Hell Or High Water
Adams, Eilean

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Chapter 2  Who Was James White?

Despite the bizarre manner of his arrival, Callville’s unexpected visitor was, in fact, quite an ordinary thirty-year-old prospector, who, less than four months before, had been making his way through the Rocky Mountains in Colorado Territory in search of gold. Since leaving home to seek his fortune, he had been through a number of adventures not uncommon in the American West, the last of which had consigned him to the silty Colorado.

James White was born on November 19, 1837, in the small town of Rome, New York. Neither his fair complexion, light hair, blue eyes, and sturdy build, nor his surname, nor any sort of family history reveals his ethnic heritage; one guess is as good as another. The only clue is that his grandparents were Connecticut Yankees who had come to the American colonies before the Revolution.

James’s father, Daniel, was born in Connecticut in 1789, one-and-a-half years after the state had ratified the new Constitution and six months after George Washington had become the first president of the United States. The 1790 census counted Daniel as one of the 3,929,214 people who constituted the entire known (white) population of the country. The cities of New York and Philadelphia were no
larger than towns and the roads that stretched between them merely stagecoach ruts.

James's mother, Mary, was born in 1794. In 1810, she and Daniel married and soon started west. They settled in Rome, New York, where Dan worked as a carpenter. Over the next twenty-six years, Mary produced twelve children, of which James was the youngest.

No family documents or written recollections exist to reveal anything about their lives in Rome, but the town itself and its canal furnish a few general clues. Rome was a growing town, and the decision to build the Erie Canal gave it considerable importance. In 1817, after years of planning, groundbreaking ceremonies for the canal were held in Rome; from then until the official and festive opening in October 1819, the town was alive with the activity and excitement generated by this great engineering feat. The resultant commerce offered plenty of work for a good carpenter. From what little is known, the White family was neither prosperous nor burdened with poverty.

In 1840, Daniel White, possibly encouraged by the great pageant of westward migration before his eyes, decided to move on again. There was less work than in Rome's young heyday, and the promise of more in the new territories of the West must have been a compelling force. Whatever the reason, Daniel, Mary, ten-year-old Joshua, seven-year-old Martha, five-year-old Jane, and baby James, not yet three, settled in Pike Creek Village on the shore of Lake Michigan in Wisconsin Territory after what was, in those days, a difficult and often dangerous journey. In 1848, Wisconsin became a state, the twenty-ninth, and two years later Pike Creek Village became Kenosha.

Kenosha schools were models of excellence in their time, but Joshua and James had scant opportunity to attend them. Daniel put strong emphasis on the nineteenth century work ethic and did not consider even a high school education a priority for his sons. The boys went to work instead. In any case, young James was more interested in physical activities and practical pursuits than in books; he lacked a contemplative nature. He did, however, possess a common-sense intelligence, and this, combined with a stubborn determination, fueled his major ambitions: one, to be free and independent and, two, to make his fortune in gold out West. In 1861, he left Kenosha. Leaving the family home announced that he was no longer his mother's baby James or his
father’s run-of-the-mill carpenter’s apprentice, but his own man, eager for adventure, with a modest “grubstake” eked out of hard-earned and slowly acquired savings.

His railroad ticket took him as far as the line went: St. Joseph, Missouri. There, Russell, Majors, and Waddell advertised their Overland Coach to Denver: for $125 they would take a lucky passenger over the Oregon Trail to Ft. Kearney, along the South Platte River to the Upper California Crossing, and then to the way station at Julesburg, where the Denver stages turned south. It was a fast journey, a mere twenty bone-shaking days, but it was too expensive a waste of White’s money.

The alternative was joining one of the wagon trains which started at St. Joseph to go to Colorado, Wyoming, and along the trail to Oregon. There was always room for another hand, someone willing to do chores, scout the trail, fix broken wagons, shoot game, or handle any of the other jobs that were part of the westward push in the 1860s.

White arrived at last in Denver, that ultimate of Wild West towns. Denver! It had everything: bankers and merchants, blacksmiths and carpenters, joiners, cooperers, painters and stonecutters, not to mention saloons, houses of ill repute, gambling dens, and lynchings, even an enterprising carpenter named Joe Walley, maker of “pinch-toe” coffins for prospectors who left town feet first. Fashionable Larimer Street boasted “smart” establishments whose wicked attractions gave the Ladies Aid Society severe competition. By the time White got there, however, the much heralded Pike’s Peak gold “find” had been exposed as a hoax; there were almost as many “Go Backs” headed east as newcomers on the road west.

There is little question that White was a greenhorn with a hole in his pocket. His money trickled away, spent on “bargain” prospecting tools and mining claims urged on new suckers by old ones. He departed the magic city just one step ahead of total pennilessness and made his way (with a few thousand others) to Virginia City, Nevada, land of the Comstock Lode.

Virginia City was nothing more than an enormous mining camp clinging precariously to a hillside. It had a huge population in constant flux; if you weren’t looking for silver, you were looking for a way out. Neither activity was very rewarding. And those awful little
mines everywhere, hellholes waiting to collapse on unsuspecting heads—which they did with terrible frequency. You wonder how many dreams vanished amid the rubble of that incredible community.

But—sound the trumpet—the army actually came to the rescue! It was almost farcical. In the late fall of 1861, the Fifth California Volunteer Infantry came to town, looking to enlist the broke, the hungry, and the disillusioned into the Union Army, offering a hundred dollars to anyone who would sign on the dotted line. The recruiters were smart; they arrived during the first winter snowfall. They were even smarter when they told the lucky enlistees, after they had signed up, that they wouldn’t get their bonus until they mustered out in three years. Still, things must have been bad; they had plenty of takers, and James White was one of them. The experience would not be edifying.