup> Today many of the followers choose not to focus on the historical facts but rather on the elements of the story that they can spin to make money. Alfred Packer, also known as Alferd<sup>2</sup>, was tried twice by Colorado courts. First on trial for the murder of one of his colleagues and secondly for five counts of manslaughter, both juries found Packer guilty. Today however, this is not what many remember about Packer. Instead Packer is remembered for being convicted of cannibalism. But the truth is that cannibalism was not even a crime when he was

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*Above: Alferd Packer. Photo: Denver Public Library*

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adjudicated. In 1907, Colorado Governor Charles S. Thomas granted Packer parole, the result of a shift in public sentiment towards Packer's alleged crimes. Packer's conviction and subsequent parole resulted from two completely different public reactions, the former a few years after Packer's ordeal and the latter almost thirty years later. There was no real change in evidence that allowed Packer's parole, simply a difference in the way people viewed Packer's story. New conceptions of Packer's tale formed within diverse atmospheres, one in the rugged frontier mountains of Colorado, the other in the new big city of Denver. This shift in thought is a prime example of how time and distance influence the perception of historical events.

The story of Alfred Packer's infamous trip in search of wealth began in Provo, Utah, during November of 1873, when a group of six aspiring prospectors left for the mountains of Colorado. Packer, who claimed to have experience in the Colorado wilderness, led the group to the Utah border, adding fifteen others along the way. The party, by then composed of twenty-one men, faced many hardships resulting from travel by foot and wagon during the winter. Eventually they were forced to eat horse feed and at a certain point even contemplated killing and eating one of the horses. On January 21, 1874, they found themselves at the junction of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers in Hinsdale County. It is there they met Chief Ouray's Ute Indian Tribe. Chief Ouray warned Packer's expedition against continued trekking through the mountains during winter and provided them with supplies and a place to camp.

Many members of Packer's party quickly grew impatient. By January 1874, a small assortment of the original group departed the Ute camp in search of the Los Pinos Agency located only seventy miles from Lake City. On February 9, a second group of six followed the lead of the first escorted by Packer. Despite Packer's supposed expertise, this second expedition got lost and ran out of food. They never made it as a whole to the Los Pinos Agency; Alfred Packer arrived alone at the agency on April 16, 1874. This was roughly three months after the group of six set off from the Indian camp. Packer initially explained that he was left by the other members of his team, after he suffered from frostbitten feet and snow blindness. Officials and citizens living around the agency welcomed Packer, who befriended the local saloon owner. Packer would stay at the saloon day and night, often tending bar when the owner was gone. As many of the members from the original party of twenty-one passed through the area, questions regarding the whereabouts of the individuals Packer departed with in February began to circulate. Participants of the original expedition noticed that Packer had more money than he did when they last saw him, along with the personal possessions of the missing members with whom he had left.

General Charles Adams, the senior government official at the Los Pinos Agency, questioned Packer regarding the conflicting stories his former companions now told. At this time Packer provided a different explanation of the events that resulted in his solitary arrival at the agency. Packer recounted that his contingent found themselves out of food and starving after only a few days. When the eldest member died from starvation, the group ate his body; later two other men died and were also eaten. With three surviving, one of the members killed another, and Packer was finally forced to kill the last in self defense. General Adams asked Packer to guide some of his men to

the place where the bodies could be found. Packer agreed, but at one point refused to go any farther and was jailed in Saguache after evidence surfaced that did not support his story. Packer escaped, untraceable for nine years until his discovery in Wyoming, living under the alias of John Swartze.

Packer was extradited to Colorado in March of 1883, at which time the sheriff who arrested Packer asked General Adams to confirm the fugitive's identity. When Packer recognized Adams, he immediately requested to make a statement to Adams personally. As Packer recalled that winter of 1874, he said that upon returning from looking for an escape route, as well as for food, he found Shannon Bell sitting in front of the campfire eating meat. The other four members of the party were dead behind him, each killed by hatchet blows to the head. Packer said that Bell attempted to attack and kill him and that he shot and killed Bell in self defense. Packer claimed to then have survived for sixty days on human meat before arriving at the Los Pinos Agency.

The Lake City Courts tried Packer on April 6, 1883, for the murder of Israel Swan, one of the members of his party. On April 13, 1883, a Lake City jury found Packer guilty and sentenced him to death. Recent changes to Colorado legal codes however, meant that Packer's death sentence was never carried out. Packer remained in a Gunnison jail until a second trial on July 31, 1886, for manslaughter of the five members of his party who did not make it to the Los Pinos Agency. Six days later on August 5, 1886, this new court found Packer guilty on all five counts and sentenced him to forty years in the Canon City penitentiary. Very little is known about Packer's time in prison, besides the fact that he made multiple attempts for early parole with the help of numerous supporters. It was not until January 7, 1901, that Colorado Governor Charles Thomas officially pardoned Packer only a day before he left office. Overwhelmingly, the efforts of *The Denver Post* journalist Polly Pry secured Packer's parole. Backed by the paper's owners, Pry staged a huge campaign to free Packer and attacked the governor in the process. Packer spent the remaining years of his life just southwest of Denver until he died on April 23, 1907. Alfred Packer was buried at the Littleton Cemetery on April 24, 1907.

Initial reactions to Packer's story varied greatly. Upon Packer's first acknowledgement of cannibalism, some of the individuals from the Los Pinos Agency reacted with sympathy and pity. Notably the famous story of the Donner party, an outfit forced to cannibalize the bodies of their dead while stranded in the mountains of California, took place only twenty-seven years earlier. It is likely that people from the Los Pinos Agency as well as Packer were familiar with the Donner party story, which perhaps colored the actions and responses of both. Packer painted his original story of cannibalism by describing his expedition stranded and starving in the cold when the eldest member died. The others ate his body because the chances of escape or rescue in the near future were bleak. As time continued, others died or were sacrificed to provide food for the others. Packer continued to insist that he killed Shannon Bell in self defense after Bell attacked him. Packer might have relayed his experiences in this way to elicit responses of sympathy and pity.

Public reaction changed drastically as more evidence suggested that Packer was not telling the whole truth. Many people questioned why Packer refused to take

local officials to the crime scene unless of course he had something to hide. Diana Di Stefano in *Alfred Packer's World: Risk, Responsibility, and the Place of Experience in Mountain Culture, 1873-1907*, claims that negative responses to Packer's story arose in a tight knit culture that developed in the mountains of Colorado. This culture evolved in a dangerous mountain environment, forcing miners and mountain men to rely on each other to survive.<sup>3</sup> Many believed Packer had killed his companions with the soul motivation of robbing them, using his alleged experience to lure them to a spot in the mountains where he would have the advantage. According to Di Stefano, "this meant that Packer's alleged behavior threatened an emerging cultural code among Western prospectors that relied on trust and reciprocity to lessen the risks of mountain living."<sup>4</sup> Members of Packer's original group who had grown to dislike him after negative experiences from the first leg of their journey expressed this sentiment stronger than anyone else. They believed Packer lied when he assured them he could guide their party through the Colorado mountains and disliked his loud and unpleasant attitude.

There is almost no documentation of public response to Packer's crimes in the nine years between Packer's escape and arrest. This changed in March of 1883. Packer, then known as John Swartze, turned up in Wyoming, discovered by a member of Packer's original 1873 prospecting group.<sup>5</sup> Documentation of public sentiment towards Packer exploded with Packer's extradition to Colorado. According to one *Denver Times* article from March 17, 1883, almost the whole town of Denver witnessed, despite bad weather, Packer's arrival from Wyoming. "Not one friendly face in all the crowd. Not one person said a friendly word to him. Alone in the world with none willing or able to help him. . . Now, he was an outcast."<sup>6</sup> The reactions of Denver residents to Packer's arrival at Union Station were kind in comparison to what was to come. Two days later, reporting on Packer's confession to General Adams, the *Leadville Daily Herald's* headline read, "Alfred Packer Makes a Most Sickening Confession of His Disposal of His Comrades." The following article, titled "Served for Sunday," described Packer as "one of the most noted murderers that the nineteenth century has produced," portraying his crimes as "hellish."<sup>7</sup> On March 22, 1883, the *Fairplay Flume*, claimed that it "is almost positively known. . . that Packer murdered his five companions and robbed them." The article branded Packer as a brute; suggesting that his placement in the Gunnison jail instead of the Hinsdale County jail protected him from mob violence that he would have faced in Hinsdale County.<sup>8</sup>

Within a month of Packer's arrest he faced murder charges for the death of Israel Swan, one of the five victims, in Lake City, Colorado. The *Dolores News* from April 7, 1883, reported Judge Gerry conducted Packer's preliminary examination in a private room because of "the court room being too crowded."<sup>9</sup> According to Paul Gantt, lawyer and author of *The Case of Alfred Packer*, Packer's case was so well known that fifty-six jurors were interviewed before the final twelve could be chosen. Eventually miners, prospectors, trappers, and hunters made up the jury. All members of the jury knew the area where Packer allegedly committed his crime. Gantt argues, "the jury believed that his sole motivation in committing the crime was robbery"<sup>10</sup> and that Packer's story of cannibalism was simply a cover up for the robbery. The jury expeditiously

found Packer guilty of murder. In Judge Gerry's sentence of death he stated, "you then and there robbed the living of life and then robbed the dead of the reward of the honest toil which they had accumulated; at least say so the jury."<sup>11</sup> Despite a widespread belief today, Judge Gerry's did not say "they was siven Dimmycrats in Hinsdale County, but you, you voracious, man-eatin' son of a bitch, yah eat five of thim!"<sup>12</sup> This statement, according to Gantt, might have surfaced as early as the day of Packer's sentencing, possibly recanted in a nearby bar by an individual present at the trial. Instead Gerry's sentence simply ended with "you, then and there, by said Sheriff, be hung by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead, and may God have mercy upon your soul."<sup>13</sup>

Eighteen years later public opinion surrounding Alfred Packer had changed greatly. This new view of Packer's story took hold in Denver around the turn of the century. Denver was now considered a "big city" the fifth largest west of the Mississippi at the time. Its residents were also far removed from the original mountain culture that influenced Packer's convictions. The majority of newspapers minimized focus upon Packer's crimes, twenty-five years in the past, and rather relied on Packer's version of events. It seems that most newspapers at the time could not agree upon the crimes that Packer was convicted of; most claiming he was convicted of cannibalism. Now many Denver citizens, in stark contrast to the mountain men who imprisoned Packer, fought for his release. For instance, a long time friend of Packer's planned to place a barrel with a sign asking if Packer should be freed at a prominent Denver location. The barrel would act as ballot box for citizens to vote. The plan was, once the barrel was filled, to provide the tally to the state board of pardons in an effort to persuade their decision.<sup>14</sup>

*The Denver Post* reporter, Polly Pry supported Packer ardently. Though her motives might have not been morally sound, she did contribute the most to Packer's release. Pry's inspiration may have come from many avenues, but overriding thought that Pry and the *r Post* editors had in mind was to have Packer work in a side show, following his release from prison. And they did succeed in securing Packer's freedom. Pry's efforts to free Packer included the circulation of a petition for Packer's parole on which she amassed the signatures of over one hundred of Denver's most prestigious citizens including Denver's mayor, chief of police, city attorney, a U.S. marshal, and the editor and owner of the *Rocky Mountain News*.<sup>15</sup> Pry's arguments portrayed an innocent old man, convicted of a heinous crime and suffering in prison. In addition, Pry conducted a newspaper crusade that Gantt claims, "probably would never have its equal in the history of America's journalism."<sup>16</sup> This newspaper campaign placed significant pressure on Governor Thomas to free Packer by portraying Thomas in a negative light.<sup>17</sup> [TN: Thomas did not resign he was replaced by newly elected governor James B. Orman after serving a single two year term]

Coloradans [TN: It is officially Coloradan as declared by the Colorado Historical Society] held mixed opinions upon Packer's parole. Newspapers from mountain regions like Telluride's *Daily Journal* called "Thomas' last official action an outrage" on January 8, 1901.<sup>18</sup> *Lake City Times*, the newspaper from the town where Packer's first trial took place declared that if justice had been served and Packer executed,

then there would be no need for the Governor's pardon.<sup>19</sup> The towns of these mountain based newspapers still housed miners and mountain men, many of whom clearly recalled Packer's crimes and trials. Mountain newspapers therefore expressed the feelings of individuals who still relied on each other for survival. People who lived in urban areas in and around Denver did not rely on each other to the same extent. Furthermore Denverites were often caught up in political struggles between newspapers, politicians, and religions all looking for a different power play against one another. Consequently newspapers printed in more urban environments supported Governor Thomas's actions, claiming that "there had always been a grave doubt as to the guilt of Packer...the people of the state, almost without exception, will applaud the action of Governor Thomas in granting this parole."<sup>20</sup> Governor Thomas never wanted to parole Packer. Even after his decision, Thomas professed he would not have done so if it was not for the pressure *Pry* and *The Denver Post* subjected him to.<sup>21</sup>

Today the story of Alfred Packer is famous in the realm of western folklore. The students at University of Colorado at Boulder can grab a bite to eat between classes at the Alferd [sic] Packer Grill, where the motto is "Have a friend for lunch."<sup>22</sup> Google search results for books about Alfred Packer yield *Alfred Packer's High Protein Cookbook*, numerous travel guides, and western history books that skim over Alfred Packer's true experiences and instead focus on his cannibalism.<sup>23</sup> South Park creator Trey Stone even created a comical movie that is loosely based on Alfred Packer's story in 1993 titled *Cannibal! The Musical*.<sup>24</sup> Yet another Google search provides directions to Packer's grave, located under a tree next to the second northern most entrance to the Littleton Cemetery. Visitors to Packer's grave today will notice coins, many from foreign countries including Australia, evidence of a strong following even today.

When examined from divergent periods in time there are distinct differences in the way Packer's story has been viewed. These different perceptions ultimately led to a shift in public opinion resulting in Packer's parole in 1901. Today Packer is regarded as somewhat of an oddity, not far from the sideshow character *The Denver Post* envisioned. Historians are not the only people who look upon past events with blinders; everyone does. Hindsight influences visions of the past. Perceptions of the past shape the present, providing historical theory for future historians to analyze and question. We will never know what actually happened in the mountains of Colorado near Lake City in 1874. We can analyze Packer's story through the contemporary responses of his day and subsequent opinions, always accounting for the context in which they were formed.



*Packer is buried in Littleton, Colorado.  
Photo: Tom Noel Collection*





## PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION OF HISTORIC GHOST SIGNS IN COLORADO'S FRONT RANGE

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Abigail Sanocki

*Ghost signs “speak to us across the chasm of decades to remind us of a time before air conditioning, before subways, before escalators, even before electric lights, when horsepower came with harnesses and the whole city smelled of something other than diesel fumes.”<sup>1</sup>*

Preservationists’ valiant efforts to identify, preserve, and maintain historic properties become spectacular when the details are highlighted and treated to last. Overlooked details could equate to overlooked architectural features and an inaccurate construction of a place’s history. A more modern and comprehensive preservation movement is working to promote diversity within historic commercial areas by including features that are able to explain the economic and business history of a city. *Ghost signs* are faded advertisements painted on building exteriors and were once one of the most popular forms of advertising in Colorado towns until the mid-20th century. They not

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*Above: Fort Collins Coca Cola advertisement painted by Donald Brown, 1958, receiving State Historic Funds for stabilization. Photo by Abigail Sanocki, March 2010*

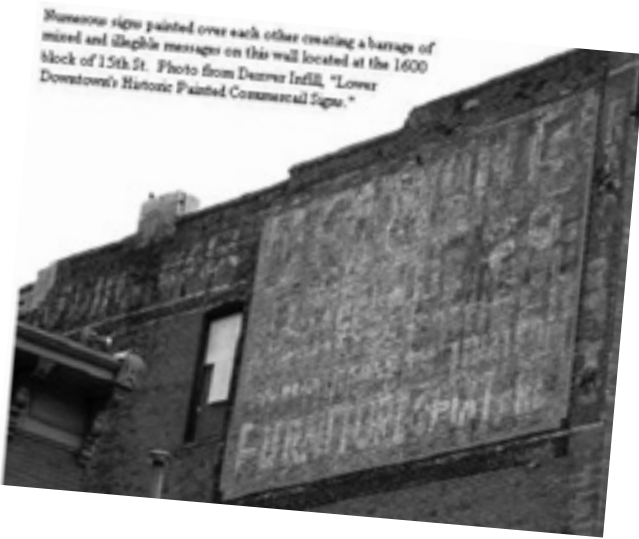
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only symbolize past commerce, but are unique expressions of local character, and are often and easily overlooked in today's motorized and fast paced society. These signs reflect the history of a building and the development of the commercial district, and in some cases, can be the only indicator of a building's past tenants and use. Ghost signs provide a unique expression of local character and have high artistic and cultural value that should be considered in historic preservation ordinances.

In Colorado, masonry and stucco wall signs provide valuable indicators of the development of communities from small mining or agricultural centers to modern municipalities. "With tobacco and cigar signs being by far the most common," type of advertisement in the state, Western historian Richard White explains that ghost signs can "give us important clues about the social habits of miners," and other residents.<sup>2</sup> Appearing as early as the first brick buildings on the Front Range in the mid nineteenth century, these paintings remained popular until replaced by more vibrant and easier to manufacture sign technology. In the last decade, a small number of painted signs have been restored in comparison to the number that has been lost to urban renewal and city gentrification. Historic advertisements for food, beverages, transportation services, and various other products and services that are not hidden in alleyways or behind buildings are becoming part of the public's nostalgic love of things from the past. These craftsmen designed signs have remained popular because they still serve their original purpose of delivering messages to the masses.



Numerous signs painted over each other creating a barrage of mixed and illegible messages on this wall located at the 1600 block of 15th St. Photo from Denver Infill, "Lower Downtown's Historic Painted Commercial Signs."

Rediscovery of these building sized artifacts presents a unique challenge for preservation planners. Are they works of art? Cultural relics? What is a sign's aesthetic value to the district in which it resides? Since they are not portable, historically these signs are often simply painted over, resulting in the cryptic layers of ads showing through peeling and flaking layers of paint that we see today. In many cases, these signs have outlived the

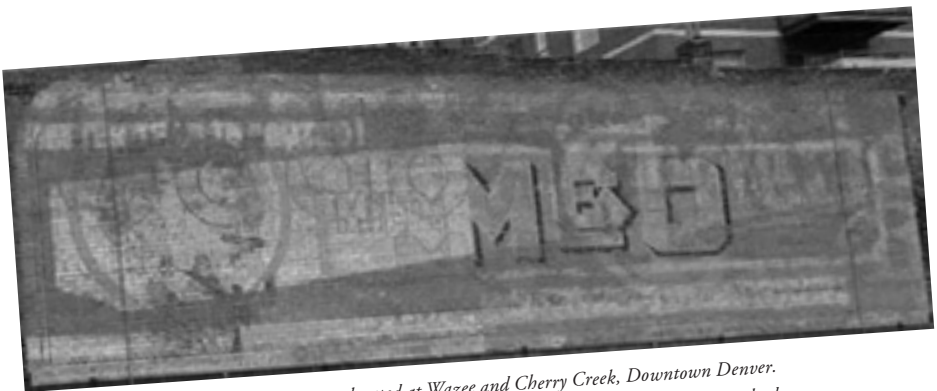
business or product they were marketing, or could contradict the needs or principles of a building's present tenet. For example, a very popular Owl Cigar sign, painted in Fort Collins around 1900, now decorates a wall on the outdoor roof patio of an upscale restaurant that prohibits smoking on their property.<sup>3</sup> In another case, Denver's renowned M&O Cigars have been advertised all over the state and country, however, as Mark Oatis, a local painted-sign restorer and muralist, exclaimed, "I don't think I'd get any public money to paint anything that said 'Every Puff a Pleasure!'" given the present and growing taboos against tobacco use.<sup>4</sup>



*Owl Cigar sign on restaurant patio located in the 100 block of N. College Ave., Fort Collins, CO. Photo by Abigail Sanocki.*

present businesses within. Signs advertising an earlier tenant may occupy a space in which the present tenant would like to use to advertise themselves. Current ordinances and zoning for aesthetics have created conflicts with historic signs and other evidence of the original history of a place's commerce. New York's Landmark's Preservation Commission spokesperson Diane Jackier, remarked in 2006 that "the commission protects architectural features and the commission does not consider the painted signs a significant feature."<sup>5</sup> Preservation planners battling urban renewal campaigns to cleanse and white wash central business districts have put preservationists in a position in which they must favor only the architectural features of specific structures. However, in Colorado there are numerous brick wall advertisements that are not only works of art, but are also recognizable community landmarks, evidence to the past activities of the people who had once inhabited the city.

Although their messages have changed, modern preservation efforts should realize that ghost signs are still marketable and offer unique insights into the culture and economy of a particular time and place. Historian William Stage explains that the



*Denver based M&O Cigar advertisement located at Wazee and Cherry Creek, Downtown Denver. The words "Every Puff a Pleasure" can be read in the bottom right hand corner. M&O Cigars had their own in house crew of sign painters.<sup>6</sup> Photo from Denver Infill*

Regardless of the degree in which present society can relate to a historic advertisement, maintaining a variety of historic components and features in a district will aid in the retention of the integrity and diversity of the district's historic character.

Of course, not all signs are integral in the design and physical fabric of a district, and can conflict with the needs of the

“most obscure signs are wonderfully anachronistic, touting services or products incongruous to the late twentieth century...thus, certain walls become as pages of some towering encyclopedia of advertising.”<sup>7</sup> We refer to these brick wall paintings as *ghost signs* not only because of their cryptic, double exposure of ads, but also because of their faded conditions visible under certain light conditions. The interpretation of the sign can change with weather. Rain brightens the faded colors, changing the specter with the weather. Over years of exposure to the sun and elements, painted wall signs fade at various degrees due to the expansion and contraction of the brick surfaces with changing temperatures and the dilution of paint formulas. Signs on the north face of a building are much more likely to remain intact in comparison to those on the west wall which take the brunt of the elements. Painted wall signs are part of a near extinct artistic industry that, despite fading over the decades, remains the most durable form of advertising to this day.

Traditionally, the men who painted advertisements on brick, stucco, and other masonry surfaces possessed a range of artistic skills and were masters of numerous trades. *Wall dogs* – a title reflecting the character of the men who did the grunt work for payment – possessed highly specialized skills in drafting, chemistry, carpentry, masonry, sales, and acrobatics.<sup>8</sup> As a career, these men were linked to a variety of jobs not exclusive to advertising – house painting, carriage building and painting, blacksmith, interior design, and photography among many other crafts. Mathias Pfeffer was one of the first to list himself as a sign painter in the 1909-1910 Fort Collins city directory, but also advertised that he worked on houses, carriages, wallpaper, grain trim, and finished woodwork.<sup>9</sup> The uneven quality of the few remaining early signs can be attributed to the plethora of identities painters would have listed themselves under, making it difficult for a client to contract a painter with the knowledge of working on masonry surfaces.<sup>10</sup> The earliest painters to arrive in Colorado came with the earliest masses of immigrants looking for work and fortune, bringing the trade to pioneer boomtowns. In 1865, there were 275 bill posting companies across the country, each employing anywhere between two and twenty painters.<sup>11</sup> With the establishment of fireproof construction ordinances in Denver after the 1863 fire, the growing number of brick walls in the city created a good market for a sign painter’s talents in a time when outdoor advertising and newspapers were the main media available for promoting goods and services.<sup>12</sup>

In the early days of brick wall advertising, wall dogs worked alone and in short term partnerships, basing operations out of truck beds, hotel rooms, their homes, and small shops. R.E. “Rollie” Nauman recalls spending months on the road in a time before hotels, when he and his partner would finish one project by headlights, go to the next location, sleep on the side of the road for a few hours, and start the next job at dawn. Mr. Nauman recounted traveling in a

*“Model T Ford truck with a reinforced top to carry [the] stage and side curtains. We kept our ropes, falls, cans of paste paint, linseed oil, Japan drier and thinner – gasoline about 18 cents a gallon – on the floor of the truck. Also on top was a three-quarter bed which we lowed at night [to sleep on].”<sup>13</sup>*

Painters who established a shop in a commercial district would move often. Fred Fridborn, established a shop in Denver in 1882, and moved thirteen times in the fifty-two years he was in business, each location within blocks of the last.<sup>14</sup> The idea was that the new locations would attract clients' attention and give the painter a competitive edge over others in the sign business. The advertisements these men painted survive today as representations of the prevailing ideologies of Colorado commerce.



*Edward D Parker and Andrew A. Killen worked together from 1883-1885, then separated and both left Denver. The two partnered on painting the Studebaker buggies and carriages sign at 1614 15th St. in 1883. The Studebaker ad is the oldest known surviving sign in Denver.<sup>15</sup> Photo from Denver Infill.*



*The Brecht Candy sign was painted by the Denver Brison Sign Company, established 1920.<sup>18</sup> Photo by Marquez, Andy, Last Signs of the Frontier, Colorado Roadside Nostalgia, (Littleton, CO: Castle Q Publishing, 2003), 110.*

The turn of the twentieth century opened the doors to a new world of retailing, and in response the maturing advertising industry demanded not only talented, but more specialized painters. Despite the devastating effects of the 1893 depression on Colorado, Denver was able to rebound and diversify its industries. In 1900, brick, clay, and pottery companies prospered in the river and rail valley alongside the five flour mills, ten breweries, twenty-five candy makers, and fifty plus cigar makers throughout the city and around the central business district.<sup>16</sup> All these businesses were in need of advertising services to identify their stores and warehouses, as well as to promote their goods being sold elsewhere in town. Clients would advertise their goods offsite through *privileges*, in which a product is advertised on a store's wall. "Privileges were essentially the tradition of wall painting;" the more of the advertised product sold, the larger and more prominently the store name would be within the advertisement.<sup>17</sup> The physical evolution of Front Range towns from wood framed boxes to solid brick buildings in a rectangular grid

pattern created the ideal environment for brick wall advertising. Within the deep, narrow lots, buildings would fill the entire width of the property, so architectural embellishments were exclusive to the front façade of the structures, leaving blank brick expanses in alleyways and on the sides of taller buildings for advertising space and an additional source of revenue for the building owner.<sup>19</sup> The plethora of signs that resulted from the enlarged market, taller buildings, and growing cities emphasized Colorado communities' economic and commercial diversity.

By 1915, the majority of wall dogs were employed by major national advertising companies which ultimately controlled most of the industry in Colorado by 1930.<sup>20</sup> Large companies were ideal for national advertisers in their ability to reproduce uniform and consistent work. Regional and national companies had separate sales departments specifically for interacting with clients, and were able to dispatch highly specialized art and production staff over a wide geographic area. Before, independent career painters operating out of their own shops had to go in person to find clients. Don Brown, a popular Fort Collins painter, admitted that, "I'd just butt in and inquire," to local businesses on a regular basis to try and find work.<sup>21</sup> Before the dominance of advertising by large corporations, the lease of a privately owned wall was not always done in cash, but as an exchange of goods or services – beer, drapes, or even a roof inspection. Harley E. Warrick painted for Mail Pouch Tobacco, and recalled that, "you might even have to pluck a chicken or help him [the farmer] milk."<sup>22</sup> Large advertising companies based out of Eastern cities had the staff and clerical capacities to be able to guarantee clients in Denver sign locations with a predetermined level of traffic.<sup>23</sup>

The earliest and most prominent sign business on the Front Range was the Curran Bill Posting & Distributing Company based out of Denver. James A. Curran, credited as the father of outdoor advertising in Colorado, got his start in Leadville as an advertising agent for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad.<sup>24</sup> Curran established the bill posting company in 1893, and is credited for many influential strategies that diversified the demand for and types of signs his crews were dispatched to paint.<sup>25</sup> Some of his achievements included bringing serious theater groups to the Tabor Opera House, an alternative to the burlesque shows predominately available in Denver. Curran was also the first to use outdoor advertising to promote political candidates, assisting Robert Speer in his mayoral campaign when all the local newspapers were opposed to his candidacy.<sup>26</sup> Despite the success of Curran's firm, it, like most other small advertising businesses in Colorado, was eventually absorbed into the larger, nationwide corporations like Thomas Cusack Sign Company, P.H. Morton Company, and the largest of all, the General Outdoor Advertising Company. The most elaborate pictorial signs done by both small shops and large firms have become landmarks part of credible restoration projects conducted by Colorado's most up to the minute consultants.

The path towards the restoration of painted brick wall advertisements, like other historic landmarks, begins with public recognition and interest. Just as with historical architecture and features, ghost signs have been threatened by overzealous urban renewal programs with the goal of starting from a clean slate, opening space in central

business districts to cater to automobiles and a faster paced business community. The major downfall of the painted brick wall advertisement came with the societal and urban changes related to the end of World War II. Even though we are not always consciously aware of it, signs are instruments of social construction capable of affecting our behaviors and giving meaning to the places we inhabit. Social purists involved in urban renewal recognized that the many pictorial signs with short phrases projected an image that the city catered to non-English speaking immigrants and the illiterate. Fear that those minorities would seem like more a part of the American social mainstream than elites cared to acknowledge, outdoor advertising practices became the target of reform efforts.<sup>27</sup> Other factors such as the reality that brick wall signs could not follow people to the suburbs and that the new steel-framed, window laden skyscrapers eradicated the space and demand in which to paint signs on buildings. Transportation, technological innovations, and the propagation of stricter aesthetics ordinances perpetuated city elites' crusade to develop and clean up urban environments in Colorado.

Neighborhood gentrification and the dominance of the automobile were symbols of the emergent modernism in Colorado's Front Range cities. Denverites walking or riding street cars had plenty of time to read the painted signs on the wall of the corner drug store or café. The owners of walls facing churches, trolley stops, and the train station made premium income for lease of their highly visible and trafficked advertising space to deliver images of impulse buy items and services to slow moving consumers circulating the market.<sup>28</sup> However, when these consumers began purchasing their own personal vehicles, traffic through business districts was moving much faster and on more direct paths – putting up to ninety percent of traffic on only ten to twenty percent of downtown roads.<sup>29</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, Colorado cities adopted new and more stringent sign codes in concern for public safety and aesthetics which limited the size or flat out presence of outdoor advertisements, ultimately becoming a death sentence for the art of brick wall painting and many already existing signs. Betty Woodworth of the *Coloradoan* felt that “a real downtown renovation should obliterate [all of] the old, fading signs.”<sup>30</sup> In an endeavor to recreate a clean central business district, local review commissions attempted to impose a sterile uniformity that would have falsified the history of Colorado historic districts.<sup>31</sup>

Amortization clauses exempted some already existing signs from removal for noncompliance with the new restrictive sign ordinances dictating uniformity in central business districts. Mass produced plastic signs, billboards, and flashy neon signs not only influenced the need for sign restrictions, but ultimately reduced demand for hand painted work. Commercial artist Harold Asmus worked out of the last and only sign shop in Fort Collins for nearly fifty years. Demand for brick wall signs was low, of course, but he made a living like the few other sign painters at this time by painting store and showroom paper banners. The Fort Collins' *Triangle Review* interview of Asmus elaborated in 1985 that he loyally “painted every single sign every single week [for the local grocery store] since 1945, 4,000 banners a year, perhaps 160,000 in all” until his craft was replaced by cheap and efficient electronic printers.<sup>32</sup> Many businesses in the sign industry folded or had to give up on the tradition of hand



painted signs. Larger companies like Denver's Gordon Sign Company redefined their business, making severe cuts in their art departments and creating a new electric sign division to keep up with changing technology and twentieth century demand. Thomas Cusack Sign Co. completely folded in the mid-1950s, followed by its largest competitor, General Outdoor, in 1963.<sup>33</sup> The art of brick wall painting began fading by the 1930s, and by the 1970s was nearly extinct. The rapid disappearance of this almost dead art form has been a result of misunderstanding and neglect.

Today, reliable preservation and restoration efforts are underway to bring surviving ghost signs back to life, creating colorful and diverse landmarks representative of a culturally significant time in a community's memory. The functional and decorative quality of a historic sign has been recognized as a feature important in characterizing the overall historic nature of a district. The advertisements that have been selected for preservation are nostalgic "symbol[s] of small town America and a bygone era."<sup>34</sup> Groups like the *Society of Commercial Archaeology* or the *Letterheads* have worked to preserve the tradition and craft of sign painting, providing outreach to communities and preservationists seeking credible professionals to perform accurate restorations. The *Letterheads* are a grass roots organization founded by Mark Oatis in Denver about thirty years ago.<sup>35</sup> The members refer to themselves as *Wall Dogs*, after their historic predecessors, priding themselves in the fact that they "do it the old way."<sup>36</sup>

Of course, turn of the century sign painters did not have the luxuries of electronic scaffolding and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration like the muralists who are restoring their work today. Exposure to lead, a toxin easily absorbed through the skin, caused neurological degradation, stomachaches, headaches, and even physical



*Mark Oatis' Denver crew working on the restoration of the highly detailed 20' x 60' Bernstein Brother's sign in Pueblo. It was discovered under a sixty year old stucco finish during building restoration efforts. Not only had the sign been repainted several times, but the name of the business had also changed twice. When Oatis restored the sign, he used the company's original name. The highly unusual "orange base had caused the colors on top of it to burn out, taking much of the original details with them." Based on characteristics of the original sign and the type of automobile pictured, Oatis believes the sign was originally painted in the 1930s. All information and photo from Oatis, Mark. "Ghost Story: A wall sign restoration lends credibility to a new historic landmark," July 1, 2004 Sign and Digital Graphics. <http://sb.nbm.com> (Accessed April 8, 2010).*



deformity. The stereotypical image of painters as drunks may have actually been the result of a condition referred to as “painter’s colic,” caused by lead poisoning. White lead has been the base of paints for centuries, and painters up through the mid-1900s would have to set aside up to two hours to do their own mixing with linseed oil and dry pigments, making the vibrant colors that attracted consumers’ attention.<sup>37</sup> Despite its toxicity, the more lead in the paint, the more opaque, durable, and long lasting the sign; hence the hundred year old advertisements that still haunt our cities today. Mark Oatis, in his article *The Good Old Signs: Billboards as an Asset to the Urban Landscape* wrote: “[The] great outdoor studio of Denver, where dozens of crackerjack artists fought wind, weather, and the occasional swarm of bees, to ply their trade” was not always safe.<sup>38</sup> In many cases, the locations of signs were not conducive for scaffolding and ladders, so the historic wall dogs would often jerry rig a *swing stage* – a large ladder suspended from the roof with a pulley and block at each end.<sup>39</sup> Working several stories above ground, wind was the most dangerous aspect of wall painting, especially winds that plunged straight down walls and pushed the swing stage out and away from the building. “Fall protection” was an extra rope led down from the roof for the painter to hold on to with his free hand.<sup>40</sup> National Parks historian and preservationist Michael Auer stressed that the “preservation of historic signs is one way to ensure that at least some of these expressions [and traditions] of local history continue to enliven our streets.”<sup>41</sup>

Once it is decided that a community desires a historic sign to be preserved, and in some cases restored to its original vibrancy, it is often the building owner’s responsibility to begin research on the sign and an artist to contract for stabilization with or without complete restoration.<sup>42</sup> Mark Oatis, who had restored many signs in Front Range cities, is often referred to clients by architects or planners who are familiar with his profession. The sign industry is still very large and active, and getting help from professionals is highly recommended. Often, the sign restoration is part of a larger community preservation mission and associated with as a civic event that attracts attention from the local press along with funding that typically comes from local contributors. In a rare and very recent case, in the Old Town historic district of Fort Collins, money from the State Historic Fund (SHF) has been procured to match the community’s contributions to aid in the preservation and stabilization of Donald Brown’s Angell’s Delicatessen Coca Cola privilege sign determined to be “significant.”

Michael Auer’s “Preservation Brief 25: the Preservation of Historic Signs” recommends that signs should be retained “whenever possible, particularly when they are:

- associated with historic figures, events or places.
- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised.
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district...
- ...[when] removal can harm the integrity of a historic property’s design, or cause significant damage to its materials.
- outstanding examples of the signmaker’s art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, use of materials, or design.

- local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community. [or]
- elements important in defining the character of a district...”<sup>43</sup>

Whether a sign has been part of a community for decades, or recently exposed after a neighboring building had been leveled, preservation and restoration often come down to if the sign will enhance the value of a property or be cleansed from the building for redevelopment. Projects to preserve painted wall signs in Colorado have ranged from being a part of continuing efforts to enhance a downtown district, or have been involved as an inventive contribution to an urban renaissance. “There is no clear consensus in the preservation community statewide [in Colorado] or nationally regarding the treatment of wall signs;” but in the case of the Fort Collins Coca Cola advertisement receiving a grant from the SHF, the community has established that the sign is important to the character of the built environment within a popular district that boasts many artistic qualities that attract residents and tourists.<sup>44</sup> As Matt Robenolt, Project Manager of Fort Collins Downtown Development Authority,

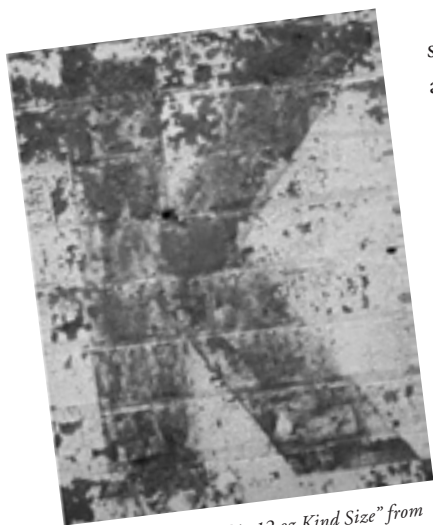


*Fort Collins' Old Town ghost sign scheduled to stabilization. Coca Cola would have paid Donald Brown and financed the sign. In return for allowing Coca Cola to use the wall, the company gave the tenants, Angell's Delicatessen, the privilege of having their name painted alongside their ad. The sign now adorns the patio of Coopersmith's Brewery located in Old Town Square on Mountain Avenue. Photo by Abigail Sanocki.*

stated in his letter to Steve Turner, Director of the State Historic Fund, this project to preserve “one of the most widely reproduced iconic images of Downtown Fort Collins...[will be] a great opportunity for restoring a well-known historic resource in the community, and also to showcase the entire historic restoration process through a fantastic public outreach effort.”<sup>45</sup>

As of the 2010 budget, nearly seventy percent of the total cost for the Old Town Coca Cola sign restoration had been earmarked for the physical work and materials needed to repair, stabilize, and recreate the historic advertisement. This figure mostly represented the actual painting of the sign, as well as the additional necessary work of repointing the masonry and stabilizing and preserving what remains of the original sign. Since this is a State Historic Fund (SHF) project, the surface preparation will be following the Department of the Interior's criteria for repointing mortar joints outlined

in Preservation Brief 2 of the National Park Service's Technical Preservation Services, with the appropriate mortar analysis and conditions report already documented. The remaining third of the restoration budget has been appropriated to documentation, analysis, interpretive signage, public outreach and education, and a decorative railing that will help to protect the painting from patio furniture and sidewalk traffic. Just under half of the total budget is comprised from SHF funds matching money from various groups in the City of Fort Collins. The ghost sign restoration is a culmination of public and private efforts and funding from the building's owner and tenant and the local historic commission and preservation organizations.<sup>46</sup> The stabilization of the Donald Brown Coca Cola sign continues to be delayed as residents and preservationists continue to debate the value of stabilizing the sign and maintaining its antique look as opposed to a complete restoration.



*Detail of the 'K' in "Big 12 oz Kind Size" from the Old Town Ghost sign demonstrating the level of degradation of the sign and need to remove all the loose paint in order to have the Acryloid B72 and new paint completely adhere to the brick surface. Photo by Abigail Sanocki.*

Upon deciding to not only preserve a painted sign, but restore it to its original glory, painters and preservationists sometimes disagree on the best method for restoration once the brick surface has been repaired. Mark Oatis, when restoring Pueblo's Burnstien Brothers' sign, as part of the rehabilitation of a defunct retail store into urban housing, recommended doing a full chemical peel and starting from a clean slate with a brand new sign. However, the people of Pueblo were strongly in favor of a less destructive method in which the original sign was kept, sealed, and painted over.<sup>47</sup> So, Oatis gently scraped the entire wall with a wire brush, removing any paint that was not firmly adhered to the brick surface, and then applied a protective sealant referred to as Zinzer Peel-Stop that is available at local paint stores. The Fort Collins restoration considered using a compound called Acryloid B72, which is also used for labeling museum objects and

provides an isolation barrier between the historic sign and new painting. However, there are mixed opinions among professionals as to how Acryloid B72 will react to moisture and the elements.<sup>48</sup> It is important that all sign restoration activities should include plans for the long term preservation and future restrictions to protect the cities' investment.

The process of recreating the sign involves the same practices the historic wall dogs used to make their large, pictorial designs. Before 1940, a sketch would be created at a one inch to one foot scale and then the painter would use his mathematical, drafting, composition, and artistic skills to paint it on the brick wall using chalk lines and the mortar joints for a straight edge and grid.<sup>49</sup> Starting in the early to

mid-twentieth century, painters began using what is called a *pounce pattern*, allowing them to accurately recreate more complex designs on a wall. Late Fort Collins painter Donald Brown explained that “you [would] have to get or buy some paper from the meat market or some place that had a big roller.” Back at the shop, the sections of paper would be taped together and the ad design would be projected onto a wall at actual size for the artist to trace out. He would then “go over it with a *pounce wheel*, which is like a spur, only real sharp on a circular wheel, and it perforates the whole design” on the outlined drawing.<sup>50</sup> Next, the artist takes the sections of paper on site, and beats the stencil with a charcoal or chalk dust filled *pounce bag* that is pressed and banged into the perforations.<sup>51</sup>

For restoration work the painter would start at the wall, and have to do some detective work to get an accurate tracing of the original ghost sign. Mark Oatis explains the importance of this additional step:

*“Quite often the worst thing you can do if you want to repaint a wall is to get up there and start painting. If it’s very faded, you can’t see the lines well enough and you won’t stay faithful. ... [So] we taped paper over the entire wall, rubbed the paper with mineral spirits to make it transparent, traced the layout and brought the paper back to the shop. There, we cleaned up the layout and then perforated it so we’d have a pounce pattern. And then we started over...so it looked exactly like the original.”<sup>52</sup>*

Then the artist will go back and begin painting in the outline and finally fill in the entire design with colors matching the original. Since we now know of the dangers associated with using lead paints, modern murals and signs are painted with zinc paste, which does not have the same durable qualities as the white lead base, but is much safer. Lead paint in comparison took longer to set, but would absorb into the brick surface and stay vibrant for up to fifty years. Mark Oatis explained that the zinc based paints lay on top of the brick and are much quicker to set, but will only “look like new for about five years and remain vivid for up to twenty years.”<sup>53</sup>

It took Don Brown three to four days of work to paint the Angell’s Delicatessen Coca Cola sign in 1958, the last advertisement of its kind painted in Fort Collins.<sup>54</sup> According to Fort Collins Preservation planner Carol Tunner, the SHF grant “will allow the city to pursue a ground-breaking ghost sign restoration that will be of use to other Colorado cities... [Fort Collins] has a good record of SHF grant management and will produce an excellent result that can be applied elsewhere.”<sup>55</sup> Located at a major gateway into the Old Town historic district, the advertisement is associated with one of Fort Collins’ most popular free-lance artists and is an outstanding example of the history of the building’s former use and Coca Cola merchandising. The excellent craftsmanship of the sign has made it a highly recognizable and important element in defining the character of Old Town. Public outreach and demonstrations will help viewers to interpret the significance of historic advertising and the value of maintaining a diversity of features within a historic commercial district.<sup>56</sup> Ghost signs are valuable

contributing resources to historic districts in Colorado cities and should be included in efforts to preserve an attractive and diverse history.

The prevalence of modern franchising and uniform, generic plastic signs and billboards have given ghost signs added value for the unique ambiance they supply to historic commercial settings. National Parks Service preservationist Michael Auer argues that historic advertisements “often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there... Historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not.”<sup>57</sup> Urban renewal, new construction, changing advertising technology, and the automotive age have threatened these advertisements to near extinction. It is hoped that this paper can facilitate in inspiring the preservationist in anyone interested in a community’s heritage and expand their perspectives to encourages diversity in preservation efforts beyond just those of architectural features. Over time, the unusual sophistication of these hand painted works has evolved from something practical, to a romantic piece of nostalgia that contributes to the historic character of commercial districts. Historic brick wall advertisements are unique expressions of local character that have high artistic and cultural value that needs to be considered in historic preservation.

## NOTES

### PASTURES OF PLENTY: Woody Guthrie in the West

*Craig Leavitt*

- 1 Woody Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* (New York, 1983), 178. All Guthrie writings and song lyrics are reproduced “as is,” including his characteristic deliberate misspellings, dialect, etc.
- 2 Richard Aquila, “A Blaze of Glory: The Mythic West in Pop and Rock Music,” in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila (Urbana, Illinois, 1996), 194.
- 3 Aquila, “A Blaze of Glory,” 194-195, 230.
- 4 James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989), 81.
- 5 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>. This paper references Guthrie lyrics as presented at the website of the official Woody Guthrie Foundation, run by his daughter Nora Guthrie in Mt. Kisco, New York.
- 6 Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York, 2004), 3.
- 7 Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, 39.
- 8 Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, 39.
- 9 Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, 39.
- 10 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 104.
- 11 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 107.
- 12 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 107.
- 13 Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley, 2007), 47.
- 14 LaChapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 45-46.
- 15 Wayne Hampton, *Guerilla Minstrels: John Lennon – Joe Hill – Woody Guthrie – Bob Dylan* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1986). “Wobbly” is a nickname referring to members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).
- 16 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 17 Woody Guthrie, *Hard Times*, Library of Congress Recordings (New York, 1940).
- 18 Jeffrey S. King, *The Life and Times of Pretty Boy Floyd* (Kent, Ohio, 1999), 2-9.
- 19 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 20 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 170.
- 21 Rick Wartzman, *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath*, (New York, 2008), 6.
- 22 Howard Levant, *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study* (Columbia, Missouri, 1983), 93.
- 23 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 155.
- 24 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 155.
- 25 Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport, Connecticut, 1973), 255.
- 26 Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, 238-239.
- 27 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 28 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 29 Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York, 1980), 165.
- 30 James N. Gregory, *American Exodus*, 80.
- 31 La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 27.
- 32 Gregory, *American Exodus*, 80.



- 33 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 34 La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie, 253. La Chapelle discovered a 1937 manuscript of the song at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research in Los Angeles, dispelling earlier claims by scholar H. R. Stonebeck that Guthrie was “merely a clever musical emulator who drew from Steinbeck’s literary depictions of migrants.”
- 35 La Chapelle, Proud to Be an Okie, 25.
- 36 Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1997), 10.
- 37 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 174.
- 38 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants* 174.
- 39 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 169.
- 40 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants* , 5.
- 41 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 2.
- 42 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 171.
- 43 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 171.
- 44 Louis Owens, “The American Joads,” in Bloom’s *Modern Critical Interpretations: John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath*, Updated Edition, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 2007), 74.
- 45 Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, 269.
- 46 Brad Lookingbill, “‘A God-Forsaken Place’: Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl,” in *Americans View Their Dust Bowl Experience*, ed. John R. Wunder, Frances W. Kaye, and Vernon Carstensen (Niwot, Colorado 1999), 161.
- 47 Lookingbill, “A God-Forsaken Place,” 165.
- 48 Lookingbill, “A God-Forsaken Place,” 165.
- 49 Lookingbill, “A God-Forsaken Place,” 167.
- 50 Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, 6, 8, 140.
- 51 Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 203.
- 52 Paul C. Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (Pullman, Washington, 1994), 2.
- 53 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 14.
- 54 Robert Clark, *River of the West: Stories from the Columbia* (New York, 1995), 257.
- 55 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 47.
- 56 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 48.
- 57 Clark, *River of the West*, 258.
- 58 Clark, *River of the West*, 258.
- 59 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 66.
- 60 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 66.
- 61 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 66.
- 62 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 80.
- 63 Robert Carriker, *Ten Dollars A Song: Woody Guthrie Sells His Talent to the Bonneville Power Administration*, *Columbia Magazine*, Spring 2001: Vol. 15, No. 1.
- 64 Carriker, *Ten Dollars A Song*.
- 65 Pitzer, *Grand Coulee*, 88.
- 66 Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 195.
- 67 Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 195-196.
- 68 Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 196.
- 69 Clark, *River of the West*, 272.
- 70 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 209.
- 71 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 210.
- 72 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 73 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 74 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 75 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 76 <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/lyrics.lyrics.html>
- 77 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 210.
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Michael Andersen

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*Michael Andersen*

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*Abigail Sanocki*

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