

# The hidden history of Colorado's *Germans from Russia*

by MATT MASICH

*Sugar Beets, Krautburgers and Dutch Hops*

Even the toddlers in this large German-Russian family near Greeley helped work in the sugar beet fields. Although ethnically German, their people lived on the Volga River in Russia for several generations before coming to Colorado.





**WHEREVER YOU SEE** an old sugar factory in northeast Colorado, you can probably find a krautburger nearby. This favorite local lunch is part of the cultural legacy of the Germans from Russia, the people whose work in the sugar beet fields fueled the region's prosperity but whose very existence has become obscured by history.

Mexican food is the house specialty at The Border Restaurant on Main Street in downtown Windsor. The enchiladas, chile rellenos and chimichangas are big sellers, but one of the most popular menu items stands out from the rest: the krautburger.

Mexican restaurants don't typically serve krautburgers. In Windsor, however, it seems perfectly normal.

Windsor lies at the heart of what you might call northeast Colorado's Krautburger Triangle, which covers the area between Brighton, Fort Collins and Sterling. Travel within the triangle, and you can generally find a nearby restaurant that serves these dough pockets stuffed with seasoned ground beef, cabbage and onions. Venture beyond, and you'll get a lot of perplexed looks if you try to order one.

The krautburger flourishes here because it is the Colorado homeland of the people who brought it over from the Old World – the people known as German-Russians, or Germans from Russia. Although many Coloradans have never heard of the Germans from Russia, or are simply confused by the seemingly oxymoronic term

German-Russian, their history and culture is deeply embedded in the way of life of the northern Front Range and northeast Plains. Krautburgers are just the tip of the iceberg.

#### FROM GERMANY TO RUSSIA TO COLORADO

A little more than a century ago, northeast Colorado was in the midst of an economic boom thanks to white gold – sugar. Farmers grew sugar beets in fields throughout the region, raking in millions of dollars when local sugar factories turned the beets into pure, white sugar. The sugar boom couldn't have happened without workers willing to work long, hard hours in the beet fields, and the original migrant laborers who met this need were the Germans from Russia.

Germans are from Germany, and Russians are from Russia. So what, exactly, is a German from Russia? John Kammerzell, president of the Northern Colorado Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, has a lifetime of experience answering this question. His family has been fielding similar queries since they arrived in the United States from the Volga region of Russia in 1906.

Kammerzell, a retired U.S. marshal now living in Fort Collins, remembers how his grandparents bristled as they told him how their old neighbors in Brighton used to call their family “dirty Russians” – or “dirty Rooshuns,” as the locals pronounced it. The name-calling stung Grandpa Johannes and Grandma Emma because it simply wasn't true: Not only weren't they dirty, they weren't even Russians; they were ethnic Germans.

The story of how the Kammerzells and other German families came to live in Russia begins with Russian Empress Catherine the Great. (With the possible exception of history professors, no group seems to be as knowledgeable about Catherine the Great as German-Russians.) In 1763, the German-born Catherine put out an open invitation for Germans to come settle along the Volga River in Russia, promising them cheap land, freedom to keep their own language and religion, low taxes, self-governance and exemption from Russian military service. For German peasants yearning to own their own land and escape the misery of the recently ended Seven Years' War, it was an attractive offer. More than 30,000 Germans moved to colonies in the Volga region. They called themselves the Volga Deutsche.

The Germans thrived for many generations, successfully farming the fertile steppes. Then, near the turn of the 20th century, the Russian government began reneging on Catherine's promises, pressuring the Germans to adopt Russian ways and conscripting the men into the military. Kammerzell's great-grandfather Georg Victor Kammerzell was drafted into the Russian army, leaving behind his home in the town of Frank to fight in the Russo-Japanese War, a horrific conflict that presaged the trench warfare of World War I. His family received no word from him for several years. They assumed he was dead.

“One day, this guy in uniform came walking down the road into Frank,” Kammerzell said, repeating an old family story. “My great-grandmother saw him, but she didn't realize until he got very close that it was her husband – he'd lost so much weight and was so unkempt. As soon as he got home, he said, ‘We're leaving.’”

Like thousands of other German families along the Volga, the Kammerzells came to America, bound for the beet fields of the Great Plains.



Greeley beet farmer Carl Meyer shows off his 1960 harvest. Catherine the Great invited Germans to Russia. A monument to the successful German-Russian Luft family stands outside their former home in Sterling.

Wikimedia Commons



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#### HARVESTING WHITE GOLD

“The population of Colorado was increased 586 today,” reported the *Denver Times* in an April 1902 article about the arrival of a trainload of “Russians” to Loveland, there to grow beets for the city's new factory. “As the industry is one requiring a great deal of child labor, these families are peculiarly adapted to the work, several of them having from five to nine children ranging from babies in arms and toddling youngsters to youths of 18. They were all healthy, vigorous specimens of humanity.”

Similar articles appeared in newspapers throughout northeast Colorado, as the flight of German-Russians from the Volga perfectly coincided with another historical event: the birth of the sugar industry in Colorado. Before the turn of the 20th century, most sugar came from sugar cane, grown in tropical or subtropical climates, but the introduction of the sugar beet to America in the late 19th century meant there was a fortune to be made creating sugar on the Great Plains.

Colorado's first sugar factory was built in Grand Junction in 1899, followed by another in Sugar City, near Rocky Ford, in 1900, but northeast Colorado, with its plentiful irrigation from the South Platte River, was to become the heart of sugar country. The first northeast

Colorado sugar factory was built in Loveland in 1901, and a dozen more sprouted up in cities across the region over the next 25 years, most owned by the Great Western Sugar Co.

The Germans from Russia arrived in Colorado wearing long fur coats typical of the Russian Empire, and as they had most recently lived in Russia, few Coloradans bothered to inquire further about their ethnicity and declared them “Rooshuns.” The newcomers settled first in tents and then in shanties clustered near the sugar refineries. Their neighbors gave these areas nicknames like “Little Moscow” or “Rooshun Corner”; the German-Russians usually just called them “the jungles.”

Bob Lebsack grew up in Johnstown in a German-Russian family with nine children, all of whom worked in the beet fields. Lebsack, now 90, still grows sugar beets. “I've dug beets every year of my life that I can remember,” he said, not counting the two years he served in the Army in Europe.

Life revolved around beets. The day after Lebsack's sister Ruby was born, their mother, Pauline, was in the fields thinning beets. During one harvest, their parents placed their 3-month-old brother John on the plow, with sister Marion assigned to watch him; Marion was 2

### Neighbors in Brighton called them “dirty Rooshuns.”

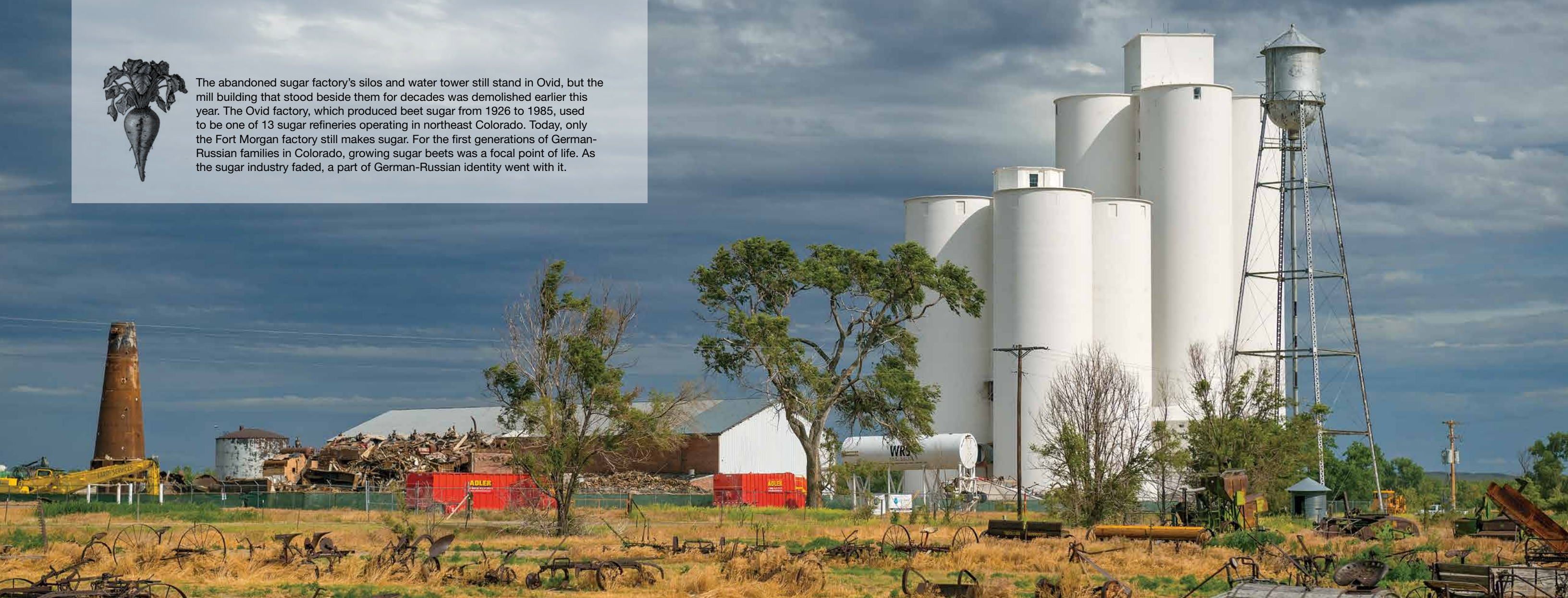
Previous page: Greeley History Museum Below: Colorado State University Libraries







The abandoned sugar factory's silos and water tower still stand in Ovid, but the mill building that stood beside them for decades was demolished earlier this year. The Ovid factory, which produced beet sugar from 1926 to 1985, used to be one of 13 sugar refineries operating in northeast Colorado. Today, only the Fort Morgan factory still makes sugar. For the first generations of German-Russian families in Colorado, growing sugar beets was a focal point of life. As the sugar industry faded, a part of German-Russian identity went with it.



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years old. Two horses were pulling the plow, and when one stopped while the other kept going, the infant went flying to the ground. "One of the horses stepped on the side of my face," said John, who emerged miraculously unscathed, though he added, with a twinkle in his eye, that the incident gives him "a good excuse for being the way I am."

"Arbeit macht das Leben süß" was a favorite proverb of German-Russian families: "Work makes life sweet." Their work paid off, and within a generation, the immigrant families had gone from itinerant laborers to farm owners. In Windsor, 10 miles north of Johnstown, 85 percent of the sugar beet farm owners in 1930 were Germans from Russia.

Windsor, with a sugar factory of its own and located just a few miles from other refineries in Loveland, Greeley and Fort Collins, was at the heart of sugar country, which made it the de facto capital of German-Russian culture in Colorado. By 1920, about a third of Windsor's population was German-Russian, prompting a running joke that the city's name was properly pronounced "Vindsor."

As the German-Russians' economic fortunes improved, new waves of field laborers came in, including Japanese-Americans and Hispanos, but German-Russians remain prominent in the sugar beet industry to this day. Ruby Lebsack Spaur's son Mark raises beet seeds in Johnstown that farmers use to plant the next year's crop.

Spaur was doing some genealogical research on his grandmother's birthplace in Russia (coincidentally, the same village, Frank, where John Kammerzell's family originated), and he was struck by how familiar the names on the 1905 village census were. "It looked like my beet seed customer list today," Spaur said. "They all made it over."

### SWEPT UNDER THE RUG

Sugar beets were the lifeblood of communities across northeast Colorado for the first half of the 20th century, and they became part of the local identity: The high school sports teams in Brush are called the Beetdiggers, and the biggest annual festival in Sterling is Sugar Beet Days. But while farmers still grow sugar beets here, the industry isn't the behemoth it once was, thanks in part to the end of tariffs that made cane sugar more expensive. The Brush sugar factory closed in 1955 and was demolished; the Sterling factory remains standing but has been shuttered since 1985. Fort Morgan's factory is the only one in Colorado still producing sugar.

As the sugar industry faded, so did German-Russian identity. By the late 1970s, there were 200,000 to 300,000 Coloradans of German-Russian descent out of a state population of 2.7 million, according to a 1977 article in the Colorado Historical Society's *Colorado Magazine*, but many of those people had lost connection to their

heritage, leading them to be called an invisible minority.

German-Russians in Colorado had already grown worried that subsequent generations would forget where they came from. In 1968, a group of them founded the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, headquartered in Greeley. Now based in Lincoln,

## German-Russians became an invisible minority.

Nebraska, the society helps preserve cultural traditions and provides resources for Americans seeking to trace their German-Russian roots.

The reasons for the loss of cultural identity were understandable. World War I broke out in the midst of the mass immigration of Germans from Russia, which encouraged the newly minted Americans to downplay their German heritage and not protest too much when they were called Russians. This only increased when America was once again at war with Germany in World War II. However, with the dawn of the Cold War against the Soviet Union

right after World War II, it was suddenly quite undesirable to be Russian. Many German-Russian families swept the old cultural identifiers under the rug and became, simply, Americans.

But not all of the old ways disappeared, with food being the most obvious holdout. The large German-Russian families still gathered for kundafal und glase (potatoes and dumplings), bleena (crepe-like pancakes) and grebel (German donuts), and it remained common to put sauerkraut rather than gravy on mashed potatoes. The traditional food that caught on the most outside of the German-Russian community was the krautburger, which also goes by the name bieroch, runza or cabbage pocket.

Schwartz's Krautburger Kitchens does booming business at locations in the old sugar towns of Evans and Greeley. The Hays Market grocery store in Johnstown sells out all 120 krautburgers its deli prepares every Wednesday. And in Brighton, just a few blocks south of the closed sugar factory whose smokestack was imploded earlier this year, is Lauer-Krauts, whose krautburgers have earned a loyal following among locals who consider this the comfort food of their youth. Lauer-Krauts' fame has spread around the world with an appearance on the Food Network's *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*. Upon tasting the Lauer-Krauts burger for the first time, the show's host, Guy Fieri, exclaimed, "Where has this been all my life?"



## BITTERSWEET SUCCESS

Besides food, the German-Russian spirit lives on in Colorado in the Dutch Hop, a music and dance tradition with a typically confusing name. The Dutch in Dutch Hop is a corruption of Deutsche, or German.

German-Russian weddings used to be three solid days of Dutch Hop dancing, but people found an excuse to dance at any time. Bob Lebsack in Johnstown remembers doing the Dutch Hop while still wearing his irrigation boots from the beet fields.

Dutch Hop music is similar to German polka, with the key difference of having a hammered dulcimer as the lead instrument. The dance moves are also like the polka but with a pronounced hopping motion.

“Dances were in kitchens and living rooms, so the dancers had to go up and down rather than sweeping around the floor,” said lifelong Dutch hopper Tim Trostel of Fort Lupton, who grew up harvesting beets in Brighton.

Every other Sunday evening, Trostel attends the Dutch Hop dance at the event hall of the Denver Kickers Sport Club in Golden. In between speaking Plautdietsch, or Low German, with old friends, he rhapsodizes about the Dutch Hop.

“This is our music, this is our love, this is our life,” Trostel said. “Once you fall in love with that stinkin’ dulcimer, you’re hooked for life. It’s angel music.”

Trostel lets loose with whoops and hollers as he bounces around the dance floor, navigating through the other couples filling the large room. Providing the music on this night are the River Boys, a band whose name plays on both the Volga River, where the Dutch Hop originated, and the South Platte River, where it found its American home. For Steve Deines, accordionist and leader

of the River Boys, the music is the thing that kept him tied to his culture.

“For many years it wasn’t popular to be German, and then the Russian thing – good lord, we were both!” Deines said. Being German-Russian “was kind of a secret thing, but when I was born, there was no doubt in my dad’s mind that I was going to be playing the accordion.”

The traditions of the Germans from Russia seem very much alive at events like this, but there is a bittersweet tinge when the dancers and musicians talk about the Dutch Hop. In the 1970s, Deines used to play at as many as four or five different dances each weekend; these days, it might be that many in a whole year. The dancers are getting older, and, for whatever reason, there aren’t enough younger dancers to replace them.

“It’s been such a big part of my life,” Deines said. “To see it withering away . . .” The Dutch Hop, and German-Russian traditions, will stick around, he said, though it will probably be less a part of daily life. Still, he finds solace when looking at it from a historical perspective.

His people left bad times in Germany hoping for prosperity in Russia, then left that land when their dreams were dashed there. The goal in coming to America was to find a better life for the next generation. The German-Russians who left the Volga for America undoubtedly had a better life than those who remained in Russia, most of whom the Soviets sent in cattle cars to Siberia during World War II, many of them never to return.

“They came to this country to thrive and grow and prosper,” Deines said. “We think about the sadness of the music and the dancing dying, but in a way, I think it’s a happy ending. We accomplished what we came over to accomplish.” 🍀

Dancers bounce around the floor to traditional German-Russian Dutch Hop music at the Denver Kickers Sport Club in Golden.

Joshua Hardin





W. H. HOLDEN—James REED—Joe BAKER—  
Joseph REED, J. H. FLAEGLE.



# The fingerprint that doomed the Fleagle Gang

Pioneering CSI work solved deadly Lamar bank robbery

by MATT MASICH



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (far left, middle) Courtesy of FBI (left, above)

Ralph Fleagle, Jake Fleagle, Howard "Heavy" Royston and George Abshier, left to right, were the members of the notorious Fleagle Gang.

The ruthless Fleagle Gang robbed the First National Bank of Lamar in 1928, making off with \$238,000 and murdering four people in the hold-up and getaway. A Lamar lawman's tireless pursuit and a novel feat of crime scene investigation brought them to justice.

MAIN STREET IN Lamar was quieting down after the lunch hour bustle on the afternoon of May 23, 1928. At the First National Bank of Lamar on the corner of Main and Olive streets, the bank's 77-year-old president Amos Newton "Newt" Parrish leaned on a railing beside his office door, chatting leisurely with his 40-year-old son, John Festus "Jaddo" Parrish, a cashier at the bank, who sat next to him at a roll-top desk. At 1:10 p.m., the bank's double doors swung open.

Four men, strangers to town, filed into the lobby. The oldest of group approached the counter, smiled at the teller in the nearest window and calmly said, "Stick 'em up."

The teller returned the stranger's smile but didn't obey his command. This had to be a joke, he thought.

"Stick 'em up," the man repeated more forcefully. The pistol in his hand made it clear this was no joke.

The other three men, all armed, fanned out across the bank's lobby. Newt Parrish immediately ducked into his office. He emerged seconds later with "Old Betsey," his single-action Colt .45 revolver, and fired a shot through the jaw of the nearest bandit. He cocked his pistol and pulled the trigger again; the gun misfired.

The wounded robber fired back but missed. Before the banker could attempt a third shot, another robber shot him through the head. In the commotion, Jaddo Parrish got up from his desk and headed toward a closet where the bank kept more weapons. The gang's leader fired into his back, and the younger Parrish fell with a bullet lodged in his heart.

The bankers and bandits exchanged a total of 11 shots in the span of just a few seconds. When the gunfire ended, the two Parrish men lay dead or dying on the floor.

The remaining bank employees did not resist. In short order, the gang members – including the badly bleeding wounded robber – stuffed several pillowcases with \$238,000 in cash, municipal bonds and gold-redeemable Liberty Bonds, then hopped into their blue Buick sedan and sped off, taking two employees with them as hostages.

Prowers County Sheriff Lloyd E. Alderman was at home eating lunch when he got a phone call: "They want you at the First National. There seems to be trouble down there."

Alderman dashed into his car and pulled up to the bank just moments after the robbers had driven away around the corner. The sheriff ushered a bank customer into his car to help him identify the culprits and headed out on their trail.

Alderman raced along the dusty backroads outside of Lamar and soon caught up with the bandits' Buick. He saw the getaway car stop and one man exit the vehicle. He cautiously approached and discovered it was one of the hostages. Quickly instructing the man to find a phone and call for help, Alderman continued his pursuit to a crossing of Big Sandy Creek.

The robbers stopped on the creek's far bank and began firing with rifles at long range. The sheriff, armed with only a pistol, couldn't match their firepower at this distance. He and his civilian companion dove into a ditch as bullets tore into their car.

With the sheriff's vehicle crippled, the bandits disappeared into prairie. Alderman had chased the outlaws for 17 miles. In the year and a half to come, he would travel another 150,000 miles by car, train and airplane trying to bring them to justice.



Banker Newt Parrish emerged from his office with "Old Betsey," his single-action Colt .45 revolver, and fired a shot through the jaw of the nearest bandit.

THE 8,000 RESIDENTS of Lamar were left in shock. The elder Parrish was a former state senator, and both father and son were among the most prominent men in Lamar. The day after the robbery, Thursday, May 24, was the 42nd anniversary of the founding of the town, but there were no parades or revelry. "The slaying in cold blood of two pioneering residents of the community has left the citizenry in no humor for a celebration," the *Lamar Daily News* reported.

May Parrish, wife of Newt and mother of Jaddo, was disconsolate. "This wipes out our little family," the *News* quoted her. "There are now just my two little grandsons." Bank teller E.A. Kesinger, whom the robbers had taken

as a hostage, was still missing. As his wife, Ruby, and 3-year-old daughter, Betty Ann, awaited word of his fate, citizens and law enforcement formed armed posses and set up roadblocks for many miles in every direction.

Sheriff Alderman took to the skies, scanning the country roads from above in a plane that the Colorado National Guard dispatched to Lamar from Denver. Alderman, a farmer until being elected county sheriff a few years earlier, had no law enforcement training, but he quickly emerged as the lead investigator



– the Bureau of Investigation, or BOI, as the FBI was then known, wasn't involved in the manhunt because bank robbery wasn't yet a federal crime.

On Thursday night, about 33 hours after the robbery, Alderman got a call from the police department in Garden City, Kansas, 100 miles due east of Lamar. A local physician, Dr. William Wineinger, had been reported missing, last seen driving off with some men who arrived at his door the previous night claiming to need his help treating a young boy whose foot had been crushed by a tractor. The Garden City police suspected, and Alderman agreed, that the story about the injured boy was likely a ruse the fleeing bandits had concocted to kidnap the doctor and coerce him into treating their wounded comrade.

Alderman caught a night train to Kansas, sending the Colorado National Guard planes to meet him there to search the countryside as soon as the sun rose on Friday. At 10:30 a.m., one of the Colorado planes spotted a suspicious car at the bottom of a ravine. The National Guard pilots landed and discovered the body of the missing doctor lying next to his vehicle. Alderman and Garden City Police Chief Lee Richardson were soon on the scene, where they saw that the doctor had been shot at close range with a shotgun blast to the back of the head. The Lamar lawman was incensed.

"I'm going to send those fellows to gallows," Alderman said, according to a later interview with Richardson.

"There was something in the tone of his voice and the glint of his eye that told me that embodied in this man, serving his first term as an officer of the law, were the characteristics of a true manhunter," Richardson recalled.

"I'm with you until you do it," Richardson told Alderman as the men shook hands.



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum



"I made up my mind I was going to find those murderers if it took me the rest of my life to do it." – Sheriff Lloyd Alderman (above)

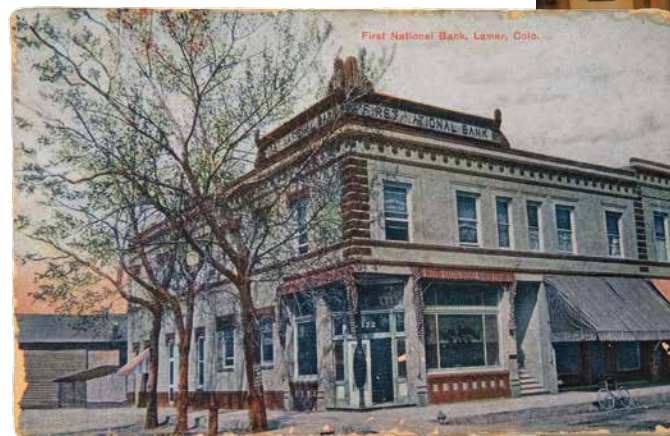
For the time being, the outlaws were gone without a trace – almost. Alderman turned over the doctor's car to Garden City police officer Rollin "Twig" Terwilliger, a self-taught fingerprint expert. The criminals were experienced enough to wipe their fingerprints off all the car's surfaces, but Terwilliger's painstaking search revealed a single remaining fingerprint on one of the rear windows. After confirming the print didn't belong to any law-abiding citizens who may have ridden with the doctor, investigators at last had evidence that could lead to the killers' capture.

**MORE THAN TWO WEEKS** after the Lamar tragedy, a Kansas family on a picnic discovered the dead body of the bandits' fourth victim, the kidnapped bank teller Kesinger, hidden in an abandoned shack near the Oklahoma border.

"I made up my mind I was going to find those murderers if it took me the rest of my life to do it," Alderman remembered thinking.

It began to look like it might take that long. Months dragged into a year as Alderman and colleagues in Colorado and Kansas continued the manhunt, fielding tips and rounding up the usual suspects who had been involved in other bank hold-ups. Alderman investigated 157 men, arrested 54 and got eyewitnesses to identify four of them as the culprits. There was one problem: None of their fingerprints matched the one from the doctor's car.

Local investigators sent copies of the fingerprint to agencies around the country, including the Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C. The BOI had tens of thousands of fingerprints



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum

The First National Bank was the scene of the deadly robbery in 1928. Jaddo Parrish's desk from the bank is now displayed at Lamar's Big Timbers Museum.



Joshua Hardin

on file, but those were only useful if they already had a suspect and simply needed to confirm that his prints matched those from a crime scene; it would be another 70 years before the agency had computers sophisticated enough to search the database to match an unidentified print. Further complicating matters, the BOI's standard procedure was to match all 10 prints, never just one.

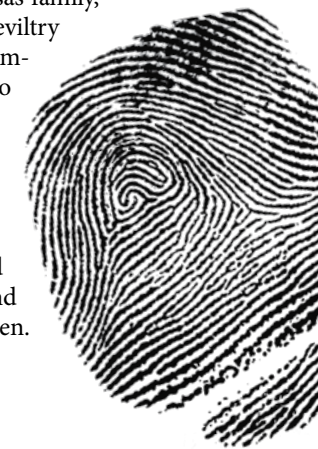
Al Ground, a specialist in the BOI's Identification Division in Washington, D.C., took a special interest in the print from the doctor's car. He memorized the fingerprint's loops and whorls, vowing to find out who it belonged to. It was one of several fingerprints in the back of his mind in early 1929 as he processed a new fingerprint card from a man calling himself William Harrison Holden, who had been arrested and released on a minor charge in California. Ground readily discovered that Holden's 10 fingerprints matched those of a man named Jake Fleagle, who had received a one-year robbery sentence in Oklahoma in 1916.

Ground put Fleagle's identification card aside, but something nagged at him – the right index finger looked familiar. He went back to the file seven times to check Fleagle against various unidentified

prints before he remembered the single print from the Colorado and Kansas murders. It was a perfect match. On July 7, 1929, BOI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent letters to Alderman and the other manhunters: They had a suspect.

**RICHARDSON, LEADING THE** hunt in Kansas, felt like whooping for joy when he got the news. He knew all about "Little Jake" Fleagle and his ne'er-do-well Kansas family, which he called "a bad lot that had engaged in devilry of one kind or another ever since I could remember." He called in Alderman from Colorado to stake out the Fleagle ranch north of Garden City, where father "Big Jake" Fleagle lived with his four adult sons, including suspect "Little Jake," and arrest any family members on the premises.

The lawmen nabbed the elderly father and two of the brothers, but the younger Jake and brother Ralph Fleagle were nowhere to be seen.



## Breaking news

★ The murder of bank president Newt Parrish and his son, Jaddo, shocked the city of Lamar, where they were among the leaders of the community.

★ Lawmen and armed posses scoured the prairie looking for the bandits, and Colorado National Guard planes searched from the skies.



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (all)



★ A huge number of tips came in about the killers' whereabouts, and nearly all of them were erroneous. The outlaws were in Kansas, but many of the false leads pointed to Oklahoma.



★ The Denver Post and other newspapers campaigned for death sentences for the Fleagle Gang and celebrated when the criminals were hanged.



Investigators did, however, find a cache of guns and letters from the absent brothers indicating they were engaged in crime elsewhere in the country. They also learned that one of the apprehended brothers had used an assumed name to get a Garden City post office box, which Alderman and Richardson began monitoring for letters from Jake or Ralph. A couple of days later they got one.

The letter, though unsigned, was clearly from one of the wanted brothers. The letter writer said he would be getting his mail at the post office in Kankakee, Illinois, for the next three weeks, and that he would be using the same alias he had used “out west.”

**ALDERMAN QUICKLY** caught a plane to Illinois, filled in the Kankakee post office about the case and gave officials a list of aliases to look out for. Shortly after Alderman left the post office, a man came in asking for any letters for Art Coons – one of the Fleagle aliases. Local police tailed the man to a nearby bank and arrested him. Art Coons turned out to be Ralph Fleagle.

The investigators tracked down Ralph’s car, where they found revolvers and sawed-off shotguns, as well as letters with the name of the hotel where he was hiding out. Alderman rushed to the hotel to see if Ralph got any phone calls for Art Coons. A call came in within an hour; the landlord took a message with the caller’s name and address in nearby Peoria, Illinois. It must be Jake, Alderman thought.

Taking no chance that Jake might be tipped off, Alderman phoned ahead to the police in Peoria to arrest the man at the address. Alderman arrived in Peoria to be informed that the police had got their man. “Bring him out,” Alderman said. “I’ve been waiting a long time to get a look at that fellow.” But when the officers brought out their suspect, it was the wrong man. Jake had spotted the police car approach and calmly walked away before they arrived at the house.

Despite Alderman’s disappointment at Jake’s escape, he still had four Fleagles in custody. Ralph was flown to Lamar, then driven to Colorado Springs, where Police Chief Hugh Harper led the interrogation. Authorities thought the Fleagles arrested on the Kansas ranch – Big Jake and sons Fred and Walter – were involved somehow, but they were confident Ralph had actually been in the bank. Ralph, however, revealed nothing during two weeks of intense questioning.

When it became clear prosecutors were going to charge his entire family for the crime, Ralph finally cracked. He offered to confess to everything



Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum (all)



**The Parrishes had been one of the most prosperous families in Lamar. After the deaths of Newt and Jaddo (above), the family suffered emotionally and financially.**

if prosecutors promised not to seek the death penalty for him and dropped all charges against Big Jake, Fred and Walter, whom he claimed were completely innocent.

**ON AUG. 13, 1929,** Ralph Fleagle gave a 13-hour confession. Ralph had robbed the bank, he said, with his brother Jake and criminal associates Howard “Heavy” Royston and George Abshier. Although Jake’s whereabouts were still unknown, police soon captured Royston in San Andreas, California, and Abshier in Grand Junction. They each confessed, finally revealing the details investigators had waited more than a year to hear.

Ralph was the brains of the outfit. He and Jake had robbed a dozen or so banks in the West, sometimes hiring Royston and Abshier to help. After scouting out the bank in Lamar, the gang drove there from Kansas for their big job armed with four rifles, six pistols, a shotgun and 1,500 rounds of ammunition.

The gang arrived in Lamar at 11 a.m., about two hours before the robbery. After the lunch hour bustle subsided, they entered the bank, and each man began carrying out his assigned task. Their careful plans immediately fell apart when

Newt Parrish shot Royston through the jaw. Royston didn’t recall much after that and didn’t know who shot the Parrishes; Ralph said he didn’t see who did it; Abshier said it was Jake.

They drove their getaway car due east into Kansas before the poses could set up roadblocks, and they admitted to luring the doctor to the Fleagle ranch. There wasn’t much he could do for Royston’s broken jaw and badly damaged teeth, so he administered morphine to ease his pain.

After two nights at the ranch, the two Fleagles and Abshier took the doctor for a ride, driving the doctor’s car and one of their own. They stopped at a ravine. The Fleagles had a short conversation and decided their captive knew too much. Jake led the doctor, unaware of his fate, out of the car, shot him, pushed him into the ravine and rolled his car in after him, Abshier said. Up to that point, Abshier said he thought they would let the doctor live.

The gang returned to the ranch, fetched kidnapped bank teller Kesinger and drove a few hours south. After stopping at a shack and throwing Kesinger in, Jake tried to pressure Abshier into killing him. Abshier refused, and the two began arguing. Exasperated, Ralph walked into the shack and fired a shot into Kesinger’s head, Abshier later said. Ralph denied this and claimed one of his comrades – he didn’t know which – pulled the trigger.

Ralph, Royston and Abshier went on trial in Lamar for murder and armed robbery in October 1929. *The Denver Post* and other newspapers clamored for death sentences for the “Lamar wolves,” as they called the criminals. Each was convicted and sentenced to hang at the state penitentiary in Cañon City, despite prosecutors’

deal with Ralph not to seek the death penalty. Their executions were carried out on separate nights in July 1930.

Meanwhile, Alderman hadn’t given up his search for Jake Fleagle, traveling to 11 states as well as Mexico following his trail. Finally, agents with the U.S. Postal Service used handwriting analysis to trace him to Branson, Missouri. On Oct. 14, 1930, 23 law officers converged on a train station in Branson where they suspected Jake might be. Jake drew his pistol when officers tried to arrest him, but the lawmen fired first, fatally shooting him in the stomach. The last of the Lamar wolves had been hunted down.

**THE DEMISE OF** the Fleagle Gang brought closure to Lamar and the victims’ survivors. It also fascinated the rest of the country. Country singer Bud Billings released a song called “The Fate of the Fleagle Gang” in 1930, which begins, “Now listen my friends and I’ll tell you a story of bandits so bold/Way out in Lamar, Colorado, they robbed the town’s bank of its gold.”

The fingerprint story became a proud chapter in FBI lore. “The Fleagle case was the first time that FBI fingerprint examiners were able to connect a single latent print left on a piece of evidence with an actual person, thus showing that person’s involvement in the crime,” the FBI’s historian John F. Fox Jr. told *Colorado Life*. J. Edgar Hoover wrote an article about the case, “The Trigger-Finger Clue,” for *Reader’s Digest* in 1947. That same year, the FBI obtained from Lamar the car window with Jake Fleagle’s fingerprint still on it to display in the lobby of its headquarters.

The window was still on display in 1964, when Fred M. Betz, the editor of the *Lamar Daily News* who covered the Fleagle case when it happened, took his young grandson, Tom, to visit the FBI building on a trip to Washington, D.C. As a boy in Lamar, Tom

Betz dug through old volumes of his family’s newspaper to read about the case. He continued his research as an adult, writing the book *The Fleagle Gang: Betrayed by a Fingerprint*, a thorough retelling that provided much of the information for this article.

The Big Timbers Museum keeps the story alive in Lamar, displaying many artifacts from that episode, including Ralph and Jake Fleagle’s pistols and Jaddo Parrish’s roll-top desk from the bank. However, for Lamar resident Jim Larrick, the events of that terrible day are more than just history. Larrick’s father, Newton Parrish Larrick, was 9 years old when the Fleagles killed his namesake grandfather Newt Parrish and uncle Jaddo Parrish. The boy and his brother went on to be raised by their grandmother, May Parrish, widow and mother of the slain men.

The family had been one of the most prosperous in Lamar, building a system of irrigation ditches and homesteading a ranch east of town. After the murders, the family suffered emotionally and financially. They managed to hold on to the ranch until the 1980s but were forced to sell it in bad economic times.

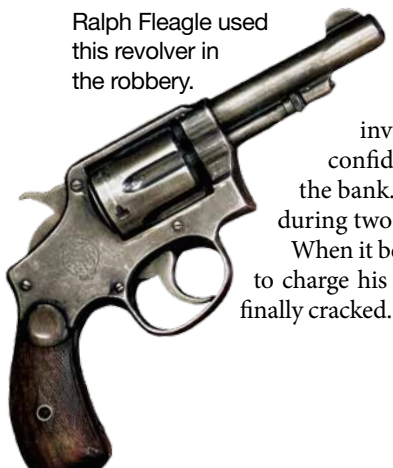
When Jim Larrick was growing up, people who knew the Parrishes would express their sorrow to him, he said. “But the further we get along, the less people talk about it,” he said.

Still, people took notice 12 years ago when Larrick started working at the same bank for which his murdered family members had worked, though the bank had since relocated across the street from the original location at Olive and Main streets. The old bank building is now Vendors Gallery consignment shop, where there are still bullet holes, though not visible to the public, inside a closet.

“From the new building, I could look out of my office right across the street at the old bank building, in wonderment or amazement, thinking that that really happened,” Larrick said. 🌿

Courtesy of Big Timbers Museum

The double funeral for banker Amos Newton “Newt” Parrish and his son, John Festus “Jaddo” Parrish, at Fairmount Cemetery in Lamar was a sad occasion for the whole community. The capture of the Parrishes’ killers brought some degree of closure.



Ralph Fleagle used this revolver in the robbery.





# Snowmass stodon

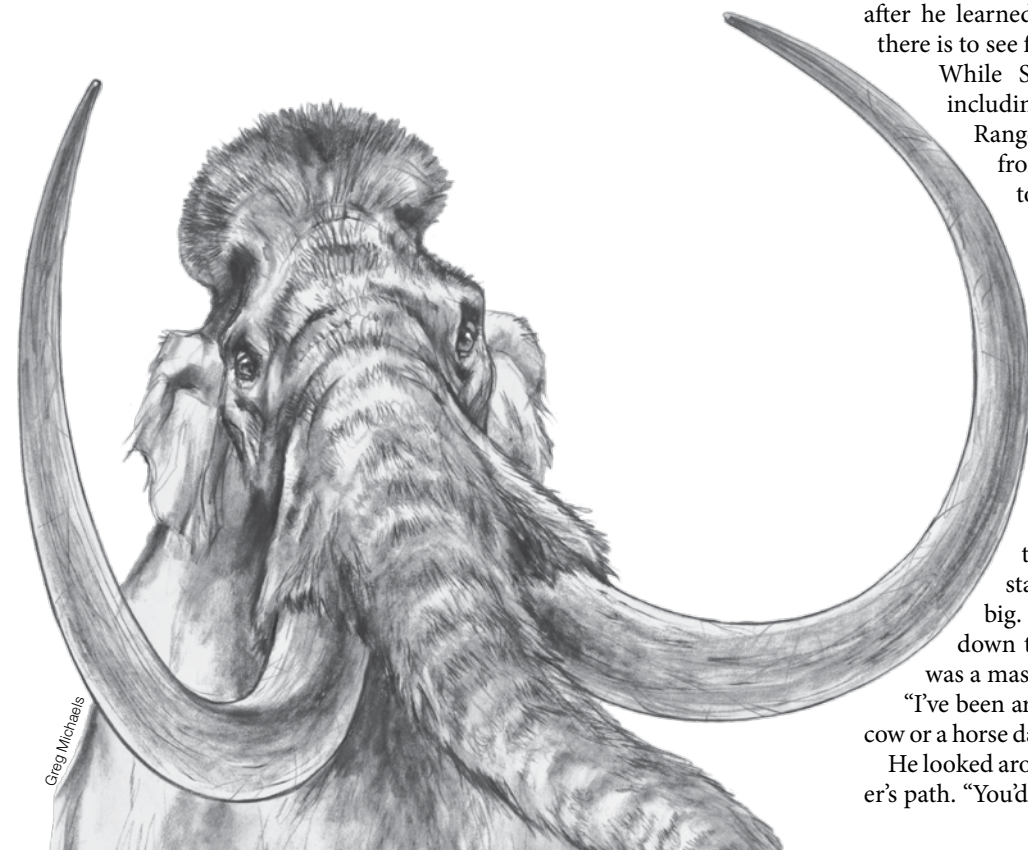
## Excavating the dig of the century

How a bulldozer operator uncovered one of the world's biggest troves of mastodons, mammoths and other ice-age giants in Snowmass Village.

story by MATT MASICH    photographs by RICK WICKER

A team from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science watches an excavator pull a mastodon pelvis, encased in plaster, from the prehistoric lakebed of Ziegler Reservoir.





**JESSE STEELE WAS** born to drive a bulldozer. His father and grandfather drove bulldozers on the Western Slope, and he started working with heavy equipment not long after he learned to walk. He has seen just about everything there is to see from the cabs of these big machines.

While Steele has unearthed some unusual things, including a few dinosaur bones while excavating near Rangely, his work mostly consists of moving dirt from one place to another. That was all he expected to do when he arrived at the Ziegler Reservoir jobsite on a ridge above Snowmass Village in fall 2010, where he and a crew from Gould Construction were to deepen a drained lake to create a new reservoir for the ski town.

The project seemed simple enough, and, for the first few weeks, it was. Every morning, Steele swapped out his cowboy hat for a hardhat and got to work dozing through layers of soft peat on the lakebed. He was nearing quitting time on the afternoon of Oct. 14, 2010, when he felt an unexpected bump jolt through his machine. Moments later, he was startled to see his bulldozer dislodge something big. He backed up, stopped the engine and hopped down to investigate. There, sticking out of the earth, was a massive, three-foot-long rib bone.

"I've been around cows and horses all my life, and I knew a cow or a horse darn sure didn't have a bone that long," Steele said. He looked around and saw more bones strewn in his bulldozer's path. "You'd better get over here," he called to his foreman,

Kent Olson. "There's something going on." Steele and Olson found giant ribs, vertebrae, a partial jawbone and part of a tusk. After a little internet research, they realized Steele had dozed up the skeleton of a mammoth. The local agency in charge of Ziegler Reservoir decided to call in the fossil experts.

**THE PHONES WERE** ringing off the hook the next day at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. The museum staff was grateful to get the call, as construction workers all too often keep quiet about fossils to avoid delays. Museum scientists visited Snowmass Village for a press conference the next week and found that the entire Roaring Fork Valley seemed to have caught mammoth fever, with thousands of people lining up to see the bones at the Snowmass Village Water & Sanitation District's offices.

Meanwhile, the construction crew fenced off the mammoth find but otherwise kept working, unearthing still more bones while the bone crew prepared to dig. Now the scientists knew they were looking for multiple animals. Even more tantalizing, one of the new finds was a mastodon tooth.

Mastodons were elephant-like giants that lived at the same time as mammoths, but it is rare to find them at the same site. The lankier mammoths, closely related to modern Asian elephants, grazed in grasslands; the slightly shorter, stockier mastodons, which came from a separate line of elephant evolution, lived in forests. Only three partial mastodons had ever been found in Colorado, compared with more than 100 mammoths. The find at Ziegler Reservoir was getting a lot more interesting.

About 30 scientists and volunteers began their work three weeks after Steele dug up the first bone. Paleontologists carefully scraped away dirt from the original mammoth, while others used shovels to



Cody Newton finds ancient bison bones at Ziegler Reservoir.

scout out new areas. The construction crew helped, too. Steele and others ran their bulldozers while a team of "blade runners" trotted next to the machines' blades to spot fossils.

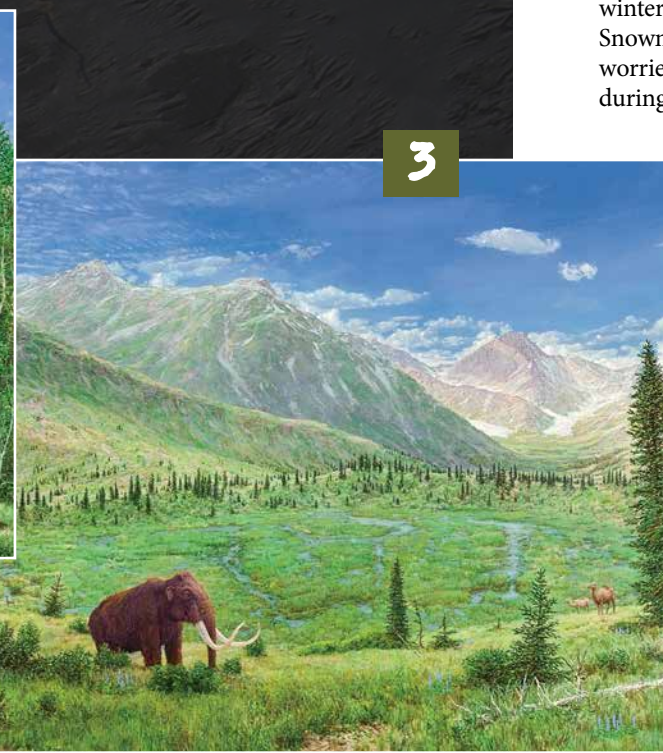
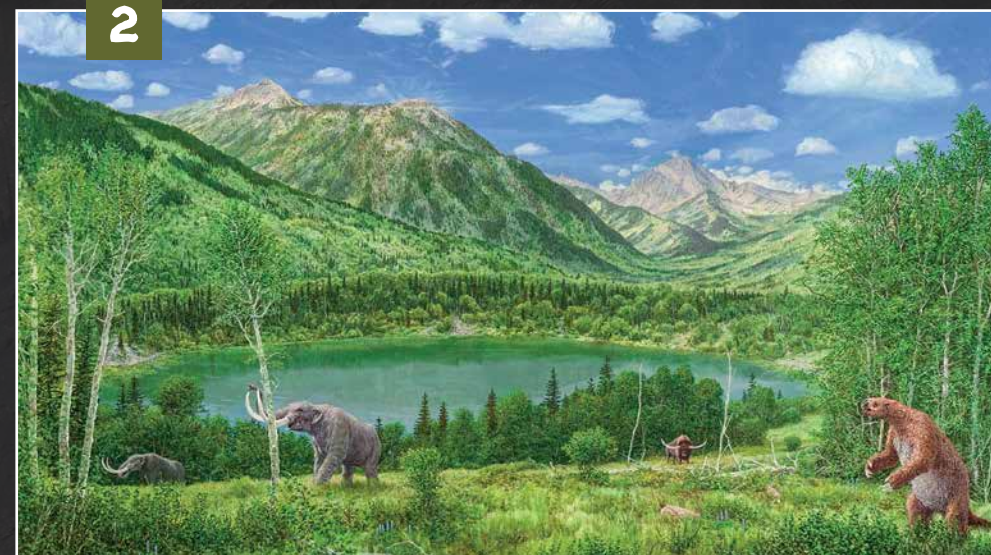
"It was total managed chaos," said Ian Miller, a curator of paleontology at the museum and co-leader of the dig with Kirk Johnson, then the museum's chief curator and now director at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

They had to work quickly. It was already November, and the winter storms that would soon dump fresh powder on nearby Snowmass Ski Resort would also bring an end to the dig. Miller worried one of the blade runners might get squished by a bulldozer during the mad rush, but, thankfully, none did.

The diggers discovered bones at a rapid clip. In the first three days, they found five different species: a mammoth, five mastodons, two ancient bison, a deer-like animal and a giant Jefferson's ground sloth – the first ever discovered in Colorado. People joked that Snowmass Village should change its name to Snowmastodon Village. That didn't happen, but the dig soon became known as the Snowmastodon Project.

Miller was pulling such long shifts – and pulling so many bones from the ground – that he barely had time to think about what a significant discovery this was. About a week into the dig, as he was excavating a massive prehistoric bison skull with horns more than six feet across, the full impact of the moment hit him. "I just stopped and took a breath," he said. "It was the first time I really got a chance to reflect and realize, 'Wow, this is world-class. This is actually happening.'"

It wouldn't be happening much longer. The snow



1. A glacier receding 130,000 years ago created a lake at Snowmastodon. 2. It was surrounded by a conifer forest when mastodons, ancient bison and ground sloths lived there 120,000 years ago. 3. It had become a marsh by about 70,000 years ago, when mammoths roamed.

Jan Vriksen (series)





Glenn Randall

began in earnest, and the dig had to shut down for the winter on Nov. 14. By that point, 600 bones and 15 tusks had been discovered – and most of the site had yet to be dug.

**THE SCIENTISTS RECONVENED** at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in late 2010 to plot their next move. Their excitement over the Snowmastodon Project was tempered by the knowledge that the site was due to become a reservoir by the end of 2011. They struck a deal with the Snowmass Village Water & Sanitation District: They could excavate the remaining fossils from May 15 to July 1, after which dam construction would resume and the lakebed would be flooded.

“We had seven weeks, and we needed to move 20 million pounds of dirt,” Miller said. He and co-leader Kirk Johnson enlisted a team of 55 scientists to work on the dig, including local experts from the Denver museum and the Lakewood office of the U.S. Geological Survey, as well as top scientists from across the world. Doing much of the grunt work were nearly 500 volunteers.

“Kirk Johnson sent me an email saying, ‘It’s the dig of century. You’ve got to be there,’” said Kent Hups, a paleontologist-turned-science-teacher at Northglenn High School. He

planned to volunteer at the dig for a week as soon as classes ended in early June. However, the night before the last day of school, he had to have an emergency appendectomy.

Hups’ doctor said he’d have to stay in bed for two solid weeks. “Duly noted,” Hups replied. Ignoring his doctor’s orders, he headed to Ziegler Reservoir a few days after being discharged from the hospital. He wasn’t about to miss the dig of the century.

Every shovelful of dirt Hups dug was agonizing, but he pushed through. His biggest find was a mastodon femur more than three feet long. He pulled the heavy bone from the waterlogged soil of the lakebed, sending a stream of water, or “mastodon juice,” pouring out of it. “It was customary to drink some of the mastodon juice when you found a big bone,” Hups said. He partook, finding it to be “gritty, with an aftertaste of ancient megafauna.”

The team was uncovering about 250 fossils each day by the fifth week. Johnson motivated the crew, offering bounties for certain bones. “Bring me the head of Ziggy the sloth!” Hups remembered him shouting at one point. But time was running out.

“In the end, we were pretty worried, working 18 hours a day,” Miller said. “We called up everybody we ever knew: former students, random acquaintances, cousins – anybody who could hold a shovel!”

They managed to excavate the entire site by the first week of July, coming home with 5,500 large bones and 30,000 small bones from nearly 50 different species. As they were packing up, a truck came to collect the four port-a-potties workers had used during the dig. The ground beneath the port-a-potties, or port-a-loos, as an engineer from New Zealand called them, was the only spot yet to be excavated. They dug, and Snowmastodon revealed its parting gift: a nearly complete mastodon skeleton, the largest discovered anywhere in the world. “We named it Portaloo,” Miller said.

When all was said and done, Snowmastodon turned out to be the most extensive high-altitude ice-age fossil site ever unearthed.

**WITH THE DIG CONCLUDED**, the scientists pieced together what they could about Snowmastodon. Using various dating techniques for the different layers of sediment, they determined the site was a time capsule spanning 85,000 years of ice-age history, from 140,000 to 55,000 years ago. The lake formed about 130,000 years ago, when a glacier melted there at the end of the second-to-last glacial period.

The area around the lake was forested 120,000 years ago, when mastodons, giant sloths and ancient bison roamed there. By 70,000 years ago, it was a marsh surrounded by grassland, providing a



Carol Lucking uses a toothbrush to clean ancient grit from the jaw of an ice-age deer excavated alongside mammoths.

home for mammoths. Fossils from this interglacial period are rare, because when the last wave of glaciers came along, they crushed and scoured away everything in their paths. But the glaciers that came along 20,000 years ago stayed in the Roaring Fork Valley and didn’t reach up the ridge, saving Snowmastodon from obliteration.

In addition to Snowmastodon’s impressive animal remains, diggers discovered startlingly well-preserved logs and plant matter.

“The place was chock-full of things that looked like they died yesterday,” said Jeff Pigata, a geologist with the USGS in Lakewood. One layer of peat opened up like pages in a book, revealing ancient leaves that were still green. The leaves, which had lain for millennia



American Mastodon

130,000-100,000 years ago



Columbian Mammoth

87,000-55,000 years ago



Long-horned Bison

130,000-100,000 years ago



Jefferson’s Ground Sloth

130,000-110,000 years ago

Snowmastodon yielded bones from 35 individual mastodons, as well as mammoths, long-horned *Bison latifrons* and a giant sloth that had never before been found in Colorado. Listed here are the dates these animals lived at the Snowmastodon site.



in unoxygenated groundwater, turned brown within minutes when exposed to air. "Pulling up sediment and finding green leaves that are 100,000 years old? That never happens – but it did," Pigata said.

By figuring out which plants and trees lived at which times, Pigata and his colleagues were able to determine what the weather was like. They were surprised to learn that past climate changes affected this high-altitude site differently from lower elevations. Researchers now have enough samples from the reservoir for decades of research into the causes of this discrepancy.

Professional scientists aren't the only ones who continue studying Snowmastodon. When Hups, the Northglenn High School science teacher, returned to class in fall 2011, he brought with him bags of soil and sediment, known as matrix, collected from the fossil site.

For the past five years, his students have sorted through the matrix with tweezers searching for seeds and microfossils. They hope to present their findings at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. Some students have become such experts that scientists seek them out by name to help the professionals identify plant species by their seeds. The experience has inspired some youngsters to seek out careers in paleontology. "I work with these students, and they're not students anymore," Hups said. "They're colleagues doing the exact same research I'm doing."

Snowmass Village continues to feel the effect of the epic find in its backyard. The town's small Ice Age Discovery Center tells the

Snowmastodon story with photos, fossils and an on-site paleontologist to answer questions. This is just the beginning, said Tom Cardamone, executive director of the discovery center. Plans are underway for a large, state-of-the-art facility, slated for an early 2019 opening. Exhibits at the new Ice Age Discovery Center might include lifelike recreations of a mother and baby mastodon, complete with sound effects of heartbeats, breathing and vocalizations; an immersive theater experience showing what Ziegler Reservoir looked like from 130,000 years ago to the present, with images displayed on every wall and even the floor; and a full-size skeleton cast of Portaloo, the giant mastodon.

Snowmastodon has also had a profound impact on Jesse Steele, the eagle-eyed bulldozer operator who kicked off the whole thing. He now treats each construction job with a paleontologist's mindset.

"I'm very, very careful anymore," he said. "I don't just slam the ol' dozer into the ground."

After all, he never knows when the next dig of the century might turn up. 🌱



To dig deeper into the story of Snowmastodon, visit [dmns.org/science/the-snowmastodon-project](http://dmns.org/science/the-snowmastodon-project), or go to [snowmassdiscovery.org](http://snowmassdiscovery.org).



Sculptor Kent Ullberg sits inside his work-in-progress "Snowmastodon." The finished sculpture was installed in front of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in 2014.



# HIDDEN IN THE SANGRES

The secluded valley town of Westcliffe is home to cowboys, creatives and a billion stars

story by MATT MASICH

photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN

The Sangre de Cristos stretch from horizon to horizon behind historic Beckwith Ranch, north of Westcliffe.





The Wet Mountains are visible in the distance as a truck heads out of Westcliffe and ascends Hermit Road into the Sangre de Cristos. Westcliffe and Silver Cliff lie in the valley between the two mountain ranges.

**T**HE PEAKS OF the Sangre de Cristos look like the mountains that all other mountains are based on.

Rising more than a mile in prominence from the billiard-table-flat floor of the Wet Mountain Valley, the Sangres form a wall of mountains with a sawblade profile stretching in a straight line from horizon to horizon. Some of the peaks are nearly perfect right triangles – a shape so prototypical that it’s what you’d expect to see if you asked a kindergartner to draw a picture of a mountain.

This panorama is the background looking west down Main Street in Westcliffe, situated at 7,888 feet above sea level on a bluff across the valley. Westcliffe shares Main Street with its twin city, Silver Cliff. The two towns, which roughly split a population of a little more than 1,000 people, are sometimes collectively called “The ‘Cliffs.”

Westcliffe is the seat of Custer County, but Silver Cliff was here first, founded in 1879 and named after the nearby cliff where miners extracted veins of silver so rich that the rocky walls looked like they were covered in aluminum foil. By 1880, Silver Cliff was the third-largest town in Colorado, but its decline began just a year later when the Durango & Rio Grande Railroad arrived in the valley and built its depot a mile west. Westcliffe sprouted up around the depot, drawing population away from its older sister city; some people in Silver Cliff lifted their homes off their foundations and rolled the buildings down the hill on logs to Westcliffe.

Before anyone mined an ounce of silver or laid a single mile of

track here, the Wet Mountain Valley was a paradise for ranchers. The silver mines and railroad have disappeared from living memory, but the ranchers remain. Sarah Shields lives in the valley with her husband, Mike, on the San Isabel Ranch, which her great-grandfather founded in 1872, three years after moving here from Lincolnshire, England, in the first wave of white settlers. The couple make their home in the original ranch house. Shields remembers hearing stories about Utes, the valley’s first inhabitants, creeping up to the house’s back window to catch a glimpse of her great-aunt Frances – they had never seen anyone with blonde hair before.

Shields grew up on horseback, where she still spends much of her time as she and Mike tend to their herd of Hereford-Red Angus cattle. They also grow protein-rich hay, for which the valley is renowned. The Shieldses feel a sense of stewardship for this land, which has been in her family for nearly 150 years. “We are the best environmentalists you’ll find,” Mike said. “If we don’t take care of the land, we’ll go out of business.”

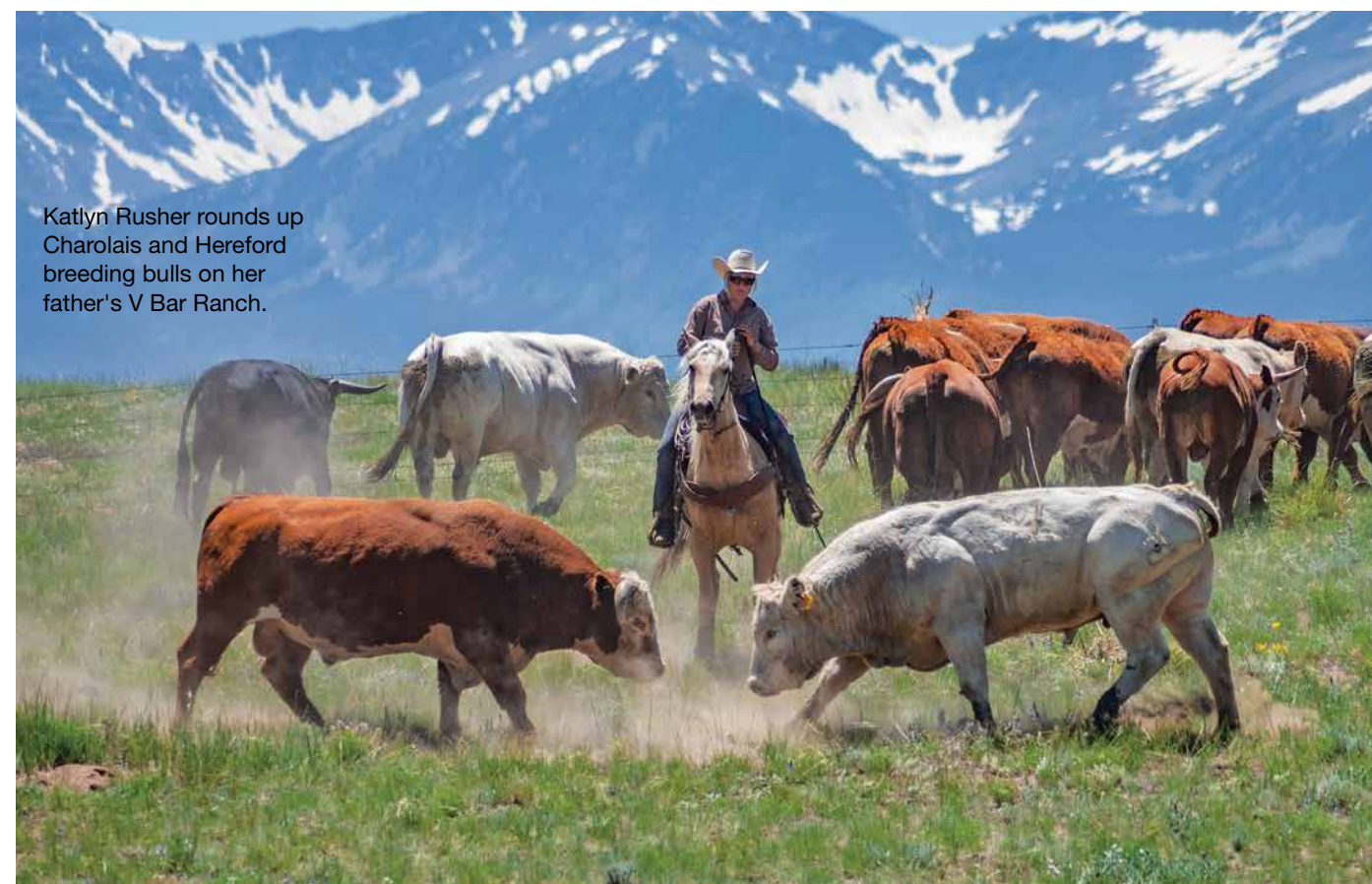
The cattle on the San Isabel Ranch bear the same Hashknife brand that her family has used since the 19th century. The couple own two other brands: the Turkey Track brand that her father gave her mother as a wedding present, and the YY Bar brand that her father’s best friend gave Mike and Sarah for their own wedding. Such ranching traditions are a direct link the past, but not everything in the valley is the same as the old days.

## A real cowboy’s cowboy hat

Photographer Bill Gillette, who has made a career of photographing ranchers in action, shows off one of his favorite cowboy hats at his Westcliffe gallery. Held together with stitches of twine and stained with sweat, the hat shows evidence of hard service atop the head of cowboy Trey Allen, who worked on a local ranch. When Gillette first saw Allen wearing it, he begged the cowboy to give it to him when he got a new one. Some time later, Gillette discovered the hat hanging on the doorknob of his gallery’s entrance.

Custer County’s population has doubled since 1990, though that means that 4,000 as opposed to 2,000 people live here now. Even though the land is still wide open compared to the crowded Front Range, some old-timers feel hemmed in. However, when the sun sets and the stars emerge, Westcliffe feels the same as it ever did.

WHILE ASPEN IS known as the “playground of the stars,” owing to its popularity among celebrities, Westcliffe has a fair claim to the title as well, thanks to the shimmering blanket of stars that covers its night sky. This valley is one of the least light-polluted places in the state, allowing the Milky Way and uncountable stars to emerge in full splendor.



Katlyn Rusher rounds up Charolais and Hereford breeding bulls on her father’s V Bar Ranch.





## Mountain Shakespeare

Actors perform *Love's Labour's Lost*, part of the Jones Theater's Shakespeare in the Sangres program. The company's main stage is inside a historic movie theater, but when local landscape architect Garrett Carlson built his Amphitheater in the Park right next door, theater director Anne Kimbell Relph thought it would make the perfect stage for *The Tempest*, which became Shakespeare in the Sangres' inaugural play 10 years ago. The beautiful mountain surroundings provide an incomparably beautiful stage. If a particularly heavy summer thunderstorm rolls in, audience members sometimes join the players on stage to wait out the rain beneath the amphitheater's rocky grotto.

Westcliffe is remote, blocked off from city lights by the Sangre de Cristos to the west and the Wet Mountains to the east, but that's not the only reason it has maintained such pristine star views. The nonprofit Dark Skies, Wet Mountain Valley has spent nearly two decades persuading local citizens and public works to put caps on outdoor lights to ensure the illumination shines down, where it is needed, and not up, where it would wash away the stars. The towns of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff have adopted the changes, and the difference has been remarkable.

"You go up the hill at night and look down, and the two towns are gone," Dark Skies President Jim Bradburn said. "We are really close to pure dark."

The International Dark-Sky Association designated Westcliffe-Silver Cliff an official Dark Sky Community, the first in Colorado and the ninth in the nation. People started coming to town specifically to experience the darkness. To aid stargazers, Bradburn and the local Dark Skies group helped corral donors and volunteers to build the Smokey Jack Observatory, which opened on the edge of Westcliffe in 2015. Observatory volunteers host free star-viewing events for anyone who makes a reservation.

Bradburn designed the observatory himself. It was a small job by his standards. In a previous life, he was a partner at Denver's Fentress Bradburn Architects, where he designed Denver International Airport, Invesco Field at Mile High and other huge projects. Bradburn is one of a surprising



Wildflowers paint the fields of the Wet Mountain Valley with a wash of color during the hot summer months, while snow still lingers at the higher elevations of the rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

number of people who have done well elsewhere before coming to Westcliffe and committing themselves to the community.

The observatory sits at the end of Main Street in The Bluff Park, much of whose land was donated by Dick and Audrey Stermer, who moved to Westcliffe after a successful career building subways on the East Coast. The view of the Sangre de Cristos down Main Street was one of the first things they fell in love with in Westcliffe, so when the land at the end of the street was up for sale, they purchased it and donated it to the San Isabel Land Protection Trust to prevent a

tall building from being built there and blocking the view.

Near the park, the couple built Cliff Lanes, a bowling alley and restaurant. The business doesn't make a lot of financial sense – bowling industry demographics say a town needs a population more than 20 times the size of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff for an eight-lane bowling alley to be profitable – but it wasn't money that motivated the Stermers. They simply wanted locals to have a year-round place to gather and have fun, and by that measure Cliff Lanes is a resounding success, serving as an unofficial community center.

People can catch first-run movies down Main Street at the historic Jones Theater, which in summer becomes a venue for live theater productions put on by the theater's owner, Anne Kimbell Relph, and a talented group of theater directors. Before Relph came to Westcliffe in the early 1990s, she had a long career as an actress on stage and screen, starring as leading lady at Denver's Elich Gardens, performing on Broadway and once touring in a play with Marlon Brando.

The Jones Theater's on-stage talent is largely local, including a generation of Westcliffe children that has grown up in the theater. Of the roughly 30 seniors who graduated from Custer County High School last year, at least 20 had acted in Jones productions and participated in the theater's summer creativity camp. "And half the kids in high

school have been in a Shakespeare play," Relph said.

Each June, the theater puts on Shakespeare in the Sangres at an outdoor amphitheater next door to the Jones building. It is a community theater, but the acting and production values seem professional. The audience arrives early to eat picnics on the lawn, with the reliably glorious weather and stunning mountain scenery providing a perfect setting – or almost perfect. A few years back, the dogs in the nearby trailer park decided that their favorite time to bark was during Shakespeare plays.

"They were barking so loud that I had to buy bones for all the dogs in the trailer park. That quieted them down," Relph said. "But the occasional noise from motorcycles? Well, there's nothing you can do."

**THE STRAY RUMBLE** of a Harley-Davidson notwithstanding, Westcliffe is remarkably serene. Because it is one of the few remaining places where it is possible to live a horse-and-buggy lifestyle, the Wet Mountain Valley has attracted two sizable Amish communities in the past decade or so.

Westcliffe is home to a wide spectrum of faiths. Despite the town's relatively small population, it has 25 churches, including the Wild West Cowboy Church, which begins Sunday services at 4 p.m. to allow ranchers to tend to their livestock in the morning, and the Hope Lutheran Church, the oldest Lutheran congregation in Colorado, founded by the German settlers who colonized the valley in 1870.

The churches don't forsake their neighbors who wind up in the Custer County Jail. Once a week, ladies from the Valley Bible Fellowship and Community United Methodist Church take turns cooking five-course, homemade meals for jail inmates. The meals are quite popular, according to a local business owner whose brother was arrested after celebrating St. Patrick's Day a little too enthusiastically.

"My brother was sad I bailed him out," he said. "He had a big ol' barbecue beef sandwich for supper, and he wanted to see what they were going to serve next."

Marilyn Keffer, a member of Valley Bible Fellowship, has coordinated the program for the past seven years, with help cooking from



## Brightening the Sangres

Greg Cook uses a chain saw to carve up a tree that has fallen across a hiking trail in San Isabel National Forest, just outside Westcliffe in the Sangre de Cristos. Each June, Cook joins fellow members of the Rocky Mountain Backcountry Horsemen to clear the trails during their Brighten the Sangres ride. They use chain saws at lower elevations, but motors of any kind are forbidden in the wilderness area higher up the mountains, compelling them to cut massive trees with hand-saws that they pack in on their horses. The North Brush and Lake of the Clouds trails, which branch off from the Rainbow Trail, are among the popular hiking routes these volunteers clear every year.

church friends. After she feeds the inmates' stomachs each Tuesday, her husband, Jerry, feeds their hearts as part of a four-man team of lay ministers who come to talk to inmates, whether about the Bible or life in general.

"There are some guys who have been in there for months and months, so they really look forward to Tuesday," Marilyn Keffer said. "They might not know anything about the word, but they always enjoy the companionship of someone from the outside coming in."

**WHILE THE SOULS** of jail inmates are finding peace, some people believe there are restless souls haunting the old Silver Cliff Cemetery, east of town. From the community's earliest days, there have been reports of eerie lights dancing among the gravestones here. Just about everyone in Westcliffe and Silver Cliff has gone to the cemetery to look for the lights, and many have spotted them. Westcliffe native Bud Piquette has collected nearly every newspaper and magazine article written about his hometown, including many historical accounts of the cemetery lights. He's also seen them with his own eyes.

"They are pastels: blue, green, yellow or pinkish, once in a while," Piquette said. "They don't necessarily appear on the gravestones but around them, shimmering as if the light were shining through water."

No conclusive scientific studies have pinpointed a cause or even confirmed their existence. Some people speculated that the phenomenon was

just reflections of lights from Westcliffe. However, when Piquette was a child, he and his family tested that theory during a town-wide blackout, and they saw the lights more clearly than ever. As for the lights' true origin, Piquette feels no need to hazard a guess.

The valley is full of legends. People still talk about the mythical Spanish gold that wayward conquistadors supposedly hid in the Sangre de Cristos' Marble Caves. A few decades back, a prospector known as Mountain Bob Leasure devoted himself to finding the treasure, building rope ladders with rungs made from old skis to explore hundreds of feet into the caves. Mountain Bob never found anything, but he did succeed in becoming a local legend in his own right.

Longtime Westcliffe residents remember the familiar sight of Mountain Bob holding court on Main Street, accompanied by his mule and his dog as he sold booklets of his short stories to tourists. He always seemed to have some new scheme in the works. From late 1993 to early 1994, he spent more than seven months inside an old mine near the Royal Gorge to break the Guinness world record for consecutive days spent underground, which stood at 210 days. When he emerged after 227 days, he was dismayed to learn that, during his subterranean stint, folks at Guinness had determined that the previous record had actually been 463 days. Mountain Bob didn't get the record, but at least he got another good story to tell.

**SKI RUNS THAT CUT** through a forested mountainside are visible west of town, but Westcliffe is not a ski town. It toyed with the idea for most of the 1980s, but the Conquistador Ski Area fizzled out and the runs are abandoned. Today, cowboys outnumber ski bums by a healthy margin. Rather than coming to ski, people come to see a place where the Old West is also the present.

Cowboys overrun the town for the Westcliffe Stampede and Rodeo, July 15-16. The Custer County Cowboy Gathering at A Painted View Ranch, Aug. 18-20, has some of the nation's top Western musicians, including Roy Rogers' old group, the Sons of the Pioneers, with food provided by authentic chuck wagons. The Wet Mountain Western Pilgrimage, Sept. 14-17, takes visitors on a tour of Old West experiences, including line dancing at the Silver Cliff Museum and tours of the restored Victorian house at the Beckwith Ranch.

The Bluff Park becomes a concert venue during High Mountain Hay Fever, July 6-9, a bluegrass festival hosted by local favorites Dry Branch Fire Squad and the Sons and Brothers Band. The music plays nonstop until about 10 p.m., by which point the sun has dropped below the Sangre de Cristos. Before the concertgoers leave, some stop by the park's observatory. Eventually, the bands silence their instruments and the last of the crowd departs, leaving Westcliffe in a stillness that is, in its quiet way, the biggest thrill in the valley. 🌲



Christopher Amundson

Greg Cook removes a downed tree from a hiking trail in the Sangre de Cristos. The peaks of that range loom behind the buggy of an Amish couple near Westcliffe, which is home to two Amish communities.

