

CHALK Creek

to the



ST. ELMO

PAST

Don Smith... \$1.

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CHALK CREEK TO THE PAST

by
DON SMITH

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TO THE READER:

The reason for this booklet probably started the first time I maneuvered my jeep up this canyon on my way to Tincup Pass, not knowing the name of the canyon, the cliffs or even the towns. As I climbed higher and higher into this fabulous country, I found my mind filling with questions like—I wonder what that was; where that trail goes; when it was built; or how high the peaks are, and when I reached St. Elmo I knew I would not be content until some of these questions were answered.

After spending hours, days, weeks and trip after trip into this town and many hours talking with the friendly people of the valley, I started finding the answers to some of my questions and began jotting them down along with the pictures I took.

To the more and more people who are going up the canyon, armed with picnic baskets, cameras, guns and fishing poles, or just seeking adventure, I dedicate this booklet with the sincere hope that I have answered some of the same questions I had, or given them information that was helpful in making their trip more enjoyable.

Sincerely,
Don Smith

Don Smith

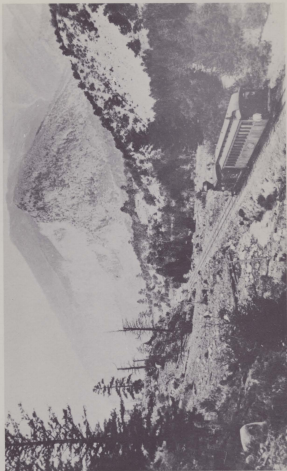


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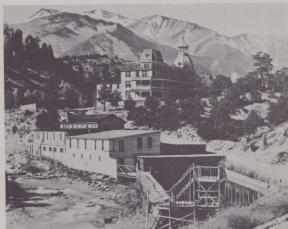
Denver, South Park and Pacific passenger train before entering Chalk Creek Canyon.

FOREWORD

MANY TIMES as I started up Chalk Creek between towering Mt. Princeton and Mt. Antero, I have thought of how long they have stood there looking majestically down on history being made. First the Indians bringing their tired and sometimes newly acquired battle-wounded bodies to the hot spring caves nestled in the cliffs to soak and sweat the health back into their bodies. Then the cry of gold, and the procession changed to weary men with an eager gold-tinted glint in their eyes leading their heavily burdened burros up the dusty trail and their sagging ore wagons on the way down; transportation of every description, wagons, carriages, stage coaches, sleighs and skis — and finally in 1880 the shrill shriek of the laboring little engines of the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad carrying supplies and people from every walk of life, which in their way were all adding to the history and color of this valley.



Heywood Hot Springs. Stage stop, located across road from present Mt. Princeton Hot Springs.



Mt. Princeton Hot Springs, with hotel in background.

THERE are three approaches to the foot of Chalk Creek Canyon. One comes in on the bias across the flats from Highway 285 by turning off at the Gas Creek school. The second turns off Highway 285 at Nathrop — straight west to where it meets the Gas Creek school road at the foot of the canyon. The third is the one I always use because of the fact that I always have to gas up the jeep at Buena Vista. This route starts at the junction of Highways 24 and 306 in the heart of Buena Vista, and goes west on Highway 306 towards Cottonwood Lake, then about a half mile out you turn off to the left and go by old Mt. Olivet Cemetery. This has always been my favorite route because here you traverse the entire east base of Mt. Princeton which rises from the valley floor to three lofty summits, the highest being 14,197 feet above sea level, designating it as Colorado's eighteenth highest peak. The peak to the south of Mt. Princeton is Mt. Antero — 14,245 feet high, which is Colorado's sixteenth highest peak. Antero is a famous location for prospecting gem collectors and is mainly famous for the aquamarine finds that have been made on its slopes.

As you approach the Chalk Cliffs of Mt. Princeton you can easily make out the line traversing the southerly summit which was the old Hortense mine wagon road providing the route for the ore laden wagons making their precarious way down the lofty trail to the mills and rail heads below. Just before the last sharp curve which takes you down to the valley floor you come to a fork in the road — the right takes you to Frontier Ranch, the left to Chalk Creek. After dropping down the shelf road which gives you a wide view of the valley below, you meet the road coming up from Nathrop. Just across the road is the entrance to Mt. Princeton Hot Springs.

Looking over the rock wall you can still see the foundation and rubble left by the wrecking crews of the Antero Hotel. This four story structure of questionable design was built in about 1889 at a cost of 75,000 dollars and had quite a fabulous history by the time it was bought by a Texas construction man in 1950. It took five months to tear it down to salvage the lumber and other building materials. I won't spend any time trying to describe it because unfortunately my first trip up



Mt. Princeton Hotel. Razed in 1950.



Hortense Hotel. This building was located between present greenhouses, and Silver Cliff Ranch.

the valley was after its destruction. The accompanying picture will allow you to see it for yourself.

Muriel Sibell Wolle in "Stampede to Timberline" covers the interiors about as well as I have been able to locate. I have seen pages of legal squabbles and financial ups and downs until the stock crash left it empty until its present owners bought it for taxes in 1944. The present rock building houses the pit baths, the dressing rooms, and upstairs the living quarters of the George Roche family, the present owners. It was originally called the Heywood Hot Spring and later changed to Mt. Princeton Hot Spring.

The building is of a European Spa design, and is built on the sands of the hot springs, which keeps the building naturally heated the year round. The water comes from an artesian type spring beneath the floor at a constant temperature of 130 degrees, furnishing the water for the baths and pool. Unfortunately at the time of the writing of this booklet the pool was temporarily closed. I, with many other people of the valley, hope it is not for long because not only was this a wonderful place to swim and relax, but part of the history of the valley when people from all over the world came to bathe in the healing and relaxing waters in its early days.

Just past the Hot Springs on the right you pass Jack Wright's greenhouses, which once was the site of the town of Hortense. In the picture you will see this also was a hot spring location. The town was incorporated in 1879, had a post office, numerous cabins and two hotels for the guests arriving daily by foot, stage, horseback, or by the now abandoned Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad which was then battling its way to Gunnison. The greenhouses are tapped into the Hortense mother spring which provides the necessary year round temperature to grow the beautiful geraniums which Mr. Wright ships all over the United States.

Next we pass Silver Cliff Ranch which is operated in connection with Frontier Lodge, by the Young Life Youth Group from Colorado Springs. Silver Cliff and Frontier Lodge were both originally built by Mrs. Byrd Fukua in about 1923. Byrd had high hopes for the growth of the valley and invested large sums of money and spent many years of her life trying to realize her dreams of the valley. Byrd sold Frontier Lodge to

a Dr. Marquard of St. Louis in 1928, who ran it as a boys' camp until about 1952 and then sold it to the Young Life Group. As you pass Silver Cliff you can see many of the guest cabins are named after different varieties of birds dating back to when Byrd Fukua ran the ranch, then called the Byrd Colonies. Byrd passed away in 1956, but not without making her mark in the valley.

Now we pass the road to Deer Valley Guest Ranch, operated by Parker Woolmington.

Next a choice of two routes each so different from the other that both should be tried. In my writing I will travel up the turnout to the left, and follow the Denver, South Park & Pacific railroad bed along the shelf road towards the Cascades. This road is easy traveling, giving ample turnout spots to give the motorist an opportunity to stop and view the panoramic scenes of the valley below. If I had taken the road that follows the valley floor I would have been traveling the old wagon and coach road leading up to the Cascades where it momentarily paralleled the D. S. P. & P. because of the narrowness of the canyon at the Cascades.

Looking down into the valley you can see the lower road and how it gives access to the many guest ranches which are situated in the lower valley below the Cascades. The first guest lodge the lower road passes is Wright's Lodge with its cool, comfortable looking cabins nestled in the shade of the trees.

Looking straight across at the white granite walls of the cliffs you can see many caves. Evidence has been found in some of these caves of the Utes long before the whites using the natural hot water springs contained in many of these caves for bathing, and they no doubt believed in their healing powers even then.

Down in the valley the road now winds by the Love Ranch run by Mrs. Jo Love. This ranch is situated at the very base of the mountain which brought Jo to Colorado in 1923 from West Virginia as a mountain climber of Swiss ancestry. Since then she has built single-handed her home, her livelihood and her life with a force and story behind it that made me wish after just a few hours with this gracious lady of the mountains that I could have been capable of doing her story justice.

For the picture taker, beautiful shots of the summit of Mt. Princeton can be had from this road, or just to sit and gaze is enough to make anyone wonder and admire the courage and the stamina of the men who trudged these hills in search for gold.

As you notice the canyon narrowing down at the Cascades, and the lower road coming up to meet you, over against the far wall can be seen the jagged white slice from the side of the mountain where the now inoperative granite quarry is located from where much of the stone for Colorado's state house was taken.

Now after the two roads meet and the canyon narrows we have Chalk Creek on our right, and the Cascade camp ground on the left, which I know from experience is an ideal place for camping.

As you drive an easy grade which penetrates the forest of pines and aspens, the route is clearly distinguishable in many spots as being the old road bed with its narrow cuts through the little outcrops of the hill, and now and then the blackness of the road shows the cindered roadbed left by the little steamers. All along the road above the Cascades can also be seen many of the old telegraph poles, insulators and the downed wire which once carried the messages for the Denver, South Park & Pacific.

The road is usually rough along in the Cascade area because the spring thaw sometimes brings down torrents of water and covers the road. From the Cascades on up you also notice many new bridge railings or completely new bridges which had to be rebuilt as the high water came down with such terrific force from the slopes above each spring.

Many summer cabins are scattered here and there visible from the road, belonging to those who are lucky enough to own cabins in this beautiful valley.

One and eight-tenths miles above the Cascades you round a curve and there comes to view the once Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad watering station of Old Alpine, which is now known as Grizzly Lodge with its little store, gas pump and cabins for its guests.

Through the trees to the right, seven-tenths of a mile above Grizzly, a glimpse can be caught of the old red brick stack —

all that remains of the old Alpine Smelter built in 1879. Turning to the right off the main road you go down and cross Chalk Creek and reach the site of Alpine. The town was incorporated in 1879, its peak year was in 1880. Official census in 1880 shows a population of 503 persons. The natives estimated the population at close to a thousand persons. With all the itinerant workers all the way up the canyon, this could have been possible.

The town had a number of false fronted stores, log houses, many saloons, and a four thousand dollar dance hall; it also had two hotels, three livery stables, three banks and one newspaper.

Alpine dwindled to nothingness as the railroad pushed on. A few of the old original buildings still stand and have been made into comfortable summer cabins by their owners.

Many new cabins are being built in this beautiful shady little area at this time.

Now leaving Alpine and retracing our steps back to the main road, or for the more adventuresome taking the Kullman Road downstream, which finally fords Chalk Creek a little above the Cascades, we are ready once again for beauty and adventure.

Just around the curve from the turnoff to Alpine we pass a road to the left which will take a cool-headed jeep driver to the top of 14,245 foot Mt. Antero and the California mine found almost on its summit. The road is now closed for regular travel, but a few years ago when the mine was inoperative I ground my jeep to the summit and obtained a picture of the sunset on the top of Mt. Shavano, which is one of the favorite pictures in my collection. The trip down this road after dark is a book in itself, but thinking of that sunset makes me forget my ulcers.

In another 3.2 miles of steady climbing comes a decision in the form of another fork in the road. I say decision because both roads lead to unforgettable scenic experiences. The upper road again follows the railroad bed to Romley, loading spur for the fabulous Mary Murphy Mine, producing lead, zinc, silver and gold as the leading producer of the area, and then on up to Hancock. For the jeep enthusiast or the hiker many trails lead off the upper road. For the fisherman you have the

Grizzly Lake trail, the Pomeroy lakes, or Hancock Lake trails. For the adventurer there is a trip to the top of the Mary Murphy Mine, with its dangling ore buckets hanging from the miles of tram cable and the ruins of the mine buildings. Or, the shackle-buster route over the railroad ties from Hancock to the east portal of the famous Alpine Tunnel, completed in 1881 at a cost of 242,000 dollars. The California Redwood lined tunnel was a feat of craftsmanship, and is still a "must" for the railroad fans. This valley to the South was also the route of the Maysville & Chalk Creek Toll Road which went into the next valley and around Mt. Shavano. It was also the route of the Altman Pass Toll Road to Pitkin and Gunnison.

Now back to the righthand turn in the road before we traveled up to Romley. Making about one curve, the valley opens up and you come upon the site of the old Ohio Lode mill, which processed the ore from many of the local diggings in the district. It was torn down in 1947, but the concrete foundations are still visible. Across the road on the right is the old assay office for the Ohio Mill, which was recently purchased and is now sporting a new split log siding to add to its appearance. Just to the right of the old assay office is the road leading down to the location of the once busy little town of Iron City. This town had a smelter built in 1880, and quite a few residents, but as the way of almost all the previously mentioned towns they were short lived as the railroad pushed its way up the valley with new towns springing into view along its route. The miners and merchants of these towns with their families moved up, leaving the towns sometimes deserted as they followed the drive towards the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

A few cabins still remain in the Iron City group; the main one is a two-story structure which once housed the Brown family. Mr. Brown was the Superintendent of the Mary Murphy Mine. This structure is now owned by Dr. and Mrs. Bender who have painstakingly preserved the beauty of the old home which was built around 1870. The Benders are very proud of their home, and graciously showed us through its many well-preserved rooms with their comfortable atmosphere. On past the Iron City group about a mile or so you find the old St. Elmo Cemetery with its old dated stones going back



St. Elmo, Colorado, Main Street—Looking West



St. Elmo, Colorado, Main Street—Looking East

to the boom years, and the fires, the epidemics, the accidents, and then sometimes natural causes. New stones show this cemetery is still used, and by the fresh flowers on some of the graves you can see it is also far from forgotten.

Now back to the main road, and after passing the mill site you at once see buildings — this is St. Elmo.

The town when first laid out in 1879 was known as Forest City, because of its heavy growth of trees. The Post Office Department objected to the name because there was also a Forest City in California. By 1880 the town had increased in size, and the name was then changed to St. Elmo — probably by someone influenced by the recent reading of the book of the same name — a best seller at that time.

In 1880 the official census recorded 163 persons residing in the town. Due to the tremendous flow of itinerant workers and the many who were waiting for forms of transportation to the gold fields ahead, the residents of the town estimated the population at between 1,500 and 2,000 people during the boom years.

In 1881 the town was the rail head for the Denver, South Park & Pacific Railroad, until the line could push on towards the Alpine Tunnel, and finally the Gunnison country. The town wasn't actually on the railroad because the railroad traveled up the side of the mountain, gaining altitude towards the Pass above, and St. Elmo was in the valley below. A short but steep road connected the railroad station with the town proper for the supply wagons to convey their cargoes to and from the station.

As you enter the town, on your right can be seen the remains of the dam which backed up the waters of Chalk Creek, forming the mill pond which also served as a recreation area for the younger residents of the town in the form of swimming in the summer and skating in the winter.

On the left you pass a long wooden building of early day vintage. This was one of the town's livery stables, and connected to it on the right was one of the town's blacksmith shops. As you look down Main Street, the two-story building on the right was, at the time of Picture A, a restaurant and bar, and upon close examination you can see the saloonkeepers' aprons, and all neglected their customers while getting their



Pack train getting ready to start for the hills with supplies.

Murphy Mine Cornet Band.



pictures taken. In 1921 this building was known as Mongrain's store and office building.

In Picture B you see part of the two blocks of stores that once fronted Main Street on your left as you enter town. In 1890 a fire broke out, some say in the Clifton Hotel and others say the jewelry store nearby, and at the head of a strong wind was carried across the street, jumped the ten-foot fire wall, and before being brought under control completely wiped out this two-block business section and left the empty area you now see.

Most of the buildings in St. Elmo changed hands and businesses too often to definitely tie one business down to the entire history of the building, but I will try to point out a few.

The one-story building before Mongrain's, was the Miners Exchange Building; a saloon and bank. On your left before reaching the main street intersection you can see the previously mentioned fire wall, which now serves as one wall for a garage.

At the main intersection of town you find the St. Elmo Trading Shop run by Tom and Martha Miller, the town's present year-round residents. After a look around Martha's store of well stocked shelves of gifts, cards and curios, and a cold bottle of pop, we are ready to continue our exploration of the town.

In front of the Trading Shop is the road which crosses Chalk Creek, past the school built in 1882, which also served as a Church whenever a minister was available, and then turns left past a few stores, scattered cabins and up Gunnison Avenue to the end of town. Here you have a choice of roads. To the right you can take the easy, well-graded road to the summit of Tincup Pass 12,154 feet high, and for the jeeps, horses and trucks, on down to Tincup, but the view from the summit is well worth the trip for anyone.

Down at the edge of St. Elmo again, the lefthand road would have taken you into the beautiful upper end of the valley to Twist's Timberline Lodge, with its picturesque guest cottages along the road. This area also was in the old days called the ball park and was used as the town's recreation area.

Back to the main intersection we continue up Main Street. Just across from the Trading Shop, to the left of the road



Stage at St. Elmo starting for Aspen.

St. Elmo Main Street, with Mrs. A. A. Stark standing in doorway of house on right.



towards Tincup, you can see the old heavy floor beams, from the once flourishing American House hotel. Next, a building which was once an undertaking parlor.

The next two-story building is the Stark Bros. Store, which dates back to the days when it was operated by Mrs. A. A. Stark, as the Home Comfort Hotel, advertising — "All the comforts of a home given to Commercial Men, Strictly first-class, Best Meals, Comfortable Clean Beds. Telephone and Telegraph communication is also available to its guests." Mrs. Stark's congenial air, home baked bread and fresh honey are still remembered by some of the old-timers of the valley. In Picture C, you see a pack train loading with supplies in front of the Home Comfort, getting ready for the hills above. Mrs. Stark's son, Tony Stark, and daughter, Annabelle Ward, have operated the business until recently as the town's only full-time residents. Tony was the Post Master until September 30, 1952. Sickness and the hand of God took Tony and Annabelle from St. Elmo last winter. Tony passed away June 7, 1958, Annabelle at the time of this writing is still ill, but fighting to go back to her home, her beloved St. Elmo.

Across the street from the Stark Store is the City Hall, with its jail in the rear (complete with ball and chain), and the old safe and fire hoses.

The street is now lined on both sides by houses and stores of all shapes and designs, and after making a turn to the left you are suddenly at the edge of town. The road that here turns to the left is the previously mentioned wagon road to the depot above.

In Picture D, you see the famous Murphy Mine Silver Cornet Band, which played at all the town's gala activities. The man third from the left is Fritz Frank, the arranger of music and the director. Fifth from the right is Fred W. Brush, one of the town's pioneers. Mr. Brush did construction work up the valley in Alpine, as well as in St. Elmo. He was master carpenter at the Mary Murphy, and during his time in St. Elmo, at one time or another, served as City Clerk, Recorder, Trustee and Mayor. He was also the town's fourth Postmaster until 1890, when the fire wiped out his business which was then called Brush and Company, drugs and notions. The band picture was taken in front of his store, which was on the left.

The foregoing information was obtained through a personal interview with Dr. Thelma B. Johnson, of Salt Lake City, Utah, from notes taken in an interview she had with her father, Fred W. Brush, prior to his death in 1938.

St. Elmo wasn't the end of the line for many people, but only the beginning of a hard battle to the gold fields ahead. Before the railroad was completed through the Alpine Tunnel, the journey was by foot, horseback, or for many of the more fortunate ones, by stage. Daily stages left the Clifton Hotel, shown in Picture E, to travel the Chalk Creek and Elk Mountain Toll Road to Tincup and Aspen, or up through Romley over the two toll roads previously mentioned.

Above St. Elmo, the Mary Murphy Mine was at its peak in 1914. In 1917 and 1918 the mine began to slow down and finally stopped operation. The mine opened for a while in 1920 and has been leased off and on since.

The Denver, South Park and Pacific was abandoned and the Colorado and Southern Railway took over. With the mine shut down the main source of revenue was gone, and with the tremendous upkeep of the railroad's operations over the Pass, they were forced to abandon their line through the tunnel. In 1926 the last proud train came down the canyon, and the rails were torn up. This, and the opening of Independence Pass as a shorter route to Aspen dropped the curtain on the town of St. Elmo.

The big storm in the winter of 1957 left eighteen feet of snow on the ground. I followed the snowplow in my jeep up to St. Elmo and was greeted by the town's then four year-round residents—the Millers, and Tony Stark and Annabelle Ward. They had been snowed in for thirteen days. I was able to snow-shoe over the roofs of many of the buildings on Gunnison Avenue, because of the huge drifts.

After spending many hours around the potbellied stove in the Stark Store, or in front of the comfortable fireplace in the Miller's store, you cannot help but let some of the history and colorful past make you love a town such as this.

As the end of my story draws near, I find myself wishing I knew more of the history and could go on. Perhaps more research, another book, who knows? But for now, good-bye, and for the canyon I say, thank you for coming, and please come back and learn and see more the next time.

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DFS



Into the Past
 TO
ST. ELMO