

Vice, Family, and Development in Colorado's Mines

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## Introduction

The American West “haunts our memory as a place of national beginnings. We imagine that its tribulations, accomplishments, horrors, and misdeeds shaped our collective character, both for better and worse.”<sup>1</sup> The discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858 sparked a mass westward migration of a diverse array of men and women. As a result, significant numbers of Americans and immigrants made the cross continental trip to Colorado. For many, the American Gold Rushes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a way to forge new and better lives in an unforgiving environment. The creation of new lives was wrapped up in a wide range of desires including wealth, family, stability, and for some, adventure. The migration of transient men, single women, and families to the West as a result of the mining revolution forever altered Colorado, but also spurred the creation of new cultures and societies.

Most mining societies that were created as a result of the Colorado gold rush catered to the diverse array of needs of a transient group of men. These new ‘male focused’ mining communities created a difficult environment for family development. Mining towns were marked by extreme poverty, general lawlessness, prostitution and an overwhelming lack of authority. These factors created communities internationally notorious for their wild nature, which made them very appealing to some young and some not so young men. Nevertheless, some families came to mining towns in search of a new start. Their time living in mining communities throughout the West was undoubtedly characterized by hardship, but family settlement in mining towns created the conditions for more stable communities. This study of Colorado mining towns and three unique families living in a range of towns serves as an example of how various types of mineral

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot West, *Frontier Children* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), Forward.

production affected communities in unique ways. The Bennett, Hills, and Barbee families all lived in various Colorado mining towns and struggled on a daily basis as a result of mining life. Yet, their many similar experiences show that the family unit spurred social change in Colorado's mining towns. Family settlement had a drastic effect on the social make-up of mining communities. The existence of families in mining towns had a generally calming effect on the community, which in turn allowed for the development of labor, education, and religious based social movements.

This essay will be divided into three sections using the experiences of three families to ground the narrative. Firstly, the essay explores the hardships that families endured as a result of mining. Section one of the paper will primarily explore the lives of the Bennett family and examine how mining in Creede, Colorado shaped that family's existence. This will lend insight into the typical American mining family and many of the common difficulties faced by these families throughout the United States during this period. Section two of the paper centers on a historical analysis of Leadville, Colorado and the Hills family. It will look at the ways in which families suffered as a result of the mining industry and how families responded to these challenges with a variety of social movements including strong community relations, educational systems, and labor movements. The third section of the paper will examine these social movements spurred by mining families in more detail by examining the concept of family in relation to the experience of the Barbee family of Cripple Creek.

These three sections of my senior essay will show that the Bennett, Hills, and Barbee families all understood what it meant to be a mining family. Furthermore my analysis suggests that the difficulties faced by families spurred the creation of strong

community relations, educational systems, and labor movements in order to better the family existence in Colorado's mining towns.

### Section One: Creede, Colorado and the Bennett Family

After eight moves throughout the American Northwest, the Bennetts settled in Creede, Colorado in 1893 as shown by the young Don Bennett's diary. Edwin Bennett was initially drawn to Creede because he "heard the clarion call of adventure and riches to be found in the Creede district."<sup>2</sup> The Bennett family, along with thousands of others, saw the silver mining town as a place of limitless opportunity. Edwin Bennett, husband and father of two boys named Don and Ted, eventually abandoned his family in Creede, leaving his wife to raise the young family on her own. Her situation, unfortunately, was not uncommon and the abandoned Mrs. Bennett attempted to provide a stable home for the young boys in an environment known for its rough nature. The Bennett family lived in "a long, log house at the upper end of a town composed of tents, tent-houses and houses all strung along two sides of the one street."<sup>3</sup> Eventually the boys' mother remarried a mine laborer named Bill McCall who transported Creede's ore to the railroads for a living. The marriage to Mr. McCall greatly improved life for the Bennett family, and both Don and Ted referred to him as their father. The Bennett family demonstrates how families commonly lived in the late 1800's, which will allow for a better understanding of why social movements were formed throughout mining focused communities.

Although their life improved, as time passed on the Bennett family's experience in Creede was marked by poverty, crime, and other problems commonly associated with

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin Bennett, *Boom Town Boy*. (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1966), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, *Boom Town Boy* 12.

mining towns. The Bennetts serve as an example of how mining families, no matter how self sufficient, struggled to survive and in turn were detrimentally affected by the mining industry.

Nicholas C. Creede, born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, discovered the Holy Moses Mine in Creede in 1889, an event that started an unprecedented silver rush in the region. The town, situated in a narrow valley, was far from rail lines and difficult to access due to steep inclines. Nevertheless, “people came into Creede Camp so rapidly that the valley was not wide enough to house them.”<sup>4</sup> This event led to the rapid growth of a rudimentary mining town, which was inherently wild in nature. Individuals from all walks of life came to Creede in search of wealth. According to one early observer, Creede consisted of “prospectors, miners, assayers, merchants, barbers, black-smiths, cooks tenderfeet, saloon men, followed by gamblers Bunco artists, prizefighters, confidence men, dance hall girls, - people from every walk of life in a mad rush to the bonanza of Creede, each with one purpose in the wild scramble - to gain a fortune.”<sup>5</sup> Creede’s tumultuous silver rush and its isolation allowed for many negative aspects of society to flourish, but early financial investment in the town also allowed for some structural and social improvements.

Although Creede was known throughout Colorado as a ‘rough and tumble boom town’, it did have some essential social services and institutions in place that improved daily life for many of its residents. By 1892 Creede had a population of eight thousand people in the narrow mountain valley; this sudden growth created a community that desperately needed essential services to be safe, productive, and sanitary. Once Creede

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<sup>4</sup> Nolie Mumey, *Creede: The History of a Colorado Silver Mining Town*. (Denver: Artcraft Press, 1949), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Mumey, *Creede*, 95.

was incorporated on March 19, 1892, various community driven efforts focused on development were started and the town began to resemble the more socially and structurally advanced communities of the period. Lumber companies, hardware stores, grocery stores, newspapers, electrical services, schools, post offices, and fire departments all became firmly established by the mid-1890's.<sup>6</sup> Don Bennett recalled that these improvements somewhat improved life for families. Don was occasionally able to attend a rudimentary school, and municipal services attempted to protect the family from some of the dangers associated with mining towns such as fires, and crime, although the family was still exposed to a wide range of difficulties.

As a result of the rapid settlement of mining towns, few systems were in place to prevent crime, violence, and immoral behavior, all of which challenged the health and safety of families. Although Creede had some essential services, the town was simple and residents did not have access to many of the municipal services other American communities continually took advantage of during this period. Mining families were exposed to continual violence. According to the historian Nolie Mumey, one mother from another Colorado mining camp claimed, "we have had murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, a hanging, an attempt at suicide and a fateful duel."<sup>7</sup> Creede, like many other mining camps, struggled to enforce law and order and it lacked central authority figures such as police, courts, or city officials. It was clear that "without a legal mechanism for settling conflicts, in an environment full of young men, physical solutions

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<sup>6</sup> Mumey, *Creede*, 5-19.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, (New York: Hill and Wange, 1979), 112.

to disagreements were common.”<sup>8</sup> The disorderly nature of mining towns made life very difficult for women and children.

The experience of Don Bennett’s mother demonstrates the difficulties many women and families faced in Creede. Mrs. Bennett continually struggled to provide a home for her two sons that would be free of the corrupt influences of a mining town. Nevertheless, both Don and Ted were exposed to a wide variety of influences considered immoral during the late 1890’s. The boys were influenced by the habits of the older mine workers, “One dodge was to give us a nickel to take a chew of tobacco, which we would do and immediately run out of sight to get rid of it.”<sup>9</sup> Eventually though, the boys stopped disposing of the tobacco and started chewing and smoking. Along with smoking and drinking, the boys were exposed to violence. The use of guns was common. Don Bennett remembers one man who had “bought a new whiplash and was trying it out, limbering it up by giving it a few trial swings down First Street.”<sup>10</sup> Another man shot Creede’s sheriff by accident and was placed in custody, only to be released hours later. Don did not become a bandit or criminal as a result of growing up in Creede, but his experience speaks to the difficulties families faced as a result of their lives in mining towns.

The ‘child’ was a major component of the American mining family. Children existed as the economic and social support structures within many mining families, which emphasizes the way mining altered the concept of childhood, and in turn affected the development of the family unit. According to the historian Elliot West, mining towns

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *Boom Town Boy*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *Boom Town Boy*, 42.

were dictated by the needs of “young unwatched working men of many lands.”<sup>11</sup> Children learned to smoke, swear, and behave in a manner considered to be hazardous to moral development. Nevertheless, children matured rapidly and took on great, and sometimes even dangerous responsibilities, in order to support their families. In mining communities “children of poorer families found employment outside the home to help put food on the table, but even at the upper economic levels the opportunity of income lured many young persons into the job market.”<sup>12</sup> Mining children helped support their families at home as well. Children “helped care for younger brothers and sisters, swept and mopped, baked, hauled water, sewed, darned, and tatted.”<sup>13</sup> Although mining families were exposed to numerous hardships they worked to improve their communities and left their mark as shown by later families in Cripple Creek.

The absence of positive influences, and the presence of so many poor role models in mining towns, allowed some children to develop into ‘adults’ who many argued lacked strong moral compasses. Few churches or schools were available in the early rudimentary mining camps, which led to children being exposed to a variety of negative influences. According to West, a wide range of behaviors in mining towns “produced a new child precocious, self confident, and individualistic whom newcomers and outside critics sometimes found profligate, disrespectful, and generally offensive.”<sup>14</sup> Although this evidence is opinionated in nature, and not necessarily negative, it is clear that children were burdened with responsibility, and lacked positive reinforcement within their communities. In mining towns “young persons would grow up among influences that

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<sup>11</sup> Elliot West, “Heathens and Angels: Childhood in the Rocky Mountain Mining Towns” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14 no. 2 (1983): 146.

<sup>12</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels”, 147.

<sup>13</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels”, 147.

<sup>14</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels”, 146.

ranged from mildly disturbing to profoundly corrupting.”<sup>15</sup> The mines had a fundamental impact on the concept of childhood, creating some responsible and hardworking young people, yet this development came at a cost. Children in mines lost the opportunity to experience childhood; they were cast into the workforce to support their families where they were exposed to a variety of negative influences.

Many families relied upon their children for support, but mining communities spawned other kinds of relationships out of unique and difficult circumstances. A large proportion of mining town populations consisted of transient men without immediate families who drifted through the West working as miners. This pattern was central to the creation of mining subcultures and small communities found throughout the American West. Mining towns were socially complex places dictated by a diverse array of needs and desires. The men and women who populated Colorado’s mining towns were bound together by a common understanding of their marginality and role outside of mainstream society.

The theory surrounding the way families were created out of society’s social margins is furthered by historian Jon T. Coleman’s analysis of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis. Turner’s Frontier Thesis “linked geographic margins and national identity, placing peripheries at the heart of his interpretation of American history”.<sup>16</sup> Coleman uses as his example, the men and women of Colorado’s mining towns who existed within society’s social margins by working as prostitutes and bartenders while living a life of vice without the support of immediate family. These various types of mining men and women who lived on the outskirts of American society

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<sup>15</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels”, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Coleman, “The Men in McArthur’s Bar”, 50.

developed their own subcultures and communities. These subcultures and small communities had characteristics, which resemble modern sociological conceptions of the ‘family’ unit. These non-traditional communities provided a wide array of support structures for their members including entertainment, companionship, and housing.

Family played drastically different roles in nineteenth-century mining towns than was typically understood during this period. The silver mining town of Ashcroft, Colorado, serves as an example of how communities and family-like structures were born out of atypical circumstances, but had large impacts on the development of social movements. An Ashcroft saloon owned by Don McArthur, a local businessman, and a cabin of Charles Armstrong, a prominent social figure, “served as gathering places for a transient group of single men working in the mines at the upper end of Castle Creek Valley.”<sup>17</sup> These two locations “provided homes where the miners stopped for news, whiskey, and friendship.”<sup>18</sup> Within these communities social constructions of, “Gender, families, house-holds, and fraternal orders” all shaped “white-working class manhood.”<sup>19</sup> Men were expected to behave in a manner which fit neatly within the rough and tumble nature of mining town life. The men and women of Colorado’s mining towns created bonds out of the resources they had available to them, which allowed for the creation of alternative family structures. The shared bonds of mining communities thoroughly influenced a miner’s identity. This creation of alternative family structures based upon shared identities in turn influenced working-class goals of mining communities.

Education was poor in mining towns. Most miners did not want to invest socially or economically in their communities, because they never intended on staying long. Poor

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<sup>17</sup> Coleman, “The Men in McArthur’s Bar”, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Coleman, “The Men in McArthur’s Bar”, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 8-9.

school or no school was of course inherently detrimental to the development of the family. Many mining families did not send their children to school because their socio-economic position demanded that children work in order to support the family. The families who did send their children to the local schools were met by an overburdened school system. According to the historian Julie Roy Jeffrey, in mining communities “attempts to raise money for schools and churches faced general indifference, if not hostility,” mainly because men wanted to earn money in the camps and then settle elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon made it especially difficult for families who considered mining communities their home. An estimated one hundred students attended Creede’s first school, which opened on April 18, 1892, but there were only two teachers: Mrs. E. H. Stafford and R.B Soper.<sup>21</sup> As a result of understaffing, children were prone to ‘dropping out’ or falling behind their peers in urban communities. The lack of a strong educational system was especially wearing on women, who sought schools out in order to provide positive outlets for their children.

Don Bennett only attended Creede’s rudimentary schools intermittently. Don spoke highly of his teachers, who realized his potential as a student, but the schools were ill equipped to handle all the needs of a diverse array of students. Don’s school was situated next to the mine’s railway tracks, which created an exciting yet dangerous environment for students. Don recalled a few close encounters with the trains while playing in the schoolyard. One day, while playing, “one of the kids shouted a warning and we looked up the track to see the switch engine coming at us, tilted over at an angle of about forty five degrees. We got out of there fast but some of the kids got peppered

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Mumey, *Creede*, 60.

with gravel and cinders when the locomotive hit the ground right where we had been, a moment before.”<sup>22</sup> Don was continually getting into trouble for smoking and misbehaving and there was not much of a structure in place to help struggling students like him. One teacher told Don, “if you don’t want to learn, that is your loss not mine.”<sup>23</sup> The teacher’s attitude was not uncommon for the period. By tenth grade Don had dropped out of school, a common occurrence during this era and went to work in Cripple Creek’s Commodore Mine. Don’s educational experience emphasizes the lack of opportunities many mining families faced.

Initially, life in the mines was difficult for women due to a lack of female companionship and the perpetuation of commonly accepted social expectations. According to historian Jeffrey who specializes in gender, life was burdensome for women because men considered them a novelty and there were few women, other than prostitutes to share their time.<sup>24</sup> One woman new to the mines claimed “the men stand there and gaze at us with their mouths and eyes wide open, every time we go out.”<sup>25</sup> A feeling of exposure was coupled with the period’s expectation that women were responsible for the creation of stable and moral communities. Mining towns posed a challenge to the idea “that women were shapers and civilizers of society. Despite the sex ratio, and despite the belief that gold fever reduced rootless men to a condition far more debased than that of ordinary men, nineteenth-century society still expected women to tame and refine.”<sup>26</sup> These gender imbalances posed significant obstacles for mothers without many resources who had to care for families.

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<sup>22</sup> Bennett, *Boom Town Boy*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *Boom Town Boy*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 109.

The glaring fact that mining towns were short of women and families meant that there were few support systems in place for the families that in did in fact exist. It was generally accepted amongst many miners that a camp was no place to raise a family. According to Jeffrey, throughout large mining towns and even “remote mining center[s] men were not easily persuaded either to bring their families West or to marry and settle down. They observed the characteristics of the mining frontier which seemed to make it inappropriate for family life.”<sup>27</sup> Little in mining towns ensured that families flourished. Nevertheless, families were raised throughout the West’s ‘rough and tumble’ mining towns, and Creede, Colorado, was no exception. As Jeffrey points out, one wife of a miner claimed it was difficult to raise children because ““all classes drink high and low...Nearly all play and gamble. Two thirds swear, and the other third uses by words of every kind some very laughable ones –while others use coarse and rough ones.””<sup>28</sup> None of these influences was seen as desirable in the context of child rearing.

The Bennett Family’s experience in Creede emphasizes the hardships that mining families handled on a daily basis. As a result of the struggles of early families like the Bennett’s, later mining families demanded and created a system advocating for labor and social rights as shown by movements in Cripple Creek. Families had different ties to Colorado’s mining towns due to the commitment they made by choosing to raise their children in such an environment. These societies allowed for bonds amongst mining families, which in turn created support structures for women and children. The presence of groups of families in mining towns shaped nineteenth-century ideas and allowed for

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 127.

community improvement.<sup>29</sup> Families were far more invested in the future of mining communities than the many transient men who flocked to mining centers in order to fulfill their many unachievable dreams.

### Section Two: Leadville, Colorado and the Hills Family

In 1877 Georgia Burns Hills, a three-year old girl originally from Georgia, moved with her family to Colorado, eventually settling in Leadville, where Georgia's father operated a hardware store. Initially the Hills family lived in Denver, where Georgia's mother ran a boarding house. Mrs. Hill resisted the move to Leadville, claiming "a wild place like [Leadville] is no place to take [the children] to live."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the Hills made the move in September to the mining camp, where they hoped to start anew. The family was relatively successful running their Leadville hardware store, which catered to the needs of miners. Yet the family struggled and eventually left the town after a few years. Their cabin in Leadville was close to downtown, and the family was witness to all manners of mining town life.<sup>31</sup> Georgia and her family experienced extreme bouts of poverty, illness, and death. The Hills' experience shows how community bonds were built out of difficult circumstances and speaks to the difficult nature of family life in mining towns; but their experience also demonstrates the calming effect families had on mining communities. The hardships the Hill family was witness to lend insight into the way in which social movements were executed.

Leadville, established in the early 1870's, quickly became one of the largest silver mining camps in the country. Early Leadville was widely known as a place where chaos prevailed, making it an especially difficult place for those with families. As in all mining

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Georgia Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood" *The Colorado Magazine*, (April 1955) 112.

<sup>31</sup> Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood", 115.

towns, Leadville's population consisted of a mix of poorly paid wage laborers, successful capitalists, and a wide array of people who met the needs of miners.<sup>32</sup> Historians ED B. Larsh and Robert Nichols claim, that "before 1879 Leadville had been less than 'civil' and considerably less than 'ordered'. Indeed, well into the 1880's, neither law nor order had much precedence, over chaos."<sup>33</sup> For Leadville to become 'civilized' its population would need to change.

While the Hills Family lived and ran a store in Robinson, an outpost outside of Leadville, their lives were struck by tragedies very common for nineteenth century mining families. Robinson, an especially isolated mining camp, had only one doctor who "probably was a good doctor when sober, which it seemed was seldom."<sup>34</sup> The Hills youngest son, Harry, was continually sick and the family struggled to get necessary medical attention. The weather became especially bad in October of 1881 and the Hills were unable to get access to the doctors they desperately needed. As a result, Harry, their first born son, died of blood poisoning in November of 1881. The death was overwhelming for the family. Georgia recalled, "to mother it seemed the end of all things. We were all heart-broken. From the little window in my parent's bedroom I watched men light a big fire on the snow. They kept it going it going until they could get a grave dug under it."<sup>35</sup> The death of the Hills' son speaks to the difficult nature of life for mining families living in the mountains during the late 1800's and emphasizes the lack of support structures in place for family health and development.

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<sup>32</sup> Ed B. Larsh and Robert Nichols, *Leadville U.S.A.* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1993), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Larsh and Nichols, *Leadville USA*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood", 126.

<sup>35</sup> Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood", 127.

The Hills' experience in Leadville echoed the difficult and chaotic nature of all early mining towns. Their cabin was situated in a rudimentary tent city where they cared for a neighbor's daughter while her parents ran a dance hall.<sup>36</sup> Georgia's mother lived in a constant state of fear during her early months in Leadville and recalled, "scarcely was there a night when somebody was not shrieking, 'Help!' or, 'Murder!'"<sup>37</sup> Mrs. Hill continually expressed feelings of depression and longed to leave the mining camp, even for short periods of time, even though the family hardware store had begun to generate profit. Although, the Hill family struggled and was witness to much hardship during their stay in Leadville, their lives got easier as more families settled in the silver mining region. As more families arrived in Leadville, the social makeup of the town began to change and soon resembled a more modern and civilized community.

Initially, Georgia's mother was responsible for educating her children, but as more families moved into the area, schools were established, which was a welcome relief for the family. Georgia recalled "when the population was growing by the thousands there were schools for the children. And to one of them Madgie and I were immediately sent."<sup>38</sup> Along with education, life improved socially as well for the Hills Family. Through their hardware store, the Hills were able to forge strong relationships, which allowed them to count on community members for support and as an outlet for much needed entertainment. Their relations were not limited by race, class or background; Georgia's mother became close with Chloe, one of the only black women in their community. Chloe helped Mrs. Hill care for the children and was considered by the Hills

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<sup>36</sup> Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood", 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ed B. Larsh and Robert Nichols, *Leadville U.S.A.*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Georgia Hills, "Memories of a Pioneer Childhood", 118.

to be: “truly a friend in time of dire need.”<sup>39</sup> Although, life was still incredibly difficult for the Hills, it began to improve as more families arrived in the region.

Leadville’s social development was the result of an effort begun by poorly paid mining families. Although there were a few exceptions, such as the Tabors, it was nearly impossible to ‘strike it rich’ in the mining industry unless one had considerable financial means or backing. Most men and women who lived in mining towns worked as day laborers and were paid a menial two fifty to three dollars a day. Even though this pay was very high for the era, few workers found steady work, and the cost of living was extremely high. Mining families therefore had little economic independence. This situation gradually spurred the creation of strong community relations, educational systems, and eventually labor movements. Although, Leadville “was still a rough town one of the roughest in the West”, the “subtle forces of culture, society, and religion were persistently eroding the rowdy terrain.”<sup>40</sup> In order for a mining town to be successful, order had to prevail over chaos.<sup>41</sup> Leadville’s positive developments were the result of the “influence of such values as are necessary for the proper rearing of children-to a great extent as imposed by the wit, wisdom, and whippings of motherhood.”<sup>42</sup> The experiences of struggling mining families, like the Hills serve as an example of why families instituted reformative programs based upon education, labor, and religion within Colorado’s mining towns.

The Bennett’s experience in Creede and the Hills’ experience in Leadville both speak to the difficulties faced by families who lived in mining towns during the late

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<sup>39</sup> Hills, “Memories of a Pioneer Childhood”, 125.

<sup>40</sup> Ed B. Larsh and Robert Nichols, *Leadville U.S.A.*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Larsh and Nichols, *Leadville USA*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Larsh and Nichols, *Leadville USA*, 40.

1800's and early 1900's. Their negative experiences emphasize the way families worked to change mining communities and create social change. Difficult family experiences like those of the Bennetts and Hills forced mining families to work towards improving their communities.

### Section Three: Cripple Creek, Colorado and the Barbee Family

Cripple Creek, Colorado, serves as a strong example of how families in a different setting reacted to the difficulties faced by the Hills and the Bennett families. In Cripple Creek, families were responsible for the creation of strong community ties, education systems, and labor movements. The Barbee family arrived in Cripple Creek in 1892, hoping to start a new life in the burgeoning mining town. Lee's mother, Kitty Barbee, was quick to label Cripple Creek "a God forsaken hole", but did her best to create a home for her family.<sup>43</sup> Very much like the Bennetts in Creede or the Hills in Leadville, they lived in a tent during their first few months in the camp and Mabel attended a rudimentary school situated in Cripple Creek's Red Light District. Mabel's father, a prospector, came close to finding success in the gold fields, but was never able to fulfill his dream of striking it rich. The Barbee family's life in Cripple Creek lends insight into the strong bond between Cripple Creek's mining families and unions because labor movements protected family interests. The family unit was wholly responsible for the creation of community bonds, unions, and education systems, because they depended on these resources for their survival.

On April 5, 1891, Cripple Creek was formally designated a gold mining district, quickly sparking the opening of large-scale mining operations in the region. Although Cripple Creek developed quickly, mines in the region faced numerous economic and

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<sup>43</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 13.

structural obstacles, which in turn greatly influenced family development in the area. Initially, Cripple Creek was nothing but a rudimentary mining camp, consisting of tents, shacks, and a few saloons; but the camp underwent numerous changes as the region garnered investment. By 1891, Cripple Creek began to develop as a center for mineral extraction and processing as a result of heavy financial investment by business leaders on the Colorado plains.<sup>44</sup> Investors had initially hesitated, because the Cripple Creek gold fields had three major problems, making gold mining both costly and labor intensive.<sup>45</sup> The first difficulty was the deep location of Cripple Creek's gold veins, which required shafts of more than one hundred feet to remove gold ore. This initial problem created a second, still more difficult issue, of subterranean water in Cripple Creek's mines; in order to remove this water, pumps requiring large amounts of energy, were needed to drain Cripple Creek's gold shafts. Finally, once the sought-after ore was removed, it needed to be processed outside of Cripple Creek, which was a costly, environmentally hazardous, and labor-intensive process. Mining risks were not just treacherous for the investor, but posed significant danger to miners and their families. As more miners were required in Cripple Creek the city's population grew, encouraging family settlement, which in turn greatly influenced the social make-up of the region.

The way Cripple Creek was initially developed by mining interests foreshadowed the city's later social structure. A miner needed considerable financial backing in order to be successful. The geologist Professor Lamb of Colorado College acknowledged the value of Cripple Creek's gold holdings, but also noted that "it [would] take a long time for the district to develop and a good deal of money to find out whether there is gold at

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Guilford Taylor, *Cripple Creek*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) 32.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Cripple Creek*, 33.

Cripple Creek”. He extended this statement by saying “Cripple Creek [was] not a poor man’s camp.”<sup>46</sup> The huge investment of outside capital in Cripple Creek pitted mine owners against workers in a race to generate profit. Cripple Creek and its leadership “must be placed in the context of internal struggles among capital and workers and of daily negotiations that forged a decade of social relationships.”<sup>47</sup> Due to the mining industry’s reliance on cheap labor, the region was marked by considerable class divides. These divisions set the stage for the social involvement of working class mining families in Cripple Creek.

The Barbees lived in a similar fashion as other mining families, although Mabel’s father worked as a prospector rather than as a mine laborer. This meant even less stability for the family, as they were always at considerable financial risk, depending on the success of Mr. Lee’s claims. Mabel’s mother stayed at home to care for Mabel and her brother, while her father worked various gold claims in the surrounding hills of Cripple Creek. He occasionally short sold claims where he had found gold in order to keep the Barbees afloat financially, but the family continually found themselves nearing financial ruin. The family was in debt to local businesses and when finances were especially tight, Mr. Barbee would be forced to collect bread from local charities for the poor without telling his wife. Although life was a continual struggle, the Barbees were fiercely protective of each other and bonded through daily-shared experiences and nightly music sessions. Mabel learned music “by ear so that [she] was able to accompany [her mother] when she sang the old songs such as ‘In The Gloaming’ and ‘Oh Promise Me’. [Her]

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<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *Cripple Creek*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 7.

father would try and follow along on the fiddle but he was more at home with the jigs and polkas he had known as a boy in Kentucky.”<sup>48</sup>

Mabel found comfort in the local community of Cripple Creek as well, and spent much time with families who treated her as their own. The Winchester family was especially loyal to Mabel, and when they amassed a quick fortune through prospecting, they offered to educate and care for Mabel in a large Denver brownstone.<sup>49</sup> Her fiercely protective father would not let her leave, and Mabel’s “heart was broken the day [the Winchesters] went away.”<sup>50</sup> The Barbee family’s financial straits and the rough-and-tumble nature of Cripple Creek were especially hard on Mabel’s mother, who claimed “a mining camp is a man’s world, it means a hard, lonely life for a woman.”<sup>51</sup> Ms. Barbee spent the majority of her time attempting to run the Barbee home with few resources. She was rarely able to enjoy time away from her household duties, which was typical for the period, but difficult for a woman whose husband spent the majority of his time in the gold fields and rarely profited from his efforts. Nevertheless, the family stayed together through numerous financial difficulties, illnesses, and deaths.

Social and familial relationships, formed as a result of the mining industry, were a pivotal aspect of the development of common goals and aspirations within Cripple Creek. Connections among men of different classes, religions, races, and ethnicities shaped the socio-political structure of Cripple Creek.<sup>52</sup> In the mining region, “there were shared experiences of work and family, lodge and union, and class and ethnicity that reinforced

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 132.

<sup>50</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 8.

people's bonds and brought them together.”<sup>53</sup> These connections point to the way “families and households were as important as unions” but also emphasize the way families and social relations were tied up in the creation of the union movement in Cripple Creek.<sup>54</sup>

The connections between families and unions were incredibly strong in Cripple Creek, because unions protected the interests of families. Unions fought for higher wages, protections against injury, and in some cases even offered programs to help support the health and general well being of miner's wives and children. Families in Cripple Creek needed unions in order for their voices and needs to be met. For the working class people of Cripple Creek, the world of industrial mining held “the possibility that they could shape the new order to reflect their values and address their needs.”<sup>55</sup> The typical working class family in Cripple Creek hoped to improve their social position in a competitive, capitalist economy. The diverse array of people and families who populated Cripple Creek were all tied together by this common goal of social and economic improvement. The community created schools and spurred labor movements, all for the benefit of the working classes. Both social relations and the family unit spurred these goals. Working class family goals underpinned social and union movements in Cripple Creek.

The Barbee Family had a more alternative outlook on the development of unions in Cripple Creek than most typical mining families. They neither supported nor discouraged the development of unions in Cripple Creek, which was rare. Mabel's father, a prospector, never aligned himself with either the mine owners of Cripple Creek or the

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<sup>53</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 9.

Western Federation of Miners during the strikes of 1894 and 1903. Mr. Barbee's stubborn outlook meant that Mabel's family suffered "more than most of the others because [her] independent father boasted of being a prospector and sympathized with neither side."<sup>56</sup> Many families were fiercely protective of the Western Federation of Miners and smaller local unions, because of the social and economic benefits, which came with union or lodge membership. Yet, during Mabel's childhood she was witness to extreme violence as a result of union driven strikes. Mabel witnessed "the start of the most disastrous labor war in the history of Colorado."<sup>57</sup> Although the Barbee Family was independent of union support, their experience speaks to the large role organized labor played in Cripple Creek.

The advent of family settlement in Cripple Creek spurred both community development and the region's union movement. Unlike Creede, which never developed big industrial mining, Cripple Creek had deep shaft mines that required experienced miners. Most workers had financial responsibilities and families to support. This allowed "local communities to [become] known as good family towns, where married miners could expect to find wages, schools, and communities that supported family settlement."<sup>58</sup> These 'family men' held stronger ties to Cripple Creek and typically invested more in the success of both the working-class labor movement and the mines themselves than those who moved from mine to mine in search of work. Men with families "bought homes, built schools, and founded unions, staking their collective claim to the communities they built."<sup>59</sup> Working-class family men wanted the mines to be

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<sup>56</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 42.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 203.

<sup>58</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 38.

<sup>59</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 40.

successful, but also demanded fair wages and a reasonable workday. Family men voiced their concerns through the creation of local unions or membership with larger, more radical unions such as the Western Federation of Miners, which staged several violent strikes in Cripple Creek during the early 1900's. Family development in Cripple Creek had a generally progressive effect on the community, which allowed for social development and the creation of labor movements.

Families and unions are closely intertwined aspects of Cripple Creek's mining history. Union membership served as a way to protect skilled miners' interests and shelter their families from healthcare costs, wage cuts, and allowed for a venue to voice working-class concerns. Families actually provided essential services for mining corporations. Families housed, fed, and created communities for laborers. Unions supported families through the organization of "holidays and social events."<sup>60</sup> The creation of programs providing "social services, health care, education, and recreation"; and the labor movement's considerable "influence in politics and daily life."<sup>61</sup> The union's influence on daily life in Cripple Creek was expressed in newspapers from the period advertising their health and wage benefits. In Cripple Creek, union men were always watching to ensure that all wage laborers were due-paying members. The mutual relationship between unions and workers strengthened the working class movement and provided support for laborers against the interests of mining corporations.

The strong relationship between workers and families allowed for systems of democratic control and solidarity.<sup>62</sup> The mining union's social and economic role in Cripple Creek and other mining towns of the same era was emphasized in regional

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<sup>60</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 72.

newspapers from the 1890's and early 1900's. On September 12, 1893, a considerable proportion of miners organized by joining the Western Federation of Miners. The April 6, 1893, issue of the *Cripple Creek Sunday Herald* signaled its support of unions by claiming, "the men engaged in the hazardous and unhealthy occupation of mining should receive a fair compensation for their labor, and such protection from the law as will remove needless risk to live and health."<sup>63</sup> The newspaper furthers this argument by claiming unions protect the masses from men like R.H Locke, a mine owner, who attempted to change the daily wage from three dollars for eight hours of work to three dollars for nine hours of work.<sup>64</sup> The opinion piece entitled 'What Makes Us Prosper' found in a December 15, 1898 *Cripple Creek Citizen* emphasizes the idea that the union protected, three dollar a day wage overwhelmingly benefitted the Cripple Creek region. The article produced an economic argument, stating the combined monthly payrolls of Cripple Creek's wage laborers totaled two hundred and seventy thousand dollars.<sup>65</sup> These numbers attempted to show that "it is the wage earner that makes the town prosperous. The man with his millions spends only a certain amount of money; but the tin bucket brigade of the district has its headquarters in this city. So long as good wages are paid, may its tribe increase."<sup>66</sup> Cripple Creek's newspapers point to the strong popular opinion amongst community members that union protected wages benefitted the city as a whole.

Along with the economic benefits of union and lodge membership; unions offered families protection from illness, death, and loss of employment. The *Cripple Creek Citizen* ran a daily column entitled 'In The Mines', which reported on the large number of

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<sup>63</sup> Editorial, *The Cripple Creek Sunday Herald*, April 6, 1893.

<sup>64</sup> Editorial, *The Cripple Creek Sunday Herald*, April 6, 1893.

<sup>65</sup> Editorial, *The Cripple Creek Citizen*, Dec 15, 1898.

<sup>66</sup> Editorial, *The Cripple Creek Citizen*, Dec 15, 1898.

injuries, which were sustained while working underground. An April 7, 1899 issue described three individuals who were badly injured while working at the Thompson Mine, one man was carried by a rock fall “down to the level below, a distance of fifty feet, where he was picked up and carried to surface in an unconscious condition.”<sup>67</sup> Unions protected families from these types of injuries by offering wage, death, and medical bill reimbursement programs. Union advertisements for Unions and lodges, like The Order of Owls ran ads entitled “Protect yourself and your family” then listed various membership benefits, which included “Sick and accident benefits of 6 dollars a week, 100 dollar death benefits, and free family physicians.”<sup>68</sup> Unions protected families from a wide array of the daily struggles, which marked mining life, and ultimately allowed for security against the unknown in an environment known for its dangerous nature.

The early formation of unions in Cripple Creek played a pivotal role in the working-class negotiation of wages and allowed for the protection of family interests. In the early 1890’s Cripple Creek’s major mines cut wages from three dollars a day (which was a typical and sufficient wage for the period and region) to two dollars and fifty cents a day and extended the workday by two hours. This prompted the Western Federation of Miners, the dominant union in Cripple Creek, to strike until original wages and work day hours were reinstated.<sup>69</sup> The strike in 1894 grounded the powerful presence of organized labor in Cripple Creek.<sup>70</sup> Early union victories in Cripple Creek ensured that labor clashes would be a fundamental aspect of Cripple Creek’s history, but also ensured that unions would play a crucial role in the protection of mining family interests.

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<sup>67</sup> Editorial, *The Cripple Creek Citizen*, Dec 15, 1898.

<sup>68</sup> Advertisement, *The Cripple Creek Citizen*, April 7, 1894.

<sup>69</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 54.

<sup>70</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 64.

The union movement ensured that miners with or without families were given a voice and the ability to negotiate with larger more powerful interests in Cripple Creek. Families and unions were inherently linked, because unions ensured that miners' families were protected against the economic interests of large mining conglomerates. In Cripple Creek, the union movement was birthed with the support of the town's family community, which would therefore ensure organized labor was a protected tenet of mining society.

Although the Barbee Family was not religious, they valued education and their experience speaks to the way the family unit spurred the development of educational systems in mining towns. The Barbees were not alone in their efforts to educate their children; as more families arrived in Cripple Creek, more schools were built and better teachers were recruited. The Barbees commitment to education began at a young age for Mabel and continued throughout her youth. Mabel's father "had it in his mind to see that [she] got a good education so that [she] could be independent in [her] own way."<sup>71</sup> As discussed in previous sections, mining families were especially dependent on children for caretaking and economic reasons. Some families needed their children to work, but others hoped that education would provide an economic cushion.

Families and the creation of schools and churches had a stabilizing effect on mining towns. Families supported the creation of schools in mining towns, so that no matter how rudimentary, schools served as places of educational escape from the harsh realities of childhood in mining camps. As towns developed "parents pressed for more formal education. Early subscription schools quickly gave way to school districts and tax-

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<sup>71</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 217.

supported instruction.”<sup>72</sup> Schools in mining towns were haphazard institutions and “most young people may have gone to school rather erratically, but they took some advantage of education in the camps; and despite horror stories of disrespectful and violent students, instruction was traditional and reasonably good.”<sup>73</sup> With the arrival of families, “the tone of the mining camp changed, less violence occurred and civil order became established. Schools were built for the children and schoolteachers were imported. Churches were established which became the center of social life for the wives.”<sup>74</sup> Both churches and schools established order and allowed for positive reinforcement.

The Cripple Creek fires of 1896 destroyed much of the mining district, leaving many homeless. The community’s response demonstrated how important families were to the social support structures of the town. Mabel’s mother “sent [her] out that night to find anyone who was hungry and homeless, and that night [the Barbee’s] four rooms were crowded. People sat around on the floor until all hours telling stories of heroism and sacrifice, of children and old folks being taken to safety, of cripples rescued.”<sup>75</sup> The Barbees concern for the community of Cripple Creek demonstrates the level of commitment found among mining families. After Mabel was left penniless and was unable to finish her education at Colorado College in the early 1900’s, the community of Cripple Creek provided the necessary funds and fulfilled Mabel’s father’s dream of having a college educated daughter. Since the Barbees had done so much for the community of Cripple Creek, “miners, muckers, pugilists, bankers and lawyers” all

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<sup>72</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels: Childhood in the Rocky Mountain Mining Towns” *Western Historical Quarterly* 14 no. 2 (1983): 160.

<sup>73</sup> West, “Heathens and Angels”, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Margaret Woyski, “Women and Mining in the Old West.” In *Mining in the West*, edited by Alan Probert, 38. (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1981) 44.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 92.

secured the funds for Mabel's education.<sup>76</sup> This level of generosity in a place marked by greed shows how strong the bonds were that held Cripple Creek and other mining communities together.

Strong community relations were created as a result of family driven movements in mining towns. Mining communities were forged out of relationships based upon mutual bonds and struggles, which had their roots in shared mining experiences. The connections were created through "relationships among workers and employers, women and men, single and married men, people of different religions and racial ethnic heritages, and unions and other social and political institutions."<sup>77</sup> The creation of strong community bonds was the direct result of family settlement. These strong connections within communities allowed for the development of the social, cultural and infrastructural development of mining towns. Families allowed for the transformation of places once marked by crime, greed, prostitution, and a lack of moral guidance. As a result of both social balance and development, Cripple Creek was able to develop from a mining town into a multidimensional community, which became a highlight of the gold mining industry.

The Barbee family's experience in Cripple Creek lends insight into the way families altered the development of mining communities in an overwhelmingly positive manner. Traditional families such as the Barbees made up a large proportion of mining communities, but other modes of family life existed as well. Families and communities were created out of unique circumstances; small groups of men who lived together may have considered themselves a family, while in other families, children may have played

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<sup>76</sup> Lee, *Cripple Creek Days*, 231.

<sup>77</sup> Jameson, *All That Glitters*, 8.

as large an economic role as adults. The strong familial and community relations, which were omnipresent in Cripple Creek, set the stage for influential social movements. This town, one of the most prominent gold mining centers in the world, developed into a strong community with a strong labor movement, schools, and churches.

### Conclusion

The Colorado Gold Rush of 1858 sparked a large and diverse westward migration forever altering the social dynamics of Colorado. Along with the many desperate men who moved to Colorado in order to forge a new identity, families made the trip as well, which had profound implications for the development of mining communities. A few men struck it rich, but most did not and returned to their homes in the East. It was the families, who settled in Colorado's mining towns though, who did not and could not return East, who suffered greatly at the hands of the mining industry. This oppression, however, pushed mining families towards the social and political development of their communities. In turn, they created good out of a difficult situation.

The Bennetts of Creede, The Hills of Leadville, and the Barbees of Cripple Creek all understood what it meant to be a mining family. They lived through blizzards, fires, death, crime, immorality, and all the trappings of mining town life. Their collective experience shows the challenges families endured as a result of their involvement in the mineral industry. Some families had children who worked while others had none at all; no matter the differences, their shared experience of mining town life shows how families worked together to improve their social condition. Cripple Creek was just one example, but throughout Colorado and the West mining families worked together to forge ties, create strong education systems, and spur labor movements.

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