5. Denver and the Rockies

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SPIRIT THAT FORM'D THIS SCENE
Written in Platte Cañon, Colorado

Spirit that form'd this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit—we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own;
Was't charged against my chants they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicatessé?
The lyrist's measur'd beat, the wrought-out temple's grace—
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou that revellest here—spirit that form'd this scene,
They have remember'd thee.

Leaves of Grass, 1881
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Denver & the Rockies

Denver in 1879 was prospering. Silver strikes at Leadville and elsewhere were creating new wealth in the area, the smelters were busy, the railroads, growing in number, were bringing in a great trade, along with thousands of people seeking health cures. The city was burgeoning; the census the next year would show a population of 35,600. In 1879 Denver had a streetcar system and two telephone companies, and was about to install electric lights.

The three-story American House, at the corner of Blake and Sixth Streets, where Whitman’s party stayed, was perhaps the city’s finest hotel. Built in 1868, just as railroads were about to arrive in Denver, it was thought at that time almost too fine for the frontier city. Its broad stairway had a rich wine red carpet. Room furnishings were of walnut and plush and silk. The beds had feather mattresses, and rooms were provided with portable metal bathtubs (filled from pitchers). There was a spacious dining room, a glittering all-night bar, and a ballroom that became Denver’s social center—its most auspicious event occurring seven years before Whitman’s arrival, when a lavish ball was given there for the Grand Duke Alexis of Prussia.

Leadville, a day’s farther travel to the southwest, had become by that fall a magnet attracting a hundred or more arrivals daily. Helping to speed them there were railroad advertisements such as those Whitman had undoubtedly seen in the Kansas papers, describing Leadville as a “rich opening” of “vast deposits” of silver near the surface, requiring for the taking only “muscle, energy and daily bread.” In
1879, the “fever” year, Leadville was growing from a population of about eight thousand to one approaching thirty thousand. It was the archetypal western boomtown. We can imagine its attraction to Whitman and his eastern journalist friends.

At first glance the records do suggest that Whitman made the excursion from Denver to Leadville. Marked maps indicating his travels he later sent to John Burroughs and to Anne Gilchrist do not pinpoint Leadville, but Whitman’s tracings on them indicate that he ventured into the Rockies far south of Denver. In what were evidently press releases the poet sent back to at least two eastern newspapers, the Washington Evening Star and the Philadelphia Times, he reported himself as fraternizing “with emigrant camps, miners, cow-boys, and Leadvilleans.” In Specimen Days he writes: “One of my pleasantest
days was a jaunt, via Platte cañon, to Leadville.” He begins the immediately following entry: “Jottings from the Rocky Mountains, mostly pencill’d during a day’s trip over the South Park RR., returning from Leadville . . . .”

Much as Whitman may have wished to visit Leadville, or to leave the impression he had visited that phenomenal place, his westward travels ended a mountain range short of it. To get to Leadville most directly that latter part of September, one took the narrow-gauge Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad, the “South Park,” still under construction. The route was by way of Platte Canyon to Webster, thence over ten-thousand-foot Kenosha Pass into South Park. At Red Hill one took a stage via Fairplay and Mosquito Pass to Leadville. Another way was to go to the end of the track at Guiraud, present-day Garos, and take the stage over Weston Pass. Leadville would not have rail service until the following summer. That September passengers from Denver still had to endure a harrowing thirty-five-mile stage ride through South Park and up over Mosquito Range. It was a jolting ride of four hours or more over a rough and hazardous road etched on the sides of the mountains, a ride through dust or mud, along terrifying precipices, and sometimes made in the fear of hold-ups.

Whitman at sixty was no longer the man to make that last rugged part of the journey by stage. His note to Louisa on arrival in Denver that he was “feeling well—better than before I started” may be taken as indicative of his continuing concern (and hers) about his health. Whatever his reason for missing the second day of the Silver Wedding in Kansas, it is not surprising that the “half-Paralytic” gave up an opportunity, as Martin put it, “to plunge 140 miles into the Rocky Mountains,” and settled instead for visiting “points more accessible.”

Geist reported their plans specifically:

At Denver, Mr. Martin and myself accepted the invitation of Capt. Wm. T. Tough to visit that latest marvel of mining towns, Leadville, 140 miles distant, lying in a basin adjoining the backbone or divide of the Rocky Mountains, and distant only about 800 miles from San Francisco. As our route involved thirty-five miles of staging through the South Park and over “Mosquito Pass,” the highest wagon road in the world, and a very tiresome ride, Mr. Whitman
concluded to remain in Denver until our return, and Mr. Reitzel
having some business matters to transact, it was arranged that they
should meet us on our return on Monday, at “The End of the
Track” (Guyraud) of the Denver, South Park and Pacific railroad,
115 miles from Denver . . . .

So, that Saturday, while Geist and Martin went to Leadville,
Reitzel attended to some business, and Whitman took in the city. In
Specimen Days he gives his impressions. He liked best what he saw
of the men, “three-fourths of them, large, able, calm, alert, American.”
He was impressed by a visit to a smelting works where he saw silver
turned into two-thousand-dollar bricks, and he liked the sights of the
city itself:

A city, this Denver, well-laid out—Laramie [sic] street, and 15th
and 16th and Champa streets, with others, particularly fine—some
with tall storehouses of stone or iron, and windows of plate-glass—
all the streets with little canals of mountain water running along
the sides—plenty of people, “business,” modernness—yet not with­
out a certain racy wild smack, all its own. A place of fast horses,
(many mares with their colts,) and I saw lots of big greyhounds
for antelope hunting. Now and then groups of miners, some just
come in, some starting out, very picturesque.

Sometime that Saturday, the twentieth, Whitman also wrote a
press release that evidently appeared in the Denver Daily Tribune the
next day. In Specimen Days a part of it is presented as an “off-hand”
interview in which he is reported as saying:

I have lived in or visited all the great cities in the Atlantic third
of the republic—Boston, Brooklyn with its hills, New Orleans, Bal­
timore, stately Washington, broad Philadelphia, teeming Cincinnati
and Chicago, and for thirty years in that wonder, wash’d by hurried
and glittering tides, my own New York, not only the New World’s
but the world’s city—but, newcomer to Denver as I am, and thread­
ing its streets, breathing its air, warm’d by its sunshine, and having
what there is of its human as well as aerial ozone flash’d upon me
now for only three or four days, I am very much like a man feels
sometimes toward certain people he meets with, and warms to, and
hardly knows why. I, too, can hardly tell why, but as I enter’d the
city in the slight haze of a late September afternoon, and have
breath’d its air, and slept well o’ nights, and have roam’d or rode

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leisurely, and watch’d the comers and goers at the hotels, and ab­sorb’d the climatic magnetism of this curiously attractive region, there has steadily grown upon me a feeling of affection for the spot, which, sudden as it is, has become so definite and strong that I must put it on record.¹⁶

What is remarkable about this “interview” is not only that he
wrote it himself, but that parts of it, omitted from *Specimen Days*, are identical with his undelivered “hastily scribbled” speech for the Old Settlers, as is evident in this item in the *Camden Daily Post*:

Walt Whitman has been interviewed by the Denver *Tribune*, and among other things laudatory of Denver, Colorado, and the West generally, spoke of the Prairies (under which he grouped all the Central States) as a new and original influence in coloring humanity, and in art and literature. “These limitless and beautiful landscapes,” he said, “indeed fill me best and most, and will longest remain with me, of all the objective shows I see on this my first visit to the Central States—the grand interior. I wonder if the people of the prairies know how much *art*, original and all their own, they have in those rolling and grassy plains—what a profound cast and bearing they will have on their coming populations and races, broader, newer, more patriotic, more heroic than ever before—giving a racy flavor and stamp to the United States of the future, and encouraging and compacting all. No wonder the Prairies have given the Nation its two leading modern typical men, Lincoln and Grant, of a vast average of elements of characters altogether practical and real, yet to subtler observation, with shaded backgrounds of the ideal, lofty and fervid as any.”

On Monday, Whitman and Reitzel arose early and took the eight o’clock “South Park” train up Platte Canyon, stopping for a “good breakfast of eggs, trout, and rice griddle cakes” at its entrance. The mountain canyon, like the wide plains of the days before, “tallied” with the poet’s soul. “I have found the law of my own poems,” he felt as the train made its way up the gorge “amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon—this plenitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammelled play of primitive Nature—the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream . . . the fantastic forms, bathed in transparent browns, faint reds and grays, towering sometimes a thousand, sometimes two or three thousand feet high—at their tops now and then huge masses poised, and mixing with the clouds, with only their outlines, hazed in misty lilac, visible.”

Along the way he sees signs “of man’s restless advent and pioneer-age”—the dugout, the “scantling-hut,” the telegraph pole, settlements
17. Platte Canyon, Colorado
of log houses, surveyors. “Once, a canvas office where you could send a message by electricity anywhere around the world!”

Their train climbs to Kenosha Summit and Whitman and Reitzel look down on South Park, of “paradisiac loveliness.” Mountain peaks “in every variety of perspective, every hue of vista, fringe the view.” Whitman thinks: “Talk, I say again, of going to Europe, of visiting the ruins of feudal castles, or Coliseum remains, or kings’ palaces—when you can come here.”

Both Geist and Martin sent their eastern readers lively accounts of their Leadville excursion. That Saturday Colonel Leonard Eicholtz, the chief construction engineer for the “South Park” (and a former Lancasterian), rode with them and explained the unusual methods required to build even a narrow-gauge railroad up the canyon of the Platte River, around “Muleshoe Curve” above Webster, and over the steep grades of Kenosha Pass.

From Red Hill in South Park, Captain W. S. Tough, superintendent of the Denver and Leadville Despatch Line, using a two-horse open wagon, was their driver or “whip.” Martin thought Tough did his best to give the eastern newspapermen “a special show.” As Geist told it:

Captain Tough has the reputation of being one of the most daring and skillful Jehus of the Rocky Mountains, and he fully sustained his reputation by driving us over the twenty-five miles in three hours and twenty-five minutes, and landing us in Leadville several hours ahead of the stages. He was very kind to the writer, who occupied the rear seat, in occasionally admonishing us in the language of Hank Smith, to “Keep your seat, Mr. Greeley!” as the vehicle bounced over the dust-hidden boulders at some precipitous curve with only a foot between us and fifteen hundred feet of almost perpendicular destruction on the left and a wall of snow-capped mountains on the right.

Geist thought Leadville was “the greatest marvel of a marvelous country in a marvelous age.” He was impressed by “the cuisine and appointments for comfort” of the Clarendon Hotel where they stayed. He noted the variety of structures in town, “from a brick opera house, now going up, the aristocratic seaside-style of cottage on ‘Fifth Avenue,’
Map 2. Whitman's excursion into the Rockies, 22 September 1879

Map by Lewis Armstrong
down to the log-and-mud cabin and the ‘dug-out’ in the side of the hill.” He also noted the well-stocked stores, the water system, and the just-completed gas works. “The town is all business and excitement,” he wrote.  

Both journalists also wrote about the dark side of Leadville life, about the deadly “Leadville quartette” of Geist’s description: “the metallic fumes of smelting furnaces, wholesale gambling, drinking whiskey, and prostitution.” “Sunday in Leadville,” wrote Martin, is a “fete day” when one can see the town “in the pride of its wickedness.” But he thought there were “harbingers” of civilization in the establishment of churches and in other slowly developing elements of law and order.  

Returning from Leadville at six in the morning on Monday, they were given “another John Gilpin ride,” according to Geist. They reached Fairplay “with both seats broken down, the side of the wagon bursted out, and one of the buffers of the brakes ‘dislocated.’” Geist did “volunteer service in going down the steep grades, by holding a piece of plank between the brake-clamp and the tire.”  

They arrived at Red Hill well in advance of the train bringing up Whitman and Reitzel from Denver. At last reunited, the four men
went sightseeing to the end of the track at Guiraud, twelve miles down the line. There they watched the stages arriving from over Weston Pass. The *Specimen Days* jottings to the contrary, Guiraud (Garos), then, not Leadville, is at the ends of those lines Whitman drew on the maps for Burroughs and Gilchrist.

The poet and his friends got back to the American House at about ten o'clock that Monday evening. We can imagine that what Geist and Martin endured going over Mosquito Pass and what they had observed of the "Leadville fever" figured large in their conversation at dinner that night.