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## Sequent Occupance in the Central City Area, Colorado

*Mary Grace Gillespie*

Man's desire for the precious metals has taken him into remote areas of the earth. This untiring search for gold lead to the exploration of the canyons of the Rocky Mountains. In 1859 there appeared in an isolated mountain valley of northern Colorado, a small settlement, later to be known as Central City, that boomed suddenly, lived brilliantly, and died quickly, only to be revived in 1932.

In the summer of 1849 seven natives of Georgia while on their way to California made camp at the confluence of Cherry Creek and South Platte River. That autumn gold was discovered in the stream gravels, but winter weather prevented the prospectors from exploring the creek to its source. When spring came they went on to California, and remained there for several years prospecting for gold. Later, these men became discontented, sold their claims in California, and returned to Georgia. Before leaving California they drew up an agreement whereby they would return to the Rocky Mountain region. In 1858 with an additional four men they set out again for their old campsite. Separating into two parties they explored in different directions. One group ascended Boulder Creek Canyon while the other crossed the front range to Fall River, Spring Gulch, and Russell Gulch, and discovered the rich gold bearing sands of that area. With the approach of another winter season the explorers abandoned further prospecting and returned to their camp on the South Platte.

By 1858 news of the gold discovery in Colorado had spread eastward to the Atlantic Coast. Here was a great

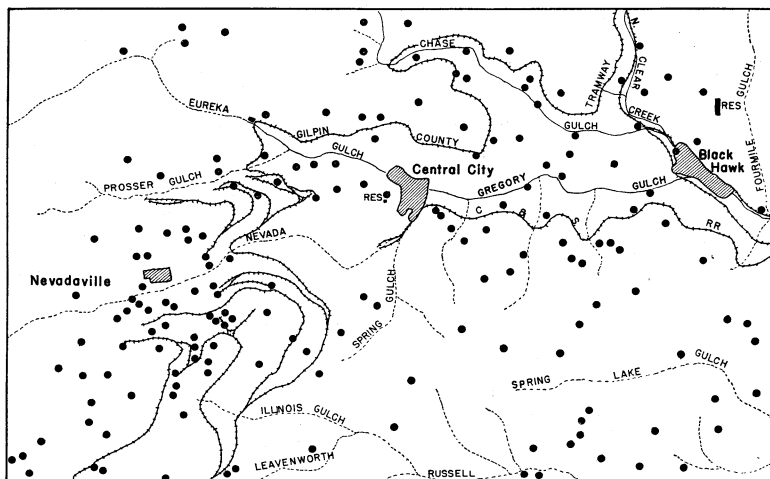


Fig. 1. The Central City Area showing locations of Nevadaville, Central City, and Black Hawk. Each dot represents a mine.

chance for men to revive their fortunes lost in the panic of 1857; consequently, the little town of Auralia (now Denver) on the fork of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River showed a marked increase in population. The discovery of gold in 1859 at Golden, Idaho Springs, and other places in South Clear Creek Canyon sent many prospectors further into the mountains. Among these gold seekers was a mule-skinner<sup>1</sup> named John Gregory who, while prospecting in North Clear Creek Canyon between Black Hawk and Central City, discovered on May 6, 1859, the first gold lode in the Rocky Mountains. With the news of Gregory's discoveries, many men deserted South Clear Creek for North Clear Creek. From May 16th to May 23rd Gregory and his five helpers took out \$972 worth of gold. Gregory soon sold his claim and prospected for other companies, later leaving the area with \$30,000 in gold dust<sup>2</sup>. By that time the gold rush was in full sway. There were from three to four thousand men in the gulch by June of 1859 and soon more than ten thousand people were occupying an area of

<sup>1</sup>Mule-skinner—Drives mules in cross country caravans and does odd jobs.

<sup>2</sup>Sibell, Muriel V.—*Ghost Cities of Colorado*—"Gregory Diggings."

about four square miles. Four famous mining towns—Central City, Black Hawk, Mountain City, and Nevadaville (Fig. 1)—grew up in Gregory Gulch.

### The Fundament

Between the front range, a short distance west of Denver, and the continental divide is an elevated intermontaine plateau. The Central City area lies within the higher portion of the plateau from which lofty peaks rise. The lowest altitude in the area, 7,600 feet, is found in the valley of Clear Creek below the mouth of Fall River; the highest is Parry Peak, 13,345 feet. Clear Creek, Fall River, and Boulder Creek drain the area. The streams have steep and uneven gradients, their courses being interrupted many times by glacial lakes. The glaciation of this area has greatly enhanced the beauty of the scenery although at the same time it has increased the difficulties of travel. Most of the streams have great fluctuations in volume and only those having their sources in the high mountains have a permanent flow. The absence of permanent streams in the plateau area has been a serious handicap to the mining industry.

Before the district was settled forests were abundant, but the constant use of wood for mine supports and for firewood depleted forest areas near the camps. Today the sides of the gulch are barren of trees and other types of vegetation as a result of destructive exploitation by the mining industry.

In spite of the altitude of the area, the relative dryness of the climate prevents extremes of either heat or cold. In summer the dryness causes rapid evaporation and prevents the heat from being enervating while in winter the same dryness keeps the cold from penetrating clothing. The superb mountain scenery of this region would have attracted human habitation eventually even had there been no discovery of gold, but the entire area would probably have been more sparsely settled.

### The Growth of the Community

The first settlement in Gregory Gulch became a thriving mining camp within a few days, attracting prospectors from all directions. At first the people lived in tents or in a pine "lean-to" without furniture or other conveniences. The miners soon found themselves confronted with long working hours and exorbitant prices. On June 8, 1859 a government was formed to settle claim disputes and establish law and order. The mining laws that were enacted remained in effect until the passing of the Federal Mining Act of May 10, 1872. By means of a court and the assistance of the vigilantes, comparative peace and order was maintained in Gregory Gulch.

Mining was carried on by primitive placer methods. Gold was panned in the creeks or washed by means of specially built rockers<sup>s</sup> fed by sluices. The soft rock was crushed and washed away leaving the gold. When the supply of gold in the river gravels was exhausted and the miners were confronted with the metal embedded in quartz, many left the area in search of other placer deposits. Only the more persistent ones remained, confident that they could find some way of extracting the gold. In June, 1859, an *arrastre*<sup>t</sup> run by ox power was erected and one run by water power was put into operation the following month. By the end of the year several small stamp mills were built.

By 1860 the rush period was over, but the Central City community had become an important center even in its first decade. In 1862 the families of the miners began to arrive, necessitating a more stable settlement. Churches, lodges, and schools were built, streets straightened, and sanitation attempted. By 1870 the citizens of Central City had decided that a good hotel was necessary to accommodate the many visitors. The new hotel, completed in 1872, was named the Teller House in honor of the man who subscribed the first \$30,000. President Grant's name appears among those on the Teller House register. A pathway of silver bricks was especially constructed for his entrance

into the hotel. The city soon became one of the cultural centers of the West. People dressed lavishly and in the latest styles. Central City was a literary and musical center, both amateur and professional theatricals being given. Many traveling shows stopped in Central City, but the local talent productions were considered best. After the production of *The Bohemian Girl*, the townsmen put up a bond and agreed to build an opera house. The structure was completed in the Spring of 1878 at a cost of \$22,000 (Fig. 2).

Central City was never so wild as some mining camps. According to reporters of that time it was absolutely decorous. It had only a "couple of murders, down in the Golden Gate Saloon, and its most famous shooting was a duel."<sup>5</sup> Class distinctions, although evident, were never rigid. A heterogeneous group of people had gathered in the town from all part of the United States and Europe. There was a distinct breach between the mine laborers, the business men, and the capitalists. Because of the peculiar combination of people and because of the isolation of the camp, social functions were an essential part of the lives of the people. Each group had its own particular social gatherings—the miners organized a union; the Germans, a gymnastic club; the Irish, a brotherhood; and the capitalists, a Masonic Lodge. This class distinction was in a measure, the result of capitalistic mining units that developed because of the difficulty of quartz mining.

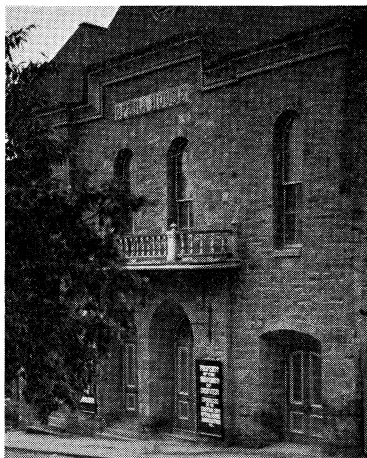


Fig. 2. The Opera House.

<sup>5</sup>Rocker—a device for panning gold larger than the simple pan and screen first used.

<sup>6</sup>Arrastre—a rude Spanish-American mill having a vat in which roll one or more wheels propelled by a horizontal beam which turns about a vertical axis—used for crushing ore.

### **Incorporation of the Settlement**

Gregory Diggings was first called Mountain City. Soon after the settlement was named, William N. Byers, while camping about a mile up the canyon above Mountain City, suggested that a new settlement be started on his campsite called Central City since it would be the central point between Black Hawk and Nevadaville (Fig 1). Central City soon became a more permanent settlement than Mountain City, log cabins were constructed, stores and shops were built, and supplies were stored for future distribution. In 1861 when the Colorado Territory was established, Gilpin County was organized. Three years later Mountain City and Central City were incorporated into one municipality under the name of Central City. The depression that followed the Civil War caused the town to struggle for its very existence. Mine after mine was forced to close because of the expense of quartz mining, inefficient methods, and overcapitalization. By 1870, however, Central City emerged a well-established town. It had the spirit and the features of a modern eastern city—its culture pattern was complete. All necessary institutions for an urban community were present, including the telephone, phonograph, and electric lights. Prospects for the future were particularly encouraging. The streets of Central City were laid along the steep slopes of Gregory Gulch, following the contours of the land (Fig. 3), the physiography permitting very few cross streets (Fig. 4). The two principal streets Main and Eureka, intersect at a forty-five degree angle. Eureka Street follows the natural curve of an intermittent stream bed that leads to Nevadaville.

### **Contacts with the Outside**

One of the first problems facing Central City was transportation outlets. In the first decade toll roads were constructed from the mines to the city. Freight had to be hauled from Denver to Central City by stage coach or by wagon. To add to these difficulties express companies gained monopolies on freight lines. The people, realizing the bene-

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<sup>5</sup>*Rocky Mountain News*—Sunday Magazine Section—July 3, 1938—p. 5.

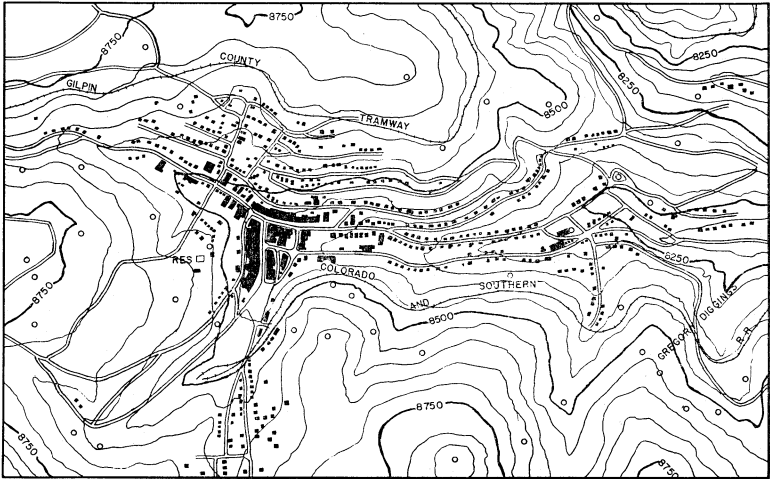


Fig. 3. Contour Map of Central City.

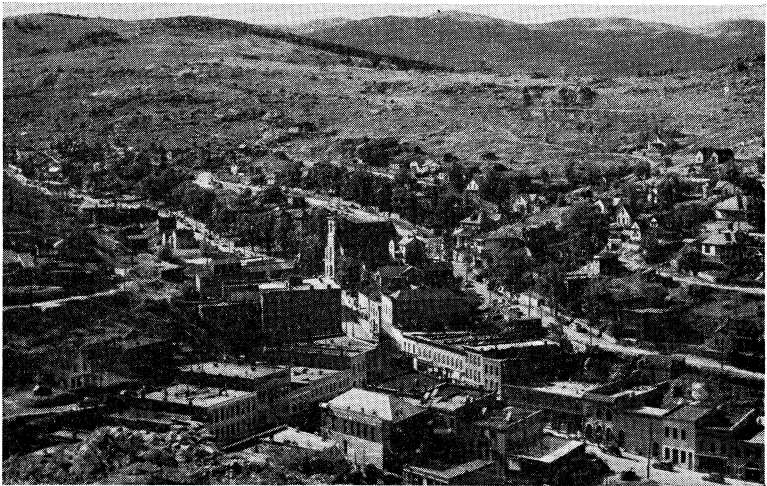


Fig. 4 Aerial View of Central City.

fit to be gained from a railroad, anxiously watched that development. They bid for every railroad building westward, but since the Gregory Gulch settlements were located in a box canyon that had no outlet to the west they finally had to agree to grade the roadbed and contribute money to

the building of a branch line. By 1870 Denver had several main railroad lines connecting it with the East. In that same year the narrow gage Colorado Central Railroad from Denver to Golden was extended to Black Hawk. The miners regarded the railroad as their salvation. The road served Central City, Nevadaville, and Black Hawk although it was not completed to Central City until 1878, and it never reached Nevadaville. Nine years later a local 24-inch gage tramway which served the mines of the Gregory Gulch region, was completed.

Central City prospered until 1874 when a fire broke out in a Chinese laundry. Because of inadequate fire fighting facilities the entire town with the exception of the Teller House, was demolished. The city was rebuilt on more permanent lines. The streets and sidewalks were widened and graded. Frame shacks were thrown up temporarily to be supplanted later by more permanent buildings. After the fire many local business men began investing their money in Denver rather than Central City. This shifting of the business center marked the beginning of Central City's decline.

### **Period of Abandonment**

By 1900 the mining industry in the area had decreased in importance and a general exodus began. People abandoned the city leaving their homes and furnishings. The population decreased until Central City was only a shadow of what it had been. The Opera House had been closed and the Teller House was no longer in use. Most of the stores were boarded up as general business had ceased. The city began to take on the ghostly characteristics of a deserted mining camp. The buildings were left to fall to pieces in the weather. Only a few "old timers" remained trying to ignore the reality of a town which had lost its glory.

### **Period of Rejuvenation**

Central City lay dormant for thirty-one years until its famed Opera House was presented to the University of Denver. The University immediately took steps to reopen the Opera House (Fig. 2) and to attempt to reproduce some



of the plays presented there when the city was at its height. Since then seven plays and light operas have been produced, and the revived interest in the historical background of the city has led to a rejuvenation of its life. Stores have been unboarded and its houses have been opened for use. Its economic life is now centered chiefly around its tourist trade as it once was around its mining industry. People come from all parts of the United States to view the site of one of the most famous mining camps in the world. "Gold was still in Gilpin County, in great quantities, but the price of precious metals fell, and the difficulties of deep mining were almost insurmountable for years. Only in recent months have experimental undertakings yielded some promise that there again will be big profit in precious metal mining in Colorado."<sup>6</sup> Men are now panning \$3.00 worth of gold a day in the streams of that area. One mine in Black Hawk is again operating and is producing gold at a profit.

Central City was founded during stagecoach days, it thrived during the railroad boom, and it was the center of the oldest and richest mining district of the region. The business of the city then reached a period of stagnation but was revived economically and culturally. The days of large fortunes amassed in a short while are over, but men can still make a profitable living by mining. At present Central City is the center of a network of mountain highways that have brought it a prominence and recognition almost equal to its former glory. When "Othello" was produced in 1936 New York critics stated that the dramatic center of the western hemisphere had shifted overnight from New York to Central City.

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<sup>6</sup>*Rocky Mountain News*, op. cit. p. 4.

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