

How Denver Got So Catawampus

By Dennis Payton Knight

It started when Bill Larimer platted the street system of what became the original Denver to run parallel to Cherry Creek, 45 degrees off center from the four cardinal compass points. Those running northwest to southeast he numbered, and those perpendicular got names. The nuisance of such a map is that it is catawampus to simple navigational references, with directions involving turns to the northeast or southwest being beyond the average spouse, teenager, and cabby.

That nuisance would have been tolerable if the succeeding town planners had kept Larimer's faith when the town grew beyond his original layout. Instead they succumbed to college learning and aligned the new corridors to go strictly by the compass, North to South, East to West. That left the existing downtown area disoriented and askew of the expanding metropolis it anchors.

The plotters then abandoned their momentary genius by designating the new east-west streets as "avenues" with their own separate set of numbers. This resulted in cornfield meets such as the one a few blocks west of the Platte River where 15th Street collides with 29th Avenue, Boulder Street, and Umatilla Street, forming an intersection of several different points.

15th Street runs southeast to interconnect at the other end with Broadway and what should be 15th Avenue. Except city fathers then promptly renamed 15th Avenue to Colfax after an obscure Vice President who would never have found fame except for Denver. That convergence of streets is where they built city hall and the state capitol. With the confusing array of streets and directions, they had to put a spire on one and a gold dome on the other just so people can find them.

In 1892 the Brown Palace Hotel emerged, barely fitting into a triangular junction involving 17th Street, 17th Avenue, 18th Street, 18th Avenue, Tremont, Court Place, and Broadway.

Dozens of other such complex interconnections dot the perimeter of downtown Denver. One of them, at 27th Street, 26th Avenue, Welton Street, and Washington Street, became known as Five Points, sharing the name of the street car stop at the connection. In the decades of the twenties through the fifties, Five Points became internationally known as "The Harlem of the West," a predominantly African-American neighborhood where business and commerce thrived.

Among the butchers, grocers, tailors, drug stores, barbers, and hair salons were clubs where prominent national jazz artists played. Ellington, Basie, Miles Davis, Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday, and others were regular headliners. Attracting large, diverse crowds of jazz lovers, they were themselves attracted to Five Points because they were accommodated at the fine Rossonian Hotel even when the Brown Palace and others downtown were closed to them.

While the neighborhood, like other urban centers, has had economic upheavals since its heyday, it thrives again now with a diverse cultural makeup. But after all the years, like the rest of downtown Denver, Five Points still sits, happily catawampus to the rest of the world.