Chapter 4  The Road to Gold

The major trail through New Mexico Territory led past the hated Fort Craig stockade at Las Cruces, along the Rio Grande, and finally to Santa Fe. White continued along the Santa Fe Trail, by way of the mountain leg that runs through Trinidad in Colorado Territory, and returned to Denver. He found nothing to keep him there, and, in the fall, he went east to Atchison, Kansas, in the company of a Captain Turnley and his family. Either that winter or the following spring, White went on to Fort Dodge, where he hired on to drive stage on the Santa Fe Trail for the Barlow and Sanderson Line.

White covered the run from Fort Dodge to Cimarron Crossing, the point where the trail divided, going south across the Arkansas River and into the shortcut known as the Cimarron Cutoff, or west along the mountain leg. Among his acquaintances was another young gold seeker named George Strole.

The two men became friends, having in common both the search for gold and fortune and the acceptance of mundane jobs when luck deserted them. Few young men came west seeking to be stagecoach drivers. They asked no questions of each other and shared only sparse glimpses into their pasts; they spent much of their time cussing Indians (and learning which tribe was which) and discussing gold prospecting.
Since White had already experienced the joys and disappointments of Cripple Creek, Denver, and Virginia City, he tended to be more skeptical, but he was not altogether immune to the lure of prospecting.

Just such a lure presented itself in the person of one Captain Charles Baker, who showed up in Fort Dodge in the spring of 1867. James White later said he knew little about the captain’s past, and that was not surprising; Baker was—and still is—a mysterious figure. As late as 1971, Colorado historians believed he was a southerner and ipso facto a Confederate officer, but after considerable research they were apparently not even certain of his real identity. Regardless of the holes in Baker’s past, however, his activities in the early 1860s were no mystery.

By the start of that decade, a number of gold seekers had gone into the San Juan Mountains via northern New Mexico Territory, traveling from Santa Fe to Abiquiu, along the Trappers’ Trail and over Sangre de Cristo Pass, thence onto the Spanish route to the San Juan country. Two of them, Albert Pfeiffer and a Mr. Mercure, in their notes on the San Juan Mountains, published by the Santa Fe Gazette in the spring of 1860, spoke of its many gold deposits, echoing William Gilpin’s descriptions of the San Juan’s “metalliferous band of metals” which appeared in an 1859 publication, Guide to the Kansas Gold Mines at Pike’s Peak. Historians believe that Baker learned of the gold potential from these sources, but even they admit to a certain vagueness about Baker’s first foray into that area.

More interesting are two accounts of that trip, one of which expresses definite opinions about Baker’s character: “In 1860 California Gulch was swarming with placer miners. Among them . . . was Charles Baker, a restless, adventurous, inpecunious man who was always in search of something new. He entertained extravagant theories about the riches of the country beyond and at last prevailed upon S. B. Kellogg and F.R. Rice to outfit him for a prospecting expedition.”

The second was Baker’s own account of his journey, written in a letter to the Santa Fe Gazette on November 29, 1860. After a description of some preliminary efforts near the Sierra La Plata, he says,

I ascended Lake Fork to its head and crossed the range to the head waters of the Río de los Animos, which stream flows south into the Río San Juan . . . . In these mountains, on the waters of the Río de los Animos are the gold
mines discovered by myself and party in August last. They are extensive gulches and bar diggings, and I believe them to be richer than any mines hitherto discovered to the North-East.

In October, Baker arrived in Abiquiu, and

in order to determine the practicability of reaching these mines from some central points on the frontier of New Mexico . . . I met with a cordial reception from H. Mercure, who kindly furnished me with all the necessary information, and in ten days after we reached the mines, about one hundred and seventy-five miles distant . . . over the only good practical road to this district . . . organized in accordance with the usual mining customs—claimed a town site in a beautiful park in the center of the mining district.

He writes that he then went to the San Miguel River, thence to the Dolores River and Rio de los Marcus (Mancos), and finally back to the Rio de los Animos “amid falling snow.”

Other accounts reveal several tidbits of additional facts, such as the main field was located in Baker’s Park (now the site of Silverton) and its environs, where eleven districts with some two hundred claims were organized, several town sites were laid out, and various claims made to open a toll road over the old trail from Baker’s Park to Abiquiu. Whatever their merit, these accounts gave Baker enough credibility that some even urged the abrogation of Indian title to the lands being settled there.

Baker left Denver in December of 1860 with an entourage which included women and children. After enduring incredible weather conditions over the Continental Divide (it was amazing both that the group kept on and that they had such faith in Baker), those members of the party who did not turn back reached the Rio de los Animos (the Animas River) in March, built a bridge, and started north toward Baker’s Park. Most of the company stopped at Castle Rock, where the ladies were “made comfortable”; they called the place Camp Pleasant.

Baker and some of the men continued north. Several of the men who had remained with the ladies set out in the spring to search for Baker and his party; they reported that “they were living in brush shanties and had so wintered. Their diggings were nine miles upriver
where is now Eureka . . . they made some sluices, but had collected very little gold.” These joyless events, amid some harrowing experiences with the wild winter snows and various alarms about the Utes, turned the whole venture into a fiasco, and the adventurous group scattered, east to Denver or south to Santa Fe. Baker and a few others remained at Eureka Gulch until fall; historians believe Baker left to join the Rebs, but the reports are vague. There is apparently no record of Charles Baker from 1862 until he turned up in Fort Dodge in the early spring of 1867.

Whatever had happened in those five years, Baker had not lost his enthusiasm for the San Juan Mountains, but he had revised his requirement for followers. He applied his silver tongue to the Barlow and Sanderson men for good reason; he had a problem. Indians, he said, had stolen his horses and supplies, and he needed help to replace them. His plan for accomplishing this was to steal as many horses as possible from a small band of Indians camping on Mulberry Creek a short distance southeast of Fort Dodge. Although this was apparently a common way to acquire horses, the fact that White and Strole agreed readily to the idea indicates either that Baker was a consummate Pied Piper or, more likely, that Indians were always considered fair game for anything.

Besides White and Strole, another adventurous young man named Joe Goodfellow signed on for both the raid and the prospecting trip into the San Juan country. Baker scouted the Indian camp and convinced the three men that the job was child’s play. So they met to carry out their dubious plan; however, Goodfellow came up missing at the crucial moment. The other three went on without him.

They arrived at a small willow grove near Mulberry Creek; the “hostiles,” as promised, were in camp and apparently rather careless with their security measures. The men tethered their horses and after dark crept closer to wait for the camp to settle down. They needed light for their raid, so it was not until near midnight, when the moon rose, that they were able to move in among the horses. Their own expertise with horses allowed them to move about without spooking the animals. They knew that none of them was as skilled as the Indians in bareback riding, but they had the element of surprise in their favor. And if they could capture a few head and scatter the rest, they were certain they could escape.
And so they did. They cut out the desired horses and let the others go, rode hellbent for the willow grove, where they transferred to their own mounts, and rode on with their four-legged loot. They kept up a steady pace, eventually crossed the Arkansas, and continued to a prearranged campground beyond Cimarron Crossing. The Indians, alerted by the white men’s shots that had sent their remaining horses in all directions, tried to follow, but it was useless; Baker and company had too good a head start.

After a short rest, the men continued along the mountain leg of the Santa Fe Trail toward Bent’s Fort. At a well-hidden camp near the Caches, they were rewarded with the sudden appearance of Joe Goodfellow, full of friendly enthusiasm for their upcoming prospecting trip and airily expecting the other three to share the Indian stock with him on even terms. His inclusion in the party was naturally the captain’s decision as its leader; Baker okayed Goodfellow’s coming with them but refused to give him even one animal. Not surprisingly, White and Strole were in complete agreement.

There is an interesting postscript to the Mulberry Creek raid: a rumor that the Indians in retaliation set fire to the Barlow and Sanderson stables at Fort Dodge and helped themselves to the horses; it’s a great story, apocryphal or not.

The four men, with their stolen Indian horses, rode to Colorado City, a sort of gateway to the San Juan country, where good provisions and animals could be bought or traded. When it was all sorted out, Goodfellow had been forced to pay hard cash to the others for his mount and pack animal, and Baker had instructed them all in exactly what they needed for prospecting. There was never any doubt who was in charge.

After about a week, the party arrived at a small settlement on the upper Arkansas named Brown’s Creek. A storm blew in on their first night, leaving them snowbound and forcing them to lay over in the local schoolhouse for several days. This delay apparently exacerbated the tensions that had been building since the incident at Mulberry Creek; when the weather cleared and the party was preparing to leave, some trivial dispute erupted into a shooting match between Joe Goodfellow and White. Apparently a number of shots were exchanged, but the two must have been poor marksmen, for only Joe Goodfellow was hit and
only in his foot. Captain Baker arranged to leave Goodfellow to recuperate with a family named Sprague. The other three continued on over the Continental Divide and into the San Juan Valley, along the Animas River, and thence to Baker’s Park.

Here Captain Baker was on familiar turf. The party prospected in Eureka Gulch and Baker’s Park itself, but their luck was minimal. Baker proposed going via the Dolores and the Mancos down to the San Juan River, where he believed the placer diggings would be better than the Animas. White and Strole, unfamiliar with the territory, naturally bowed to Baker’s greater experience and knowledge. He carried a compass and a memorandum notebook and assured them that from the San Juan, they could head north for further prospecting on the Grand River. The Grand (which on today’s map appears as the upper reach of the Colorado) rises in the Rocky Mountains and flows southwest to join the Green River from Wyoming. Baker was confident and convincing, and the lure of the yellow metal remained unabated.

They gathered animals, tools, and provisions and headed for the San Juan River. By now July was coming to a close. They had celebrated Independence Day in Baker’s Park, gone fishing in a couple of the many mountain lakes near the Dolores’s headwaters, and followed the Mancos River Valley, where they admired the ruins of Indian cliff houses below Mesa Verde without knowing what they were. Finally, they came to the San Juan River near Four Corners, where today Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico meet.

The men got to work on placer diggings along the riverbanks, moving northwest by west and following the meandering river. Where the river entered a steep-walled and forbidding canyon, they came to an abrupt and discouraging halt. There was no place to walk or ride and no bottomland for prospecting.

This apparent dead end called for a crucial decision by Baker. They could, of course, retrace their steps to Baker’s Park and follow a known route to the Grand River, but the captain’s intuition (or possibly his ego) convinced him that they could get to the Grand from this point on the San Juan. It was simply a matter of finding the shortest overland route to the north that would allow them to strike either the Colorado or the Grand at the nearest point. The prospect of travel
through this rugged and desolate country was daunting, but White and Strole apparently remained willing to follow Baker’s lead.

The most obvious route lay through a large wash just a short distance from the San Juan’s canyon. Along its eastern edge ran an imposing ridge; to the west were smaller ridges and canyons in a great jumble. It was rough country, and water would be scarce, but it must have seemed worth the risk, for they swam the horses across to the north bank and left the San Juan behind.

Baker kept an eye out for any breaks which could lead them generally northwest, the direction where he was certain the river lay. At the first break, they turned west. The contours of the land took them over near-mountainous terrain that was hard on the horses’ legs and feet; they were funneled into cul-de-sacs and forced in ever-changing directions. They occasionally stumbled upon Indian trails. They spent a night on the trail. Finally, despite the detours and delays, they found a river, but Baker was unwilling to commit to giving it a name. In any case, this river was hundreds of feet below them down a sheer cliff, and from their vantage point, they could see that it offered scant bottom-land along its course. A side canyon presented itself, and their pressing need for water drove them to find a way down its steep slopes.

There was water at the bottom; it was not a running stream but a spring healthy enough to satisfy both men and animals. Their short stay in this little canyon provided rest and gave Baker a chance to explore the possibility of exiting it to the north to reach a more accessible part of the river. Unfortunately, the north slope of the side canyon was too sheer to allow them a way out. Once again it became necessary for Baker to reassess their position. He finally determined that their only choice was to retrace their steps to the San Juan. It was a disappointing decision.

The following day they packed the animals and started out of the canyon by the same route they had entered, with Baker, as usual, leading the way up the steep slope and over the top. Without warning, shots broke the silence. Ambush! Baker fell, mortally wounded, before the Indians’ guns. White and Strole, far enough behind to have escaped the first shots, peered over the top and realized immediately that the captain was dead and they were hopelessly outnumbered. All they could do was retreat into the canyon and try to save themselves.
The two men did not panic, but they lost no time in removing as much as possible from the horses before abandoning them: overcoats, lariats, guns, ammunition, and flour. From what Baker had told them about the Indians in this territory, they were sure their attackers were Utes and would pause long enough to claim the horses, possibly even to mutilate Baker’s body, giving them time to escape by the only route open to them—down the canyon to the river.

They made reasonably good time, pausing occasionally to listen for sounds of pursuit and encouraged by the silence. As the sun set and the darkness approached, the moon gave them enough light to make it to the river’s edge. This river, whatever its name, was broader and deeper than the San Juan, but it was smooth and unthreatening. A hurried discussion brought them quickly to the conclusion that the river offered the only hope of survival. They hastily gathered some driftwood logs and, using their lariat ropes, made a crude raft. It was, they thought, just good enough to keep them afloat, and they were anxious to leave this side canyon behind as quickly as possible. White remembered from his days in the army at Fort Yuma that there were many upriver settlements where, with luck, they would be rescued. Strole, from St. Louis, was no stranger to rivers; each carried his own brand of optimism into the currents of the muddy river on that quiet, moonlit night.