

## Denver's Infamous William McGaa

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

William McGaa was a Colorado mountain man who lived at various times in what is now the town of LaPorte north of Fort Collins but also encamped regularly along the banks of Cherry Creek. He claimed to be the son of the Lord Mayor of London and that he had a family estate called Glenarm in Scotland.

That he was there among the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapahoe proved valuable to William Larimer in acquiring land from the Indians to establish St. Charles. McGaa had native wives, thus claiming he had the authority to make the land transfer. The town was quickly renamed Denver to curry favor with the Kansas Territorial governor.

Denver's Wewatta and Wazee streets are named for two of McGaa's wives, and, for another, what is now Court Place was called Wapoola. Champa Street was named by him after a Sioux word for chokecherry, and Glenarm was named after his supposed Scotland estate.

McGaa named a street for himself, too, but because of his own debauchery it was soon renamed Holladay. Then the Holladay family declaimed the honor because the street was one of saloons, brothels and 'low-life establishments,' and so finally it became Market Street.

McGaa had but one accomplishment, his son, William Denver McGaa, born in 1859, and noted as being the first child ever to be born in Denver, but his reputation was otherwise so miserable that he went mostly by an uninspired alias, "Jack Jones."

Much of this information is from an article by columnist Dick Kreck in *The Denver Post* dated August 22, 2008. Another undated, unsigned internet article entitled "Mountain Men and Life in the Rocky Mountain West" covers the McGaa story, and I also found an entertaining, long out-of-print book by John White, a fellow of Queens College, Oxford, called "Sketches from America", London, 1870.

White, in his extensive travels, made his way to Denver where he met McGaa in the personage of "Jack Jones, surnamed the 'Pioneer,' a very old and famous explorer of Colorado." He was "anxious to hear what [he] had to say for himself and sought many interviews with him for the purpose of obtaining information. On all these occasions he was so uniformly and thoroughly drunk, that his evidence could not be taken."

White finally, "by some lucky chance" found McGaa in a "state approaching sobriety" and fancied he "was about to draw out very interesting tales of adventures among the Rocky Mountains." But the "'Pioneer' kept throwing such longing looks toward the hotel bar" that White offered to buy him a drink, which was accepted cheerfully.

White described an American saloon custom of putting "two tumblers, one empty, the other half full of water, along with a bottle of the selected spirit" before the "intending drinker who helps himself according to his taste and capacity." Mr. Jones, to his consternation, "did not trouble the water at all." McGaa quickly got drunk, and White didn't get his story.