

FRONTIER SOCIETY—CEDAR CREEK, MONTANA  
1870-1874

Prospecting along the Montana side of the Bitter Root mountains, in the fall of 1869, Louis Barrette and A. B. Lanthier followed Cedar Creek to Oregon Gulch to investigate a quartz formation the former had noticed a year before. There they made the discovery which precipitated the famous Cedar Creek stampede.<sup>1</sup> Over the mountains from Idaho the gold seekers came; from all over the Territory of Montana—through Hell Gate canyon, past Missoula, past the old town of Hellgate and on through Frenchtown. The valley hummed with the news, resounded with the creak of wagons and the voices of drivers, throughout the spring and summer of 1870.

Early in September, 1870, a certain Joseph Magee, editor-printer, turned off the trail at Missoula; and, springing from his wagon, began to unload something other than miners' tools. With the arrival of his printing outfit, another mirror of frontier life was established; and on September 15, the first reflection of the camp appeared: the *Missoula Pioneer*.<sup>2</sup> The Cedar Creek correspondence, in what it reveals inadvertently as well as consciously, presents a typical page in the social history of the mining camps.

At the place of the gold find, Louisville (named after the man who discovered Barrette's basin) sprang up first. This settlement was fifteen miles up Cedar Creek. Two miles above Louisville, Forest City was established in June, 1870, and boasted that it was "one of the largest and busiest of the . . . mining camps of the Territory. . ."<sup>3</sup> Sprawling loosely along Cedar Creek, Forest City meandered "for more than half a mile, as if the town had not yet quite made up its mind where to settle. . . In every direction windlasses, shaft-houses and piles of mining timbers meet the eye; while, in walking through town, one must pursue a serpentine course to avoid the huge piles . . . or dumps of pay dirt that obstruct the main, and only, street of the place."<sup>4</sup>

This was a man's camp. Women were a rare quantity. "The population of Forest City is rapidly increasing. At present its num-

1 The general details of the discovery of the digging I owe to J. T. Lacasse of Missoula, Montana. The total Cedar Creek yield has been estimated at from twenty to thirty million dollars.

2 Volume I, Number I of this paper is included in the Ryman collection at the Missoula, Montana, City Library.

3 *Missoula Pioneer*, January 12, 1871.

4 *Idem*.

ber is about 170—in the sad disproportion of 166 of the graceless to four of the gentler sex—not quite enough, you see, of the latter to go round.”<sup>5</sup>

Here were stores in which the miners could exchange their dust for supplies.<sup>6</sup> Ample provision was made for drinking and gambling. “To supply our wants and furnish us amusement, we have five stores, one restaurant, and four saloons. In the stores, very full assortments of goods, at really reasonable figures, are offered in exchange for coin, dust, green backs, or good ‘jaw bone.’ . . . Of the saloons, two . . . are devoted to billiards, and having one table, upon which we, bachelors forlorn, unable ourselves, while here, to indulge in the delightful exercise, can at least set the billiard-balls a kissing. The remaining two . . . depend upon the sporting fraternity for patronage. In them the Royal Montana Tiger lies in his lair, ready at all hours to give battle to those (whose name here is legion) who have a liking for an occasional set-to with that noble animal. Another saloon . . . is about opening in the upper end of town, in which, in addition to the usual fluid entertainments, the professors of poker will be supplied with everything necessary for the prosecution of their favorite science.”<sup>7</sup>

Five saloons. . . . But there was no doctor there, and the people depended on good luck for their continued health. Neither were there any lawyers. The miners settled their own disputes by “building artistic heads on each other,” by a miners’ court, or, in the most serious matters, by recourse to Louisville and Judge Chauncey Barbour. . . .<sup>8</sup>

At the time our correspondence began, severe winter weather had impeded mining operations, but only one claim had been idle all winter,<sup>9</sup> throwing a number of men out of employment, and lessening the money supply in camp. “Christmas was spent here very merrily; Miss Maggie Smith gave a social dance to her friends and it was largely attended. A concert and supper were given in the evening.”<sup>10</sup> One Thomas Doyle had been shot in a holiday altercation over a mining claim, but was reported to be recovering.<sup>11</sup>

Within two weeks the weather had turned so severe that all

5 *Idem.*

6 A sample of prices during the pioneer period: “Sack of Halls self-raising flour, \$14.50; cake of fine toilet soap, \$1.00; kinikinnik tobacco, \$5.00 per pound; one violin, \$75.00.” *Helena Rocky Mountain Gazette*, September 29, 1866.

7 *Missoula Pioneer*, January 12, 1871.

8 *Idem.*

9 *Idem.*

10 *Ibid.*, January 5, 1871.

11. *Ibid.*, January 12, 1871.

mining operations had come to a temporary close.<sup>12</sup> "Time are very dull just now at Forest City—indeed, to say that they are dull will give but a slight idea of the stagnation which here is now the order of the day. . . . Fully two-thirds of our population are out of employment. . . . However, we are all living in hopes of the good times which we confidently believe to be coming in the spring. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

During the time of enforced idleness, the attention of the camp turned to the need of a post office.<sup>14</sup> "At present our mail is brought up from the nearest post office [Louisville] by express. . . . Half an hour after the arrival of the mail in Louisville, our carrier pigeon, 'Sam,' makes his appearance in Forest City, mounted on his fiery, untamed mule, enveloped in a cloud of snow, and with coat tail fanning the horizon, he dashes up through town to Cave's store, where, barricaded behind a cord of bacon, and shouting his battle cry of 'two-bits,' he distributes to us our mail. Now you may think two-bits a trifle not worth noticing, when paid for a letter that comes to relieve the monotony of a dull winter camp; but that, I beg to say, depends on circumstances. When a delicate little missive comes to hand, upon which I recognize the tracing of 'Scoopie's' pretty little white paw (Oh, that such came oftener!) then it is a trifle—so much so that, having once paid it, I straightway forget all about it, and returning, tender payment again and again. . . . But there are letters not exactly of this description. When a batch of half a dozen is received—the first of which vividly recounts the virtues of Dr. Kill-emquick's Magic Corn Salve; while the second calls your staid bachelor attention to the unrivalled merits of some cordial intended to alleviate the sufferings of our juvenile fellow citizens when passing through the critical ordeal of 'teething' and, in the others, certain benevolent individuals, moved to compassion by your struggles against poverty, offer to relieve you of the same by liberal supplies of patent greenbacks—it is then that the charge of two-bits assumes gigantic proportions: and ye honest miner, losing all patience, discourseth, after the manner of the army in Flanders, upon express in general and Sam's in particular."<sup>15</sup>

Mail coming in to the camp was received promptly, but expensively. Outgoing mail, by the Wild Mule Express, took two or three

---

12 *Ibid.*, January 26, 1871.

13 *Idem.*

14 *Idem.*

15 *Idem.*

days to reach the mouth of Cedar Creek.<sup>16</sup> A petition was circulated, and forwarded to James Cavanaugh, the territorial delegate in Congress, to secure a post office for the camp.

The following week our correspondent was on night shift at the mines<sup>17</sup>; but he found time to tell his readers that the foundation had been laid for the first hotel in Forest City. There had been additions to the camp population. "The sporting fraternity of Forest City yesterday received a large addition to its numbers by the arrival of several well-known, old Territorial sports. (We think we could have worried through the spring without them.) Two of the 'Fair and frail' also made their appearance at the same time. (We are *certain* we could have survived without *them*.)"<sup>18</sup> The new arrivals were unwelcome to the financially hard driven camp, as they were "flat broke." A Mr. McKenzie had lost a pocket book containing \$90.25. "To explain the astonishing circumstance of a Cedar Creek man's having so much money, I may say that Mr. McKenzie is a new-comer, having recently come over from Diamond City. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

Water, which had been standing in one of the mining claims, delaying work, had been drained. The process was called "tapping," and was both difficult and dangerous. But having been successfully accomplished, it would make possible the resumption of mining operations. It is noticeable that even this early, the work of mining was being done by "companies"—small groups which were gradually supplanting the individual miner and forecasting the great development companies.<sup>20</sup>

The eight months' old settlement was growing. "Cabins are going up in every direction." And still another gambling establishment was in prospect.<sup>21</sup> Gambling, in fact, seems to have been the main pastime, there in the winter-bound camp. The weather was too capricious for sustained out-door labor. "Commencing on Monday, with Mercury playing bo-peep with Zero, the middle of the week will often favor us with blinding snow-storms, winding up finally with rain, so that Saturday ushers in an era of muddy streets, leak-

16 "The overland company have to encounter many difficulties in performing their task of bringing in the mail. The word along the line is 'Push through at all cost.' When the mule gets off the track, he is dug out, but when the road is lost, or the coach jammed in the drift, it is left there; the bags are tied together, the passengers sit on them and they are hauled over the snow." *Virginia City Montana Post*, April 8, 1865.

17 *Missoula Pioneer*, February 2, 1871.

18 *Idem*. The large proportion of saloons and brothels in pioneer towns astounded more than one observer. Bishop Tuttle wrote of Virginia City: "Almost every other one [of the log buildings] was a saloon. Two or three of these latter were 'hurdy gurdy' houses, where women were in attendance for keeping up dancing and all night revels." Daniel Sylvester Tuttle, *Reminiscences of a Missionary Bishop* (New York, 1906), 125.

19 *Missoula Pioneer*, March 30, 1871.

20 *Ibid.*, February 9, 1871.

21 *Idem*.

ing rooms and profane miners. . . ."<sup>22</sup> Thus the miners turned to the "diversified industry" of poker. Some, if we are to believe our correspondent, found gambling more profitable than mining, and retired to live on the fruits of this type of labor. At least there were no self-confessed losers in the camp!

There was to be a bank in camp, a new fancy-goods store next door to it, and at last, the post office. Mr. Cavanaugh had finally lent an ear to the community, and the *Pioneer* of March 2 announced the appointment of a postmaster. Mining was getting brisker:<sup>23</sup> new claims were being operated, although the snow was still four or five feet deep in Forest City, and the wind still lashed the cabins. A prospector, coming in with his pack train, got stuck in the snow half a mile below town, and a group of citizens had to go to his rescue with shovels. Occasionally one gets a hint of the darker side of this continual flow of hopeful immigration at all seasons, under all conditions. An occasional terse phrase is suggestive: "Many [immigrants are] in poor condition and likely to have difficulty surviving the winter."<sup>24</sup>

How quickly the pioneer spirit rose! A month ago, the camp had been idle, discouraged. But now a little more work was being done, a little more money was in circulation, and "our town maintains no less than five ladies of unquestionable reputation . . . pretty good signs of prosperity in a community made up of the guileless children of the mountain."<sup>25</sup>

Our miner correspondent made friendly fun of the temperance movement, which was at that time being very seriously agitated in the Territory. The citizens of Forest City, he told his readers, were in the forefront of that noble movement.<sup>26</sup> "Every temperance party is, you know, sub-divided into two smaller parties, known respectively as the 'Beauties of Temperance' and the 'Sad Examples'; and between these two the entire population of Forest is somewhat unequally divided. About one-twentieth of our citizens are numbered among the Beauties, whose aim in life it is to make manifest the blessings sure to result from a strict adherence to ice-water as the only beverage; while the large-sized, vulgar fraction of them that is left are Sad Examples, and do their level best to offer in their career

---

22 *Ibid.*, February 23, 1871.

23 *Ibid.*, March 16, 1871.

24 *Missoula Pioneer*, March 16, 1871; *Virginia City Montana Post*, August 18, 1866.

25 *Missoula Pioneer*, March 16, 1871.

26 *Ibid.*, March 30, 1871.

a solemn warning against the awful consequences that are sure to follow a too free indulgence. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

The Chinese were a constant source of amusement, if not of dislike or contempt, to the frontier. They made no bones about it from California to Montana: ". . . the Chinese—the little yellow men . . . gentle and timid—[were] laughed at even while they were being used as mine laborers, and later when they could only work mines abandoned by whites, were discriminated against as soon as it was found that they could make a living on that which the white man had abandoned. . . ."<sup>28</sup> "An amusing trial [before the Louisville Justice of the Peace] took place here last Monday, that of a Spanish Cyprian [woman] named Rafella . . . who has assaulted and battered a Chinaman for putting in circulation certain reports calculated to injure both her moral character and her standing in society. Poor John was present in court, presenting a head that would have been a credit to Donnybrook, but, having no witnesses to testify in his behalf and his eyes being so unfortunately oblique that he could not see the propriety of advancing \$24 as security for the costs of the court, the case was dismissed. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

It was a crude community in which quarrels were settled by physical encounters. Two of the citizens engaged in a "difficulty," which they settled with knives. Mining was still the motif, the basis of most quarrels. The aggressor in this case gave himself up to an officer, but no charges were preferred.<sup>30</sup> It was also a robustious journalism which printed items like the little story of Hog-eye Mary: "One day last week that beautiful and sylph-like member of the demi-monde . . . believing that the young affections of her lover were becoming alienated, bethought herself of a new way of making an impression upon that enterprising youth, which she proceeded at once to put in force, albeit the impression was made on his head instead of his heart, and was effected with the aid of a pitcher. The recipient of these delicate attentions, after being put through the process, presented a rather dilapidated appearance, having as some of the boys remarked, 'a head on him like a pizened pup.' Upon seeing him, however, I thought the comparison too severe . . . on the pup, for to me he looked exactly as if he had just returned from a friendly little visit paid to some of the jolly boys of Beartown."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, March 30, 1871.

<sup>28</sup> Katherine Coman, *Economic Beginnings of the Far West* (New York, 1912), 318-319.

<sup>29</sup> *Missoula Pioneer*, March 30, 1871. . .

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1871.

<sup>31</sup> *Missoula Pioneer*, March 30, 1871.

Mining was the recurring motif, the thread of all the life here. Even the physical buildings were dependant on it. Collapsing timbers in several claims not only had driven numbers of men out of work at the mines, but had even endangered several houses, as the lower part of the town was built directly over the mines.<sup>32</sup>

Mining and gambling. . . . Still another billiard hall was building.<sup>33</sup> One wonders at so much enterprise in a camp whose prospects were still largely a matter of faith. But the thread brightened. New, rich strikes were reported in May,<sup>34</sup> and the ambitious business man could hope to see his efforts made fruitful. This mushroom growth of towns—this rise and fall of hope—were a prime characteristic of the frontier, and colored the social as well as the economic life. Montana is dotted with the “ghosts” of settlements like the one at Forest City.

Members of the fair sex, especially the lighter variety, were aggressive in defending themselves against the free press of the frontier! “On Saturday last, a lady, who took offense at a paragraph which appeared in the Helena ‘Herald’ . . . waited upon the editor and demanded a retraction; and Mr. Editor, not seeing fit to do so, was frequently struck across the face with a cowhide . . . the lady’s champion . . . was fined five dollars and costs. The editor . . . was fined twenty dollars.”<sup>35</sup>

Another “social” item, from another year. The ladies of Forest City were still keeping life an adventurous affair:<sup>36</sup> “The quiet town of Forest City was unusually excited, on the night of the 24th inst. A dance was being held at the place usually known by the original classic cognomen of the ‘Rag House.’ It appears that a disturbance arose between one of the inmates of the house and a prominent Miner of this town, who, it is alleged, made some remarks derogatory to the old Lady’s character which coming to her ears, naturally roused her indignation, she went to the gentleman in question, and demanded a retraction of his words. Which he refused to do, when this high strung lady offered to go out in the street and fight with pistols, saying she did not want any man to take up her quarrel, that she was able and willing to defend herself. Her antagonist refusing to fight her, she applied a few endearing epithets, such as you are

<sup>32</sup> *Missoula Pioneer*, April 6, 1871. It was not uncommon to build towns over the mines themselves. Butte today is still honeycombed underneath with a labyrinth of diggings.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1871.

<sup>35</sup> *Helena Rocky Mountain Gazette*, November 24, 1866.

<sup>36</sup> *Missoula Pioneer*, December 7, 1872.

a dirty low-life cur . . . fired off his pistol at a lamp and extinguished the light. A general stampede of the house took place. A ponderous mass of flesh and blood known by the appellation of the 'Native' knocked down two men, who impeded his exit from the place of danger. Another gentleman who hails from Sweden, put in his appearance at this juncture, and in language more forcible than elegant declared that he was ready to die in defence of the two women who owned the house. Especially, he said, in defence of 'Molly.' But this chivalric young lady declined the services of the 'Bully boy with the glass eye' with thanks, saying she knew enough to take care of herself, the crowd, thinking as Molly did, quietly dispersed. And peace once more reigned supreme, much to the satisfaction of the good people of the town."<sup>37</sup>

But readers of the *Pioneer* were to hear less and less of Forest City. By the autumn of 1874, the precocious infant Mayville, whose birth was recorded in May, 1871, had become "the present heart of Cedar's enterprise and activity."<sup>38</sup> Here was activity enough, in contrast to the dead and abandoned towns that made the new life of the frontier seem sometimes so very old. Here were two well-stocked general stores, two restaurants, one meat market, four saloons. Here was even a goldsmith to work the bright metal into ornaments.

Over and over the same story was repeated—of men who spent their money, their time, their hope, for claims that paid but little or not at all. And gradually more and more individual miners who could not afford the long pull were selling out to the larger groups. "We know too little of the people of the West who cracked under the strain. . . The trails . . . were traveled by the failures going home; but how numerous these were, the historian can only guess."<sup>39</sup>

The story of mining as a whole is a romantic one. It meant the opening up of the Territory. But the story of the individual miner was not always so glamorous. "There is considerable complaint of hard times in and about Cedar. Reports from other sections show that the Cedar Creek miners are as prosperous, if not more so, than any mining camp in the Territory; so that the only show for them to better themselves is to leave the Territory altogether. It then be-

37 Items of this sort are to be found scattered through the "social" columns of the times: "A friendly set-to. On the evening of the Fourth a young lady of the dance-house profession said her 'feller,' by way, we suppose, of celebrating the battle of the nation, had 'a bit of a discussion wid sticks.' The lady came off victorious, and all went to the calaboose. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, July 7, 1866.

38 *Missoulian*, September 2, 1874. (The former *Missoula Pioneer*.)

39 Frederic L. Paxson, *When the West is Gone* (New York, 1930), 37.



comes a question whether they can do better in the States or in other Territories than they are doing now. A careful examination of this question must convince them that they cannot. With prudence, industry and economy they can lay by from \$200 to \$500 per annum, where they are, and this is better than they can do in the States, where they will be compelled to practice these virtues."<sup>40</sup>

If one wished to visit Mayville, "the proper thing to do . . . is to take passage in Robinson's little red wagon as far as Moose creek ferry, and from there on gently persuade some equable cayuse or religiously disposed mule. The trip is not suggestive of rock-me-to-sleep-mother ruminations or dyspeptic forebodings. Rob has contrived to crowd as much comfort into this route as the topography of the country will admit of receiving. His riding animals are generally of the Concord thorough-brace, easy-going build; but he has a few zigzag lightning goers for travelers of delicate constitutions who ask for particularly easy-riding animals."<sup>41</sup> The traveler could stop for a good meal at Mrs. McCabe's station, thirteen miles below Frenchtown . . . one of the pleasantest things to remember after having traveled that road.<sup>42</sup>

Here was Superior City, with "a resident population of two souls . . ." and then, at last, Cedar Creek. The muddy water would attest the work that was going on up above; and from now on, the traveler would find the miners at work. Here was the Cayuse flume, which had been worked for four years, and was only now down to bed rock, and ready for a rich yield. . . . All the way to the ghost of Louisville, men would be busy on claims which "cannot be expected to yield more than wages for the second working."<sup>43</sup>

Louisville, from which mail was once sent by express to the miners at Forest City, and to which they once adjourned for legal adjustment of their quarrels, was almost empty. "The lumber and logs of the old town of Louisville have pretty much all been utilized in building flumes [for the newer mining claims]. . . . There are three souls and a ghost in Louisville.

"The graves give up their sheeted dead,  
To walk and gibber in the streets."

But the traveler might dismount here for a drink. Eastern vis-

<sup>40</sup> *Missoulian*, September 2, 1874. This is a different prospect from that of the earlier rush. In Virginia City, in 1864, "Many persons are taking out \$250 per day. . . . Wages are high—from \$6 to \$12 a day. . . ." Virginia City, *Montana Post*, August 27, 1864.

<sup>41</sup> *Missoulian*, September 2, 1874.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*.

itor writing a "piece" for the monthlies, or hunting a relative sunk in the swift changing waters of the frontier—for him "there is a saloon at this place to furnish the elixir to brace the backbone for further climbing and to dispel ghostly thoughts."<sup>44</sup>

ROBERT L. HOUSMAN

---

44 *Idem.*