

## Reminiscences of Early Denver

Dr. John Elsner's Toast at Banquet of  
Medical Staff and Board of Managers of  
N[ational] J[ewish] H[ospital] for C[onsumptives]

A few days ago, when I was informed that I was to respond to the toast, "Reminiscences," it reminded me of the fact that I am the only practicing physician living in the state, of those who came before, or at the time I did, and it at once carried me back to something over forty years, at the close of the Civil War, when I left New York, to cast my lot in the "Far West."

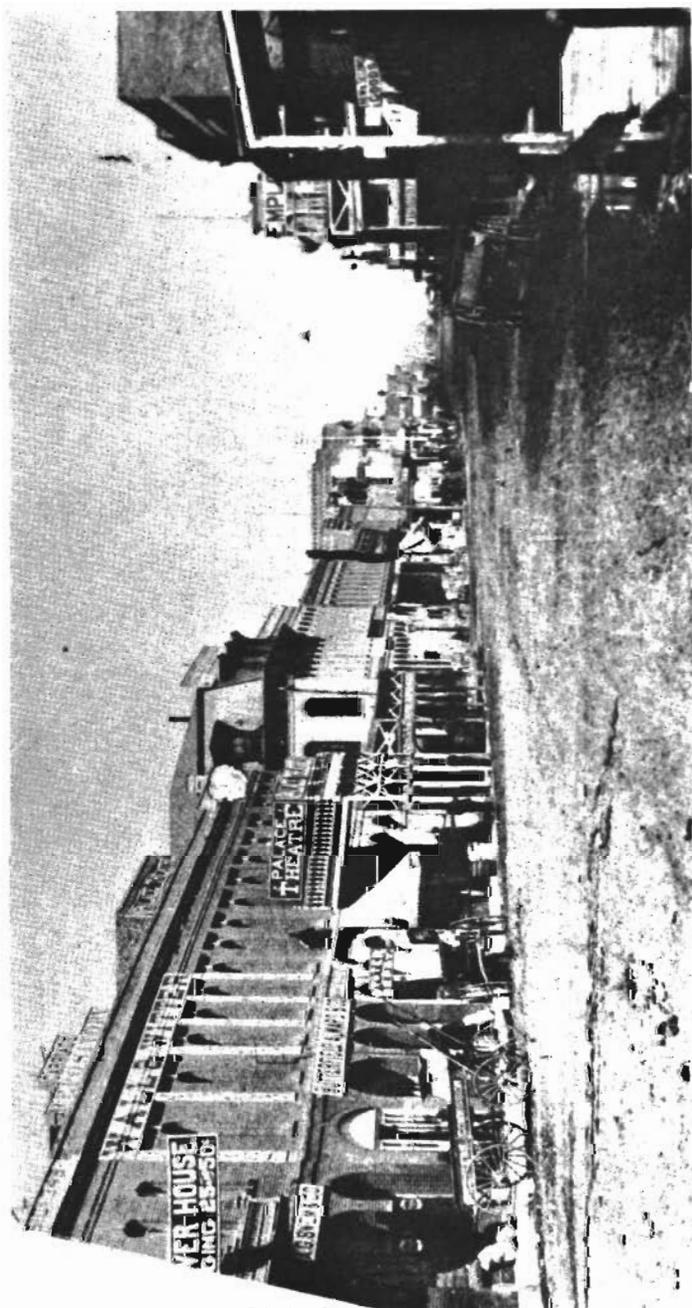
I did not leave New York on account of ill health, but became interested in a company, composed of wealthy gentlemen, who organized and purchased a mine, called the Onondaga, in Central City, and was to meet my [wagon] train in Waterloo, Iowa. I travelled by rail to Waterloo, and there was elected captain of the train, consisting of twenty-seven covered wagons, thirty-five men, fourteen women and a number of children. We took along a certain amount of mining machinery, as the majority of these men were to work this property. We averaged about twenty-four to twenty-six miles a day; had a number of encounters with Indians, and were compelled to corral our wagons before dark, and station picket guards a short distance from our wagon for protection to ourselves, and the women and children, from unexpected attacks. On that account, it took us nearly forty days to reach Denver. Most of this distance, I either rode horse back or walked, although I owned a half interest in one of the wagons.

By the way, one of the wagons which joined us later on our trip, was called "The Ark"; this was painted in big red letters on the canvas. It contained two young men from Philadelphia; one a young lawyer, the other, the son of a very wealthy gentleman, a grocery merchant; both were in the acute stage of tuberculosis, and both were greatly improved upon their arrival in Denver. This, no doubt,

was due to their being night and day in the open air. They remained in Colorado a number of years, returned home in perfect health, and so far as I know are still living.

A very interesting circumstance occurred after we left Fort Kearney, [Nebraska]; one evening, at dusk, a young man, his face somewhat burned from the sun, his head covered with long, thick curly hair, his body clothed in a blue blouse, slouch hat, buck skin trousers, a belt around his waist, filled with ammunition, his revolver on one side and bowie knife on the other, came into camp. He was at once put under arrest, and was thought to be a spy from some Indian camp. My men were very much excited, and asked that he be put in chains, taken back to Kearney and turned over to the officers there. I remonstrated with them, and with one other member of my company, decided to examine him, in order to ascertain who he really was. He gave his name as William Seymore Howell. He said his father was a member of the House of Lords of London; that he had been out at sea, was wrecked and lost everything. On his return to America, he joined the army, served until the close of the [Civil] War, was honorably discharged, and, as he had but little money, decided to cross the plains from the Missouri river on foot, and seek his fortune in the Far West. He had a number of letters and papers addressed to him by his parents and others, an honorable discharge from the U.S. Army, a diploma, as being a Master Mason, with receipts, showing that he had paid up his dues and was in good standing.

After this examination, I informed him that he was welcome to travel with us, that he could ride when he felt like it in my wagon and partake of my food, but that it was necessary for me to ask him for a number of days to surrender his revolver and bowie knife, and that I would put a guard over him, and that he would be watched night and day, until we were fully satisfied that he was really William Seymore Howell. This man proved to be one of the most deserving, cultured and honorable gentlemen, and in course of time, having been successful in Denver, he returned to New York, thence to London. This was about the time that Gilbert and Sullivan were writing their operas, and it was he, who sang the leading part in "The Queen's Lace Handkerchief," and I had the pleasure of seeing



Denver in the 1870's



him when he came to Denver, when he informed me that he had married and was the father of two children. Only last year, I received a letter from his wife, informing me that he had died suddenly.

#### HOW DID IT PAN OUT TODAY?

I arrived in Denver, June 6, 1886 [*sic*—1866]. There were about seventeen thousand people, a military post, commanded by Col. Howard. The business streets were Blake, Lawrence, Larimer, Wazee, Fifteenth, extending across the Cherry Creek bridge, now the West Side, then called Auraria, parallel with Larimer and Blake, and what is now Walnut. On the right side of Blake street, between Fourteenth and Fifteenth, the side walk was covered with tables, where they carried on open gambling games of all kinds; behind these were the most noted gamblers known. The center of the street was crowded with ox trains and bull whackers, coming in from the East, with freight of all kinds. These bull whackers, having been for three or four months on the plains, were paid off here, and as long as the money lasted, would lose in at these games, and when they had no more, would play their watches or revolvers on a card, which, as a rule, they would also lose.

Back of the side walks, where were situated all these games, was a large beer hall, which was run by Billy Merchant and "Count" Murat; by the way, the "Count" claimed to be a Frenchman and a nephew of Bonaparte's King of Naples. He was, however, a German, and had been a barber all his life time, was a very fine looking man, and on account of his fine appearance, was dubbed "Count," and in time, believed he was one.

His wife was the third white woman in Denver, although [she] was thought by many to be the first, but Mrs. Booker and daughter, of Morman [a Mormon?] family, were the first and second, and Mrs. Murat was the third. Mrs. Murat is still living at Palmer Lake.

It has been said that when Mr. [Horace] Greeley visited Denver, the "Count" served as his barber, charging him one dollar for each shave, and Mrs. Murat charged him three dollars for laundering a half a dozen pieces of linen, which Mr. Greeley paid, remarking

that there was at least one man here determined to make the best of his opportunities.

There were quite a number of physicians here; the leading ones were Dr. McClelland, Dr. Strod, who was a brother-in-law of J. Q. Charles, Dr. Buckingham, Dr. McClain, who had charge of the Military department in Denver, and who died of blood poison, caused by a cut received from a pen knife while opening a nut. It was found necessary to amputate the hand, in a short time the arm, when death followed. The Doctor was a brother-in-law of Andrew Sagendorf, who is still living in Denver. There was also Dr. Treat, an eclectic, besides quite a number of physicians, who were not so noted.

Dr. Bancroft arrived just one month before I did. There were four banking houses: the First National Bank, Kountze Brothers, Warren Hussey & Co., and Cook & Sears, Banks. Money was worth five per cent a month.

On my arrival, I rented a room over the First National Bank, which was located on the corner of Fifteenth and Blake. Adjoining me, were the offices of the officers of the military post. Dr. Bancroft had the office directly opposite mine. Robert Wilson, Justice of the Peace, Francis Case, Surveyor General, Markham & Miller, Attorneys at Law, and Judge Perkins, Attorney, all had their offices in the same building.

My office was known as the headquarters for the New Yorkers and everybody else, and each evening, after our labors for the day had been completed, all in the building met in my office, where, in the center of the room, was a table on which was a large box of "Game Cock" tobacco, and plenty of clay pipes. We would smoke until the fumes so filled the room that you could not see your hand before your face, when the question would be asked, "How did it pan out today?" and the one who did the best or made the most, was expected to "set them up." Very often they would indulge in a game of "seven-up," the favorite game.

After banking hours, I would sometimes go into the back room to witness the interesting games of poker occasionally played there. I recall one, where the participants were Judge Hughes, Governor McCook, Mark Shaffenburg and Colonel Waddingham. It so happened that Shaffenburg held four nines, Jack Hughes, four jacks;

the other two dropped out of the game. They bet until there were ten thousand dollars in the pot. You can well imagine the excitement, when four jacks, held by Jack Hughes, won the ten thousand dollars.

I would here say that Mr. Dave Moffat was discount clerk in the bank, and was interested in a stationery and cigar store on the opposite corner, the firm being Wolforth, Moffat & Clark.

In 1870, I was appointed [Denver] County Physician. There was no hospital in Denver. I collected the patients, who were lying in the hen houses and barns and were treated heretofore for so much a visit, established a small hospital with twenty-nine beds, on Ninth Street, on the West Side. [I] was County Physician for six years; attended not only all the patients in the hospital, which in time was very much enlarged and is now one of the buildings of the county hospital, but all the insane, the prisoners of the jail and all the out door patients of the country.

A very strange circumstance is that two of the County Commissioners, one the chairman at the time I was appointed, Mr. Frank Cram, died in the county hospital; in after years, Mr. Tommy Anderson, who had been alderman of the city of Denver and County Commissioner, died at the county hospital.

I was told that some time in the sixties, Dr. McDowell, son of the famous McDowell of St. Louis, established a hospital, received a tract of land for the purpose of erecting a building, and after the Land Company gave him this land, I do not know whether he built the hospital or not. A year or two after this, Dr. Cass and Dr. Hamilton established a hospital, where they treated the patients for the county, as I understand, by contract; but in a short time, Dr. Hamilton was made assistant surgeon of one of the Colorado regiments and the hospital was given up.

In the latter part of the sixties, Sister Eliza of the Episcopal Church and myself treated a large number of patients in a tent, where a few pay patients defrayed the expense of the others. Soon after I established the county hospital.

Father [Joseph P.] Machebeuf, afterwards [1887] Bishop, with a few of the Sisters of Charity, established a small hospital on Walnut street, which was then McGaa, and either Twenty-fourth or

Twenty-fifth. This was the nucleus of the present St. Joseph's Hospital, the ground on which that hospital now stands having been donated to them by Governor [William] Gilpin. The ground of the present county hospital was donated by Richard Whitsitt.

#### DISEASES PECULIAR TO COLORADO

In 1868, I performed what I believe to be the first operation for stone in the bladder, upon Judge Perkins, who was sixty years of age, and lived at the Planters House, then situated on the corner of 16th and Blake. The anesthetic was administered by Dr. Heimberger, now living in Denver. The operation was successful, the Judge living five years afterwards, dying as the result of an accident, having fallen into an excavation, one dark night in Golden.

The second operation for stone was performed about three months afterwards by myself, near Cimmaron Mines, on Mr. Maxwell, of Maxwell's Grant. The government furnished me an ambulance and a squad of soldiers, who escorted me there and back. In this case the anesthetic was given by a distant relative of Mr. Maxwell, from St. Louis. This operation also proved successful; Mr. Maxwell died many years after at his home.

Not long after this, I received a call from Mr. Staabe, to Santa Fe. The trip was made by coach, and it required four or five days to make it. Inside the coach there were eight passengers, seven men and one woman. Among them was Gen. Charles Adams, at that time U.S. Post Office Inspector, who was seated opposite me. The General was one of the unfortunate ones who perished in the memorable Gumry disaster [an explosion at the Gumry Hotel in Denver in 1895]. By his side sat the lady and by my side, Judge Kingsley, still living in Denver. One morning, during our trip, the general took from his pocket a pipe, took out a match box, got a match and, turning to the lady beside him, said, "Madam, is smoking offensive to you?" She said, "It is." He lit the match and with it the tobacco in his pipe and answered, "I am very sorry."

We changed horses about every twenty miles, and one evening, we arrived at a place called "The Red Lion Inn." We entered the hotel and found that we were compelled to remain there overnight.

The landlord informed us that his house was well filled, and he would have to put two of us in a bed. Judge Kingsley and myself decided to sleep together, and asked to be shown to our room. One of the boys took us around to what they called the "Plaza." Our room was on the first floor, there being no other rooms over them, as the ceiling was made of the starry heavens, the floor, Mother Earth. The door consisted of an army blanket. There was a small board table in the center of the room, on which was a candle stick, holding a candle about an inch in length. The bed was made of rough lumber; there was a straw mattress, no sheets, a couple of army blankets, and pillows that it was difficult to say, but the judge believed that they were made of cotton batting. We decided, however, that we would not go to bed, but sat on the bed, amusing ourselves telling stories.

The next morning we were called to breakfast, and found in the breakfast-room, a long table covered with oil cloth, benches on both sides, tin plates and the knives and forks chained to the table, and in a short time, a tall man, wearing a slouch hat, short coat, his trousers held up by a belt holding a revolver, entered, carrying a large wash basin, which I afterward learned contained hash. He dumped the basin on the table, took out his revolver, and with it in his hand, looked all the passengers in the eye, saying, with an oath, "Perhaps there is someone here, who is not fond of hash!" There was not a passenger, who didn't seem to think that he had always loved it. That was the last time I ever ate hash.

We finally arrived in Santa Fe; stopped at the Du Fonde [*sic*—La Fonda Hotel] only one day, when Mr. Staabe [Abraham Staab?] kindly removed me to his house, where I had the best of accommodations.

On my return to Denver, I learned of the Indian outrages on the Bijou [creek east of Denver] where a man by the name of Lindsey was accidentally shot. He was going to visit one of his friends, and instead of knocking at the door, said, "How," and his friends, believing him to be an Indian, fired through the door. The bullet passed through the upper portion of the left lung, and lodged in the back under the scapula. A telegram was sent to Mayor De Lano, then mayor of Denver, to send someone to remove the bullet. The

mayor offered a reward of one thousand dollars to any man who would ride there, he to furnish a guide, and cut out the bullet and attend the man. I accepted the offer, and, with a guide, we rode horse back, changing horses every ten miles, being compelled to ride around the Indian camps at night, and was successful in bringing back the bullet, and was fortunate enough to save my man, and come home safe.

In 1871, I called a meeting, at my house, of the medical men of Denver, extended to them a banquet, and then and there organized the first medical society, both city and state.

At that meeting, Dr. Buckingham, being the oldest medical man in the city, was elected president. At that meeting, also, was organized the nucleus of the first medical college; at that meeting Dr. Buckingham, Dr. Bibb and myself were elected delegates to the American Medical Association, to be held in San Francisco, May 2nd to 5th, 1871. I was also appointed a delegate to represent the county of Arapahoe. At that meeting Alfred Stille, of Philadelphia, was president. It was at that meeting, too, that I was appointed chairman of the committee on "The Diseases Peculiar to Colorado." While in San Francisco, a number of gentlemen from the east, besides myself, attended a meeting of the State Society of California and discussed the management and treatment of pneumonia in the different localities of the United States, and had the honor of being elected honorary members of the state society. At this time, too, a society, of which I was a member, was organized, called "The Rocky Mountain Medical Society," composed of all those, east of the Rocky Mountains, who attended the meeting, and strange to say, that so few are still living that the organization died, not being able to get a quorum. Time would not permit me to tell you anything more of the interesting happenings, during our stay in San Francisco, at the early day.

#### TAKE THE KEG

In the early 70's, the building, on the corner of Fourteenth and Arapahoe, which is now the Conservatory of Music was a literary academy for higher education, and was conducted by Mr. Frank

Church and Mr. Bridges. This same Bridges had two brothers and a father, who were prominent physicians in Ogdensburg, N.Y. The younger brother graduated in the same class with me. Mr. Bridges came to me with a letter of introduction from this brother. After opening the school, I was appointed professor of physiology and hygiene, where I gave two courses of lectures, but the classes were so small that the school was abandoned, and the place was made into a bath establishment, conducted by Dr. Hart and a relative. After a few years, Dr. Hart returned to the east and in the course of time came back, having graduated in medicine.

I recall a funny circumstance which took place in '68 or '69; a survey was to be made of some lots between 18th and 23rd streets on Larimer. On this ground was Eam's Soap factory. Ben Whittemore, deputy surveyor of Denver, and a brother-in-law of DeWitt Talmage, of New York, was to make this survey, and was to receive, in payment, a lot, ten dollars or a keg of beer. He presented the proposition to those who met nightly in my office, and left it to them to decide. The decision was, "take the keg of beer," which he did, and we shared it with him.

When I first came to Colorado, some one was shot almost every night; many were killed outright. It gave opportunity for many gun shot wounds to be treated.

On my arrival in Denver, among other things, I had a silk hat and an umbrella, and after twenty-four hours I found a placard on my door, with skull and cross bones at the top, and underneath was printed, "Dispose of your hat and umbrella, as it is a violation of the vigilantes." It was not necessary for me to do this, as the following day, I missed my umbrella and discovered my hat cut into two parts. From that time on, I wore a felt hat.

There are many most interesting medical and surgical cases which I remember distinctly, where I was assisted by the physicians who were here then, and some who are here now, but these will be narrated at some future day, at some medical meeting.

Some of you who are here may perhaps remember when the D[enver] & R[io] G[rande Railroad] passed into the hands of a receiver. This caused the late Professor De Costa [Dr. Jacob M. Da Costa?] of Philadelphia, to come to Denver to investigate, as he had

\$50,000 worth of stock. He discovered that unfortunately his stock had very much depreciated or was worthless, and he told me that "it was really too bad, as it would compel him to work very hard for at least two and perhaps three months, to make up his losses."

In conclusion, I must go back about eighteen years, to the time when a portion of the Jewish community was aroused to the necessity of having a consumptive hospital, and I can well recall when Dr. [William S.] Friedman, as well as myself, pictured to the community the vast amount of comfort, relief and possibly saving of life which could be given to the unfortunate who were sick but we were unable to open the complete building until through the aid of B'nai B'rith and the magnanimous subscriptions and donations towards maintenance. It was the first of its kind so far as I know, being the purest charity to all denominations and creeds, with neither profit nor gain to the board of managers or medical staff.

I can assure you all, for myself, that there is no institution with which I have been connected, in which I have a greater interest, and only regret my inability to do more.

[*The Jewish Outlook* (Denver, Colo.) May 29, 1908]

The American Jewish Archives announces two new publications:

AN INDEX TO SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES  
ON  
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

Edited by Jacob R. Marcus

Published by Ktav Publishing House, Inc., New York  
and

LIVES AND VOICES

A Collection of American Jewish Memoirs

Edited by Stanley F. Chyet

Published by The Jewish Publication Society of  
America, Philadelphia