

Denver's Long, Wicked Street

By Dennis Payton Knight

Abraham Lincoln considered him an unworthy intriguer. Congressional archives say he was "as amiable a man as ever served in Congress, good-natured, kindly, cordial and always diplomatic." Intermingling smoothly with conservatives and radicals, he rose to Speaker of the House and eventually to Vice President. He aspired to the presidency and might have made it if he hadn't fallen to a national scandal involving Congress, cash and stock bribes in exchange for votes and actions favorable to the Union Pacific Railroad. On the scandal, he expounded, "It seems as though all the devils were let loose on me; and if you think this is an exaggeration, ask anyone you meet who has lived in my district."

Schuyler Colfax, known at his peak as "Smiler" Colfax, was the man for whom the world's longest street is named. Some measure the avenue at 26.2 miles from its exit off Interstate 70 in Golden to where it rejoins the interstate in Aurora; others cite it at nearly 50 miles from Heritage Road in Golden to Headlight Road in Strasburg.

From the foot of the Rockies, Colfax travels through Lakewood, crosses the South Platte, then navigates canyons formed by skyscrapers, city hall and the state capitol building. It threads miles of mom-and-pop operations, car lots, restaurants and chains, bisects downtown Aurora, and finally spills onto Colorado's rolling plains. It seems always to be in a state of revitalization never quite accomplished, but always optimistic.

It has been called "the longest, wickedest street in America" and there is ample evidence along the way to support that distinction. The beat generation's Jack Kerouac wrote about Colfax, and the movie, "Every Which Way but Loose" shot scenes in front of Kitty's Adult Emporium as proof of the street's wickedness.

In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, Colfax attracted thousands of tuberculosis victims coming for Colorado's curative climate. Good homes and neighborhoods clustered about the hospitals and sanitariums built for them. Financial, professional, business and government employment flourished, and Colfax Avenue became the address to have for the wealthy and elite class.

A downfall began after the Panic of 1893 and many mansion owners were forced to rent out rooms. Then, after the silver market crashed, development in Capitol Hill concentrated on apartments. Demographics changed yet again after the Second World War when lenders preferred new construction and there was massive white flight to the suburbs. Homes were sold to developers for high rises or left abandoned. Colfax became a miles-long neighborhood of renters and transients.

On Colfax in Lakewood was a tuberculosis sanitarium, the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society, or JCRS. Property on its front was developed in the 1950's as JCRS Shopping Center. For decades it has been home to one of the most heavily visited establishments in Colfax history, Casa Bonita, a Mexican restaurant loved for its 30-foot waterfall, cliff divers and strolling mariachi. (Casa Bonita is just as unloved for its food, but that's another story.)