

THE HISTORY OF  
INDEPENDENCE  
GOLD MINING CAMP

copyright 1984, by Harold Shaffran

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank all those who contributed and helped to document this time in history. I would like to express my appreciation to Michelle (Shellie) Harper and Virginia (Ginny) Haberman for their knowledgeable assistance in researching this information at the Aspen Historical Museum archives. I would like to thank Bill Dunaway and Mary Hayes for their interest and encouragement. I am deeply grateful to Chris Cassett for his generous contribution of time and talent to photograph Independence as it appears in present time. Of equal importance, I would like to acknowledge the generous monetary contributions which made it possible for this publication to see the light of print. Most of all, I thank Ramona Markalunas for her vision, insight, information and advice.

CHAPTER ONE  
EARLY HISTORY

Fireworks, firewater, and fights was how most of America celebrated their country's Independence day more than a hundred years ago. But one miner turned his back on such transient pleasures, and traveling what was then known as Hunters Pass, along the top of the Continental Divide, crossed over into Ute territory. A few miles west of the summit he spotted a likely looking geological formation of honeycombed quartz, chipped away at it, and discovered a gold strike which he named Independence in honor of the day.

Beyond these simple facts, confusion reigns. The lucky man's name is believed to be Billy Belden. Some reports indicate that another claim, the Last Dollar lode was found the same day. Other historians believe that the Last Dollar was another name for the Independence strike. The truth is shrouded in the mists of history. At least there is no dispute about the date, July 4, 1879.

News of the strike reached Leadville, and gold fever being stronger than fear of Indians, other prospectors quickly followed. This was the start of the Aspen boom. A tent city which took its name from the original find sprang up. Several strikes were found and Independence was considered to be the leading gold camp in the state.

Henry Staats, one of the original thirteen men who spent the winter of 1879-80 in Aspen wrote this lively account which illustrates

how quickly people flocked to the site of a new strike.

"A man from Indiana discovered the Independence mine and on the fourth day of July, 1879, he brought some ore to Leadville to have it assayed. It ran high in gold. I was three miles up the Arkansas River above Leadville, came in to get some grub and heard about the strike. This was on the 10th day of July, 1879. I had a horse I rode and a pack horse. I left my pack horse in Leadville, got some grub, tied it and my blankets behind my saddle and lit out for Twin Lakes. Six or seven miles up Lake Creek I took the Red Mountain trail, got lost and camped there that night. In the morning I took the trail back to Lake Creek, found the trail up stream and came over the range at the point now called Independence Pass.

When I struck the first timber I found about 50 men camped around the new strike. Everything was staked out for a mile around the camp. The next morning I got outside of all the stakes and brought in the first silver ore that was shown in camp. Where I found it was west of the camp, in what is now called Dead Man's Gulch. I did not think much of the formation and did not go back.

I stayed at the new camp a few days, and there is where I got acquainted with J. Warren Elliott, who proved in after years to be one of the finest men I ever met and one of the most fearless. This was proved while I was staying at the camp. He had opened a hole, five or six feet, and had to go back to Leadville for grub. When he got back...[he found that his claim had been] jumped and two men stood in the hole, each with a gun. When Mr. Elliott was told that his claim was jumped he took off his coat and walked into the hole. He took the gun out of the first man's hands and threw it up on the bank, then took hold of the other man, jammed him to the wall and told him to take his gun and get out or he would beat him to death. The man got out and they both left camp that night and never came back. Mr. Elliott did not have a gun at the time nor did he ever carry one in all the years we worked together....

No one there knew how to sharpen a drill; all their drills were dull and they were trying to get their assessment work done. They had learned I was a miner and came to me and wanted to know what to do. I told them to put their drills in a fire made of pine limbs with plenty of pitch. I went down to the creek

and picked out a good-sized smooth granite boulder as big as I could lift and brought it up to the fire. There were plenty of hammers in the camp and in a few hours I had all the drills sharpened and tempered." 1

Eastern investors were also attracted to the area. J.V. Farwell of Chicago bought the Independence, Mammoth, Dolly Varden, and Gatton mines. W.B. Dickerman from New York bought the Last Dollar and Johnson Placer. F.M. Brown brought about a merger between the investors and they formed a stock company in the fall of 1879 called the Farwell Consolidated Mining Company. Brown was installed as manager. The company soon acquired title to several of the richest claims in the area. By July of 1881, Farwell's mining estate comprised almost seventy-five acres of mineral ground and thirteen separate mines. The Last Dollar, Legal Tender, and Independence being the most valuable.

Their workings displayed a gold-bearing vein showing 900 consecutive feet of pay mineral. Its width ran from thirty inches to six feet. The Last Dollar showed

"...the most regular and well defined vein of gold ore to be seen in the gold regions of America." 2

The social hierarchy in a mining camp put the mine owners and superintendents at the top. A great majority of the mine owners did not live in the camps, but spent their time and treasure in more refined markets.

Despite harsh weather and almost constant wind, the hardy

pioneers at Independence stayed through the winter. During the winter they traveled on skis. Web snowshoes were seldom used. Instead a long narrow ski, called the Norwegian snowshoe, was popular. They were 7 or 8 feet long by 5" or 6" wide and curved up at the front. The bottoms of the skis were rubbed down until they were very smooth and wax was applied with a hot iron. Above timberline, with no bushes or undergrowth to go through, a man could travel much faster than on webbed snowshoes. To go uphill they sidestepped. A piece of deerskin was fastened on the underside of the ski with the hair pointing back to act as a brake. Instead of two poles, one long pole 6 to 7 feet long was used. When going down a steep incline, the skier would put the pole between his legs to slow his descent. On level ground the pole was used as in poling a boat through water. It also aided in keeping one's balance. Norwegian miners introduced the use of this type of travel to the mining section of Colorado. They were in common use in 1879, and made possible the working of mines in winter, since food could be packed to snowbound camps.

Norwegians established shops in some camps and made skis to order. Size of feet, height, weight, and most important, planned use was taken into account. A miner who would be using his skis when packing heavy loads needed a different construction than a man who would travel light or be using his skis for town races and recreation. For recreational skiing the long pole was not used.

Plank sidewalks were built two feet above the ground so that snow might be more easily shoveled in the street. The high sidewalk also kept pedestrians out of the mud and manure in the streets. In

winter, the street had a mound of snow extending its entire length, shutting off all view across the street except where openings had been cut.

Because of the extreme cold everybody wore flannel underwear. Pneumonia was a frequent killer. They wore the same clothes until they fell apart. The men also wore dark glasses to protect their eyes from snow glare. Snow blindness was a common ailment.

The cabins were crude affairs. Often without plank floors. Instead several inches of sawdust covered with gunny sacks served their purpose. Although some had mattresses stuffed with straw, less particular miners made do with pine boughs covered with buffalo robes or blankets as a bed.

Beans, bacon, coffee, and sourdough bread were the main staples in a mining camp larder. Dried apples, potatoes, flapjacks, and oatmeal provided some variety. A pressure cooker was necessary to boil potatoes or beans at high altitudes. The air is so thin that the water boils away without getting hot enough to cook them. Venison and trout was plentiful, bear meat occasionally varied the fare. A frying pan, coffee pot, tin cup, butcher knife, and iron spoon were usually the only kitchen utensils.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MINING CAMP GOVERNMENT

The quickness with which a mining camp formed was a unique part of the settlement of the west. Rather than isolated homesteads, an instant urban environment emerged. A diverse group of independent-minded people had to band together to address the problems inherent in becoming a town. Imagine the plight of a small settlement, nothing more than a group of tents and cabins, facing the prospect of organizing themselves to deal with all the attendant problems of government; property lines, fire protection, law enforcement, etc. Mining camps were a prime example of government 'by the people, for the people'. There was a recognition of the importance of a cohesive structure for the greater good of the community. Fire, for example, was always a danger. Regulations had to be adopted and enforced for the good of all.

In many camps, the head of the government was the mayor and council. The council levied and collected taxes, was responsible for all ordinances and regulations, oversaw other committees and agencies, and in general was responsible for implementing and enforcing the rules of government. Most council members served without pay. The

prominent members of the community realized the importance of an orderly framework if they wanted their town to progress and grow.

One major need was a municipal water system free of impurities from mining operations, garbage, animal and human waste. Quickly accessible water in case of fire, and a pure water supply to prevent the spread of epidemics that often swept through the camps were most important. Sanitation was especially difficult to enforce since dogs, hogs, goats and burros often roamed freely despite ordinances to keep them penned. Also, the inhabitants would throw refuse behind their cabins where it would fester and decay.

The foremost concern was money to finance the necessary jobs; treasurer, clerk, engineer, attorney, etc. Often these jobs were combined. It was difficult to carry out rules and regulations given the transitory nature of a mining camp. Plans could not depend upon a steady population. The few "permanent" residents did not want to be taxed to cover municipal services for the transients. Property values could change overnight depending on the value of new strikes. Businesses opened and closed with great frequency. One solution to gain greater tax revenue without the burden resting on the few steady members of the community was to assess a business license tax. Another major source of revenue for the city budget was through fines. Some camps passed ordinances against prostitution merely to be able to fine violators.

Fines were for such offenses as prostitution, pornography, disorderly conduct, public drunkenness, destruction of public property, excessive noise, failure to illuminate and/or fence construction sites, resisting arrest, discharging firearms, and carrying concealed weapons.

Fines were preferable to jail time, since rather than collecting revenue, the city had to pay to feed the prisoners, putting more of a burden on their budget. Those unable to pay were often requested to do public service in the form of street repair, firewood cutting, or other necessary chores.

The only gunfight of record that occurred in Independence was when two drunks started shooting off their guns in one of the saloons. The town marshal tried to arrest them. They threatened him with their weapons, and he shot and killed both of them. They were buried in the town cemetery.

Incidentally, it was not unheard of for a man to die in bed of gunshot wounds, because bullets from a shooting spree in a neighboring bar penetrated the thin walls between the buildings.

CHAPTER THREE  
CAMP DEVELOPMENT

Miners, unlike farmers, required a whole retinue of suppliers. A farmer might not see any hard cash all year. Miners needed many supplies and had the money to pay for them. They usually spent freely having the attitude that more riches could always be dug up out of the earth. When a new strike was discovered, closely following on the heels of the prospectors were the merchants to fulfill their needs. Hardware, dry goods, groceries, all were necessary. Kegs of whiskey made up a large percentage of the goods shipped to the camps. The merchant would bring his wares over the passes to eager customers. Because of the twin difficulties of weather, and roads that were barely more than trails, the wagons that did get through to a new camp could expect to make a large profit for the storekeeper.

Theodore Ackerman was the first such man to bring his goods into the Independence mining camp and set up business in a large tent. He eventually expanded into a store, restaurant, and boarding house. For two dollars a day, a traveler received room and board.

Theodore Ackerman was one of the earliest arrivals at Independence. He was born in London, England on April 12, 1848 and indentured himself at the age of fourteen for a term of seven years to learn the trade of merchant-storekeeper. He emigrated to Chicago where he lost all his belongings in the Great Fire, October 8, 1871. He

moved to Colorado Springs in 1872, and from there to Leadville and Independence. He brought in food and supplies on burros from Leadville to the new camp in Independence. As his business expanded he became a prominent figure in the fledgling town serving as postmaster for the Sparkhill post office from July 3, 1882 until October 18, 1887. He also served two terms as Mayor. With the arrival of the railroads at Aspen, the Aspen-Leadville stage line ceased operations and the town started to decline. Ackerman closed his business and moved to Aspen. He ran a restaurant there for a short time, but soon gave that up and for several years he and Eugene W. Jewett were partners in a grocery store on Galena Street.

In 1900 he sold his interest in the store and moved back to Colorado Springs. He moved to Denver in 1914. Theodore Ackerman died on April 6, 1926 and is buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery near Golden, Colorado.

Boarding houses, a general store, and saloons, not necessarily in that order, were usually the first buildings erected.

"In their haste the citizens forgot to build a church and school house, but they now realize the want of both and steps are being taken toward their erection." 3

Despite heavy snows and all but impassable roads, the blooming of a tent city into a vigorous mining camp took place. In 1880, the population numbered around three hundred. By 1881, it had grown to five hundred, and had eleven established businesses; four groceries,

four boarding houses, and three saloons. A newspaper was considered a highwater mark of a town's permanence. The Independence Miner published its first issue Oct. 8, 1881. All the residents were involved in mining to a greater or lesser extent. The business and professional men would furnish a grubstake to prospectors while they continued to tend their own businesses. In May of 1881, a man named Hanson succeeded in bringing a sawmill over the range. Twenty new houses were under construction. The camp was booming.

By 1882, there were several boarding houses, hotels and saloons. There was the Bank of Pitkin County, established before Aspen or Ashcroft had one. The town also contained clothing stores, hardware shops, two stage lines, a sawmill, druggist, blacksmith, stationery store, restaurants, laundry, livery stables, an attorney, and a justice of the peace. This was Independence's peak. The population was between 1000 and 2000 inhabitants, and over forty businesses were listed in the town directory, ten of them saloons. Drinking and gambling in the saloons was the main form of recreation for the men. Brothels were not included in the directory. Given the spend easy attitude of the men and the scarcity of female companionship, especially in the fledgling camps, prostitution was widespread.

First came the miners to work in the mine,  
Then came the ladies who lived on the line. 4

CHAPTER FOUR  
NAMING THE CAMP

The names the miners gave their strikes provide some clues to their identities, among them were: Last Dime, Golden Age, Orphan Boy, Wild Irishman, Southern Boy, Western Girl, Mountain Boy, Mountain Girl, Mountain Lion, Golden Rule, and a personal favorite, the Seek No Further.

The names they gave their town however has provided many a headache to researchers. During one period, Independence had three different post offices, with three different names. Ironically, it never had one called Independence.

As was true of other Colorado mining camps, the name of the post office was not necessarily the same as the name of the town. The easiest way to untangle the complicated skein of names changes is by means of a chronological sequence. Two promoters, Burton and Kinhead had surveyed the townsite in 1880 and owned a government patent on the land. A government patent, in this sense, means a deed to land not previously owned by anyone else. They renamed the town Chipeta in honor of Chief Ouray's wife. Ouray was the government appointed chief of the Utes. Kinhead secured a post office called Sidney, and was appointed Postmaster on January 4, 1881. The Farwell Company officials applied for a post office under the name of Farwell, and it was granted and established on July 14, 1881. However, on September 17, 1881, The Aspen Times, still referring to the town as

Independence, reported:

"The Post-Office Department has asked the people to change the name of their camp, their being a number of towns of that name in the country. The 27th inst. has been advertised as the day for an election to decide between the names of Chipeta and Monmouth [sic]. On that day the town will be incorporated."

By January 28, 1882, The Aspen Times was reporting news headlined

"Chipeta - News and Gossip from the Golden Corner of Pitkin County."

On February 1, 1882, a third group, segregating themselves from Burton and Kinkead on one hand, and the Farwell Company on the other, secured still another post office called Sparkhill.

"Once more the name of Independence has been changed. Let us hope this will stick. The Post Office Department in Washington, D.C. christened it Sparkhill and appointed McHenry postmaster." 5

Business directories used both Independence and Sparkhill as addresses. Talk about an identity crisis!

Sidney was discontinued on March 20, 1882. On July 3, 1882, Farwell Post Office went out of existence. Sparkhill was discontinued on October 18, 1887. On April 20, 1899, Walter S. Ritchie secured a post office named Chipeta, it was discontinued on October 17 of that same year. The townspeople changed the name of the town to Mammoth City when the Mammoth Mine was discovered. Then when the Mount Hope

Mine revived some mining interest the town called itself Mount Hope. Neither name stuck, and eventually the original name, Independence was revived. By this time, there was no post office at all. Despite petitions from the townspeople, all mail for Independence was received at Aspen.

CHAPTER FIVE  
MINING THE ORE

In January of 1881, the Farwell Company began operating a fifteen stamp mill. A stamp mill is a machine which crushes the ore to powder by means of heavy stamps or pestles. Each stamp weighed 850 pounds, and dropped ninety times per minute. The mill was run by steam and water power. Since coal was not available, timber was used to stoke the boiler. The surrounding forests were stripped bare to provide fuel for the stamp mills. As a conservation effort in the 1930's, the area was replanted with seedlings.

Gold was extracted by shoveling the ore into long iron troughs called mortars. As it was pulverized by the stamps, a constant flow of water moved the ore through an iron screen and down to two sets of copper plated sloping tables, the lower set of tables usually covered with coarse blankets. The Farwell Company's stamp mill had copper plates twelve feet long and 400 feet of blankets. The addition of quicksilver in the mortars caused the precious metal to bond to it, while the tailings were carried away. Then the amalgam (combined metals) was heated to separate it again and the quicksilver was recycled. The blankets and mortars were cleaned daily to recover all the bits of gold possible. By May of 1881, at least sixty-six mines were being worked. In September of the same year, the mill was

enlarged to thirty stamps. Nearly \$100,000.00 worth of gold ore was milled before it played out. The U.S. Bureau of Mines estimated a total district production of \$190,000.00. The mill was shut down on January 21, 1882. It operated sporadically for the next forty years, but in 1912 it was dismantled. It was partially torn down in the 1920's when Independence Pass road was improved by the state highway department. In its day it was the most complete of any in the state. Tramways connected to the mine tunnels transported the ore directly to self-feeding crushers, and from there to the stamps. Its estimated capability was sixty tons per twenty-four hour day.

Maris & Middleton's stamp mill, a rival company, treated 2,000 tons of ore with a gross value of \$70,000.00. At that time, in July of 1881, it was the highest average, not only in Colorado, but of all the gold producing countries of the world for a like number of tons.

In early September of 1881, Farwell Consolidated announced a reduction of the men's wages from \$3.50 to \$3.00 a day. The men went on strike and the mines were shut down for five days.

By 1883, there was little prospecting going on. In early 1885, Farwell Consolidated leased to Captain William L. Davis (a brother-in-law of Joseph Pulitzer) all their mining interest and control of the now fifty stamp mill for one year. He made \$30,000.00. It was hoped that this renewal of activity would bring jobs and prosperity to the waning economy of the town. It was not to be. The 1885 edition of Crofutt's Grip-Sack Guide of Colorado referred to "Sparkill [sic]

(formerly Independence) [as] a small mining camp of more houses than people." By 1888, there were less than one hundred people still living there.

## CHAPTER SIX

### TRANSPORTATION

Of prime importance in any mining camp was transportation. Supply lines were essential to furnish the camps with the necessary equipment to work the mines. Furthermore, if the ore could not be transported, it was not much use to anyone. Therefore, a link to the outside world was vital. One source of revenue in a mining camp was fulfilling this need. In March of 1880, the Twin Lakes and Roaring Fork Toll Road Company was formed. It was promoted by B. Clark Wheeler, an Aspen pioneer. He and some of his associates contracted with Dr. J. E. Rice (Doc) Rice of Twin Lakes to undertake the project. Charles L. Moore was employed to survey the road route. He was one of the first men to come to Independence and quickly became an important member of the community. He taught school there, and also used his surveying knowledge to help untangle mining claim disputes. Moore was a Pitkin County commissioner at the time he was employed by Doc Rice, and in 1884 served as the town constable. Rice was paid \$10,000 for the job. The Independence Pass trail was improved enough for horses, and they started collecting tolls while they tried to raise enough cash to build a wagon road. Constructing a stage route from Leadville to Aspen was quite a feat. As one report in 1880 described the journey:

"As far as Selden's ranch, a wagon road has been constructed...At Selden's the road ends in a trail, which is

well marked but very rough and marshy to the foot of the range, where a zig-zag ascent, reaching far above timberline, is commenced. The rapidity of the rise and the uncertainty of the trail is evidenced by the score or more of dead animals which have missed their footing and rolled back into the valley....The descent into Independence gulch surpasses anything the wildest imagination can conjure. The narrow path seems almost perpendicular, if indeed it does not lean a little backward. Many a burro has ceased from troubling before he reached the bottom. At Independence, accommodations can be obtained, meals 75 cents, oats 10 cents per pound. The grass, naturally luxuriant, is fed down by the stock.

Leaving Independence, for 20 miles the trail leads across more rocks and swamps than any other hundred miles in the world. It is plain enough there is no danger of getting lost, as where the biggest rocks and the deepest sloughs are, there is the trail. A prominent feature is the toll bridges, wide enough only for man and horse...Riding that 25 miles is out of the question. It must be walked and the horse led with great care, or some legs will be damaged." 6

With the spring thaw the miners were anxious to get to their mines, regardless of the fact this was the time of year when the danger of snow slides was the highest. By May of 1881, at least thirty people a day were paying a twenty-five cent fee every three or four miles to use the road.

The Independence Pass men were eager to widen their road to Aspen before the public became too accustomed to the longer, but already established Cottonwood-Taylor Pass road. Pearl Pass, despite a 4,915 foot vertical fall was also carrying freight from the railroad at Crested Butte to Aspen and Ashcroft. Everyone wanted to reach Aspen. It was now well recognized as the long sought after "second Leadville." In fact, even before the road was quite finished, a group of Leadville bakers, eager to take advantage of the market in Aspen

for fresh bakery goods tried moving a huge oven there.

"A sled was purchased, on which the furnace was securely fastened...with half a dozen jacks as motive power. The trail soon narrowed to such an extent that the projection sides of the oven stuck, and it was found necessary to excavate several feet at each side to admit its progress. At night the weary bakers slept in the oven...Meanwhile, an unexpected difficulty arose. The spring tide of travel had already set in, and several jack trains were not long in following the bakers' caravan. They were not long in catching up with it, either, and the awful fact dawned upon them that they could not pass it, but would have to linger in the rear. This filled them with sorrow and disgust, for they were in a hurry, and like most travelers into a new mining camp, imagined if they didn't get there right away, all the land would be staked off, all the trades overcrowded, and all the provisions eaten up. So it looked as though three or four rainbows and all their varied hues, particularly blue, had settled on the spot. Then another and another jack train came hurrying up, and stopping at the rear of their unfortunate predecessors, inquired anxiously;

'What's up?'

'A G-- D--- pie factory is blocking the road!'

'Well, why don't you push the ----- thing off?'

'Can't do it, it's too hell-fired big!'

The oven isn't at Aspen yet, and isn't liable to be before late this week, and the pack trains still accumulate in the rear, until the road for nearly a mile is black with shivering, swearing, howling men." 7

This event intensified the importance of an improved road from Leadville to Aspen. The Farwell Company hired men to help put the road in shape since the Toll Road Company was suffering from a lack of funds. By July the whole town of Independence plus about seventy-five employees of the Twin Lakes and Roaring Fork Toll Road Company worked feverishly to cross the Divide before the August rains began. Pitkin County residents completed the last miles into Aspen in October. Snow fell heavily the following week, but the Toll Company men were

gratified when stage and freight traffic immediately switched from Cottonwood, Taylor, and Pearl Passes.

Burros and cows were brought up from their summer grazing grounds. On narrow trails a long line of burros, loaded with ore sacks would delicately pick their way. A burro wrangler rode behind on a horse, his pockets filled with small rocks. If the lead burros got out of line and started bunching together at some uncertain part of the road, the wrangler would stand up on his stirrups and with incredible accuracy pelt the burros with rocks until they were all proceeding in a straight line again. Dogs accompanied the caravans, nipping at the heels of any burro inclined to stall. When the packs were removed the burros would roll over rubbing their sore backs on the ground, tiny feet kicking up clouds of dust. Burro transport was priced as high as \$100.00 per ton, but competition later reduced the price to \$25.00.

Wall and Witter had started a daily stagecoach service to Leadville in June of 1881. Two more companies; McDonale and McLain, and Carsons Stage and Express Line quickly entered the lucrative field. During the summer of 1882, the hairpin turns were banked and broadened so that stagecoaches could travel at full speed. As they came hurtling down the perilous pass, well trained dogs, barking loudly, ran ahead of these madly flying coaches to warn upcoming traffic to get out of the way. Traffic flowed on the unpaved two lane

road throughout the winter. In fall they changed from stage coaches to sleds. It was kept open continuously from 1881 until 1887 when the railroads reached the Roaring Fork Valley.

"In going to Aspen, the traveler will find that the discomforts are not nearly as great as usual in mountain-stage travel. Carson's lines start from both Leadville and Granite, and either line may be selected. Both lines run to Twin Lakes, where the mountain wagon leaves for a trip over the range. There are frequent relays of horses, and in crossing the range, six animals are put to work. Mr. Carson has just put on a complete outfit of powerful horses.

I have never before realized the benefits to civilization of a modest piece of wire. When Morse sent his first message by telegraph, "Verily what God hath wrought," he might have said something about wire. If a mountain teamster breaks his harness, he mends it with wire. If he breaks his wagon tongue, he mends it with wire. If he cracks an axle, he mends it with wire. If a spring gives way, he mends it with wire. His tool chest is complete with a monkey wrench and a bunch of wire. If his wagon were to go to pieces, he would reconstruct it with wire. If a horse were to break its leg, he would bandage it with wire and go ahead unconcernedly. "What became of the telegraph line to Crested Butte?" we asked a teamster. He closed one eye, whistled a soft meditative refrain and said, "The freighters used it all up." Between Aspen and Twin Lakes we met 40 freight teams, two jack trains of 75 jacks, and stages with 29 passengers." 8

The pack trains sometimes stretched one to one and a half miles long. If it became necessary to pull off the road to do some necessary repairs, a train might have to wait hours to get back in line.

In wagon freighting generally there was much competition, with rates usually not being as important as expeditious service. The criterion for the best driver was whether he could deliver the biggest cargo in the shortest possible time and return for another. He was expected to do his own loading and unloading. If his trip was long, he used the stations established to give him and his animals a night's rest. On the steep upgrades the

driver might use a team as large as twenty animals, hitched five abreast. He then rode the left wheel mule, telling his team which way to go by means of jerks or a steady pull in the line. Often he hauled two wagons hooked together, with just enough space between to allow him to negotiate sharp curves. His vehicle had large wooden blocks for brake shoes, which he applied from his saddle by means of a rope reaching to the large wooden poles used as lever arms. The driver reckoned the average life of his wagon and team to be three years. He had to be especially skilled on the many narrow roads with turns so sharp that the only way to go around was to get up speed, bunch the animals, and allow momentum to carry the wagons safely through. Under such conditions upgrade, he used an assistant to direct mules placed behind the vehicles and harnessed to a long push pole. In winter the teamster replaced his wheels with runners and shod his animals with calks or, in rare instances, bolted to their hoofs flat board showshoes equipped with calks. While small freighting outfits were numerous, the great bulk of the traffic fell to a few large concerns. Expenses were high, but so were the profits.

For passengers there was stagecoach service. Of coaches operating through difficult terrain, typical perhaps was the Georgetown-Leadville line...Its chief difficulties came in the winter, when it used sleighs equipped with a unique snowshoe-like brake, to run over the top of the mountains to connect with stages on either side. It employed three to six men on this portion of the route to help the homemade plow keep the road clear and, when needed, to pull the horses back onto the hard-beaten trail quickly enough to prevent their becoming buried in the snow. The drivers wrapped their feet in burlap, warmer than overshoes and less likely to slip. In spring the company's chief concern was with washouts and unsafe bridges; its stages carried long bridge planks to use in getting across dangerous places. 9

The arrival of the railroad dealt a heavy blow to Independence's fading economy by focusing transportation attention downvalley. Although there were occasional spurts of mining activity, Independence was a dying town. In 1912, J.R. "Jack" Williams, a resident of over

twenty years, finally left. He was the last known person to live in Independence.

The last to go was one of the first who came. Williams had helped build one of the first log cabins at Independence. He ran a jack train to earn money to finance his prospecting. As he said, "he earned money with his jacks to plant in his prospect holes." 1

Williams was once paid \$100.00 for bringing two children from Leadville to Aspen. The children rode in box panniers slung over a burro, while Williams and the parents walked the sixty-five mile trek. During one of his prospecting trips in 1882, the leader of a government surveying party asked Jack the name of the mountains. Upon hearing they were unnamed, he wrote "Williams Mountains" across his map. Jack claimed that the residents called the mountain north of Independence Pass, Belden Mountain, and the mountain south of the Pass, Doc. Rice Mountain to honor the two men. The former for the discoverer of the original strike that founded the town, and the latter for the man who built the toll road.

In the late 1880's, Williams lived at his ranch in Snowmass Creek, but spent his summers living at Independence, prospecting, and acting as caretaker for the mill. He also bought land in northeast Aspen, part of which became the Williams Addition in May of 1889. Access to the Cowenhaven Tunnel was on this piece of property. The sale of that small parcel of land produced more profit than all his prospecting had done.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INDEPENDENCE TODAY

Independence and its fate was typical of the mining camps in general. They sprung up quickly in a remote area, led to further exploration and expansion, and within half a dozen years its boom or bust fate was decided.

There are several reasons why Independence was short-lived. The gold played out, it was difficult to get supplies to the camp, and the hard winters discouraged further settlement of the area. A decisive factor was that the coming of the railroad to Aspen ended the importance of Independence as the main stage stop between Leadville and Aspen.

Today a concerted effort is underfoot to preserve and protect what is left of the log cabins at Independence. Time, neglect, fire and snow have all taken their toll on the relics of this once thriving gold camp. During the winter of 1976 the last standing boarding house burned to the ground due to the carelessness of cross country skiers building a fire on the wooden floor.

Independence's ruins are also threatened by souvenir hunters. One attempt at a solution for this problem was a series of signs, a la Burma Shave jingles, put up along the trail through the site of the town.

If you like this village  
Its treasures don't pillage!

Welcome to the town of Independence  
Take pictures...take time  
But leave the town for your descendants.

Since we won the west and built this town  
One hundred years have passed.  
But if you grab that board and leave  
None of this will last.

The ghost in this here town  
Will haunt them that tears it down.

A ghost of the west  
Resides in this shack  
Please let him rest  
In peace -- intact.

Within three weeks of their erection, those signs were torn down and carted away by vandals. Restoration plans are difficult because there are still active mining claims whose owners have to permit activity there. Between Main Street and the river is still privately owned. The Forest Service is attempting to buy or trade the land, so that it can be preserved. The Colorado Legislature has designated the site as part of a six mile "scenic highway" area. In 1974 it was put on the National Register of Historic Sites. It is one of very few significant mining camps in the state where any standing ruins are left. It is also one of the most accessible. Highway 82 follows almost the same route as the old stage road.

In July of 1982, through the unceasing efforts of Ramona Markalunas, "the heart, mind, and backbone" 11 of the entire

Independence Restoration Project, the Aspen Historical Society was granted a special use permit by the U.S. Forest Service as part of a Preservation Plan established jointly by the Historical Society, the Colorado Preservation Office, and the Forest Service. There are twenty-four sites on which work will be done, ranging from clean up work to actual construction. Seven sites will be left as they are. The first cabin to be restored was for the "resident ghost", an innovative program in which a caretaker spends the summer months living at the townsite, conducting visitors on tours, and by his/her presence, discouraging further vandalism to the ruins.

The first Resident Ghost was Jere Rood who took up residency on July 1, 1982 in a tent. On July 10, the Ghost Town Club of Colorado sent a large crew. Under the direction of Oscar Haberman, long-time volunteer, the Ghost Cabin was made habitable. Presently, the cabin is complete with 1878 wood stove, Coleman lanterns, double bed kitchen table and 'chipmunk-proof' cabinet for storing food. Built of hand-hewn logs, the cabin has two windows, and two entrances; no running water, electricity or gas. Cooking is done over either a wood burning or gasoline stove. Drinking water must be hauled from the fresh water spring approximately 100 yards downhill from the cabin.

Work is being done on the old General Store which will be used as a museum to display artifacts and other historical objects. There are not enough original logs remaining, so other lumber must be used. Apart from the General Store and Ghost Cabin all other buildings will

be preserved with original materials up to their potential. Due to vandalism and deterioration of the wood, this means that many buildings will not be able to be fully restored. All preservation work is being done by volunteers. During the summer, one day a week, local residents go up to work on the buildings. A "Preservation Contract" is executed by a group of individuals who undertake the responsibility of preserving a selected site within a set period of time. The Historical Society provides the material and supervision. The volunteers are asked to bring their own tools.

Every year in late July, or early August, the resident ghost hosts the High Rockies Shin-dig. This is a fund raiser for the Preservation Fund of Independence. There is a barbecue, music, bingo, square dancing, raffle, volleyball, and blacksmith exhibition. Guests may dress as their favorite mining character and a good time is had by all.

Independence is a visual reminder of our past history. Men and women came to seek their fortunes in the gold fields of the west and by so doing helped to develop a country. They deserve our respect and remembrance. A ghost town such as Independence must be preserved, not only as a testament to the vigor of these hardy pioneers, but to give future generations an appreciation of the spirit and fortitude that drives mankind to seek new frontiers, overcome adversity, and gain another foothold to the future.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Frank L. Wentworth, Aspen on the Roaring Fork, pp.43-45.
2. The Aspen Times, July 2, 1882.
3. The Aspen Times, Sept. 17, 1881.
4. Duane A. Smith, Rocky Mountain Mining Camps, The Urban Frontier, p. 227.
5. The Aspen Times, Feb. 18, 1882.
6. Frank L. Wentworth, Aspen on the Roaring Fork, p.70.
7. The Leadville Chronicle, May 15, 1881.
8. Frank L. Wentworth, Aspen on the Roaring Fork, pp.125-126.
9. William S. Greever, The Bonanza West, pp.200-201.
10. Len Shoemaker, Roaring Fork Valley, p.59.
11. Sonny M. Armstrong and Jeremy Bowman, A Ghost's Guide to Independence, unpublished material.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Fossett, Frank. Colorado Its Gold and Silver Mines, Farms and Stock Ranges, and Health and Pleasure Resorts. Tourists Guide to the Rocky Mountains. New York: C.G.Crawford, 1879.
2. Crofutt, George A. Crofutt's Grip-Sack Guide of Colorado Vol. II. Omaha: Overland Publishing Co., 1885.
3. Wentworth, Frank L. Aspen on the Roaring Fork. Denver: Sundance Publications, Ltd. 1976.
4. Smith, Duane A. Rocky Mountain Mining Camps, The Urban Frontier. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1967.
5. Hollister, Ovando James. The Mines of Colorado. New York: Promontory Press. 1974.
6. Greever, William S. The Bonanza West, The Story of the Western Mining Rushes, 1848-1900. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1963.
7. Shoemaker, Len. Roaring Fork Valley. Denver: Sundance Publications, Ltd. 1973.
8. The Aspen Times (Aspen, Colorado). Scattered issues 1880s.
9. The Leadville Chronicle (Leadville, Colorado) May 15, 1881.
10. Gardiner, M.D., Charles Fox. Doctor at Timberline. Caldwell: Caxton Printers, Ltd. 1938.
11. Armstrong, Sonny M. and Brown, Jeremy. A Ghost's Guide to Independence. Aspen Historical Society Archives: unpublished material. Aspen.
12. Aspen Historical Society Archives. Independence file: unpublished material. Aspen.