

How Denver Got Its Castle

By Dennis Payton Knight

It's less than an hour's walk from the castle to Windsor Gardens, but the Red Baron could have spanned it by air from his uncle's castle in a minute. Baron Walter von Richthofen was the uncle and godfather of the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, the World War I German flying ace. "Baron" means roughly "a man entitled to his own castle."

Baron Walter was born in 1850 in Silesia, then part of Prussia, later Germany, then Poland. In 1869, before serving in the Franco-Prussian War, he enjoyed a trip to America convincing him this was a land of opportunity. He returned after the war, found his way to Denver, and was impressed. A city in its infancy, he decided to grow up with it. He helped found the Denver Chamber of Commerce and established a real estate company. An eloquent salesman, he even promoted a rail line to get prospects to his offerings.

Much of this essay I credit to an article by John Koster in *Wild West Magazine* in March of 2018. Koster detailed how Richthofen got rich once and went broke twice while building Denver up, and in the process built his castle in what is now Denver's Montclair Park neighborhood.

He also built a German beer garden, rare then in America, "where wives didn't patronize saloons and didn't care much for the women who did." It had brass bands, and men actually danced with their wives, sometimes right after church. Respectable Denver disapproved, however, and the business failed.

Walter then took his English-born wife Jane and family back to Germany to visit the big Richthofen clan. She loved Germany, Walter preferred Denver, and so they divorced. The children stayed in Germany with Jane, and Walter returned to Denver to court and marry another woman, Louise.

He wrote a book called *Cattle-Raising on the Plains of North America* (1885), proclaiming Colorado's front-range to be "the largest and richest grass and pasture region of the world, and that it will probably soon become the most important beef-producing country on the globe."

Money flowed, but then the catastrophic winter of 1886 wiped out the range-fed cattle industry, and the Baron turned to building the castle the other Richthofens called "Louiseburgh" after his wife. Finished in 1887, it featured 21 rooms, towers, a stone bridge over a moat, and gardens stocked with deer, antelope and wild canaries.

In those years tuberculosis was ravaging rich and poor alike. Cleaner environs were sought by the suffering wealthy, and German spas pursued whole milk as a remedy. Denver had clean air, and Walter had plenty of milk, so in 1888 he unveiled his "Swiss milk cure" for tuberculosis at what he called the "Molkery" (from German for "dairy"), a hotel and attached dairy farm where TB sufferers could sip unpasteurized milk and soak up sun on porches. Then scientists found a cure, and quackery fell to the side. Today the "Molkery" structure serves as a Montclair neighborhood civic building.

The Red Baron likely never stayed in the castle, because in 1891 the Richthofens sold it so they

could travel. Then, when the panic of 1893 knocked the bottom out of Denver real estate, Walter returned to open an art gallery, health spa and hotel, but he was finally reduced to selling books from the tailgate of a wagon to cover expenses. It is still lived in but overgrown now and hard to see from the street. But drive by 7020 East Twelfth some time and see what you can of Denver's own Richtigshofen Castle.