

The Human Mole of Julesburg, Colorado

by Dennis Payton Knight

James Michener's novel, "Centennial," is historical fiction set in a large geographic triangle with its points roughly at Denver, Laramie and North Platte. Because that is the setting for many of my own life's experiences, I identify with Michener's evocative scenes and colorful characters, many taken from real places and real people.

The book features, for instance, a fictional Italian character who digs large caves. He is based on a very real Uberto Gibello, a stone mason from Italy who arrived in Julesburg, Colorado in 1880, worked on the railroad, saved up, and, in 1887 established a homestead nearby. That's where he became known as the "Human Mole."

Homesick for Italian wine, Gibello planted a vineyard on the homestead, digging cement-lined trenches from the South Platte River for irrigation. But his system failed, so he quit farming and became a dowser instead, using water witching skills he had been taught in Italy. Detecting spots for local farmers to sink wells, he became sought after for his successes. He was well liked, though odd, living like a hermit in a tent on his barren homestead.

Subterranean structures were popular in those days as protection from Indian raids, and so the quirky Italian moled into his property, situated near a deep, rugged wash known as "Devil's Dive." After his first underground sanctuary was accomplished, he kept going until he had another one, bigger and better.

And then the bachelor dug some more using his pickaxe and shovel, and the wheelbarrow he jokingly called his "wife." Over 23 years, Gibello had hollowed out a complicated system of rooms connected by a 9-foot wide tunnel that spanned over half a mile. The largest cavern was 350 feet long, 6 feet tall and 10 feet wide. A stone staircase led down to a 150-foot foyer in which pictures were hung on the dirt walls. Some of his rooms had sod beds, tables and niches carved into the walls.

Stephanie Waters, in her book, "Forgotten Tales of Colorado" (The History Press, 2013) writes, "Uberto guarded his incredible underground den with the fierce pride of a lion. In fact, when historians tried to restore the old Platte Trail, which ran through his property, he flatly denied them access and even dug a deep trench across his road to prohibit trespassing. Some reports stated that the old man demanded that travelers paid a fee when passing through his land and shot at those who did not comply."

People called him crazy to work himself to death without purpose, but he said he had to work hard because he didn't want to get "seek" and die. Mental illness did, however, claim Uberto's life at age 75 in September 1910.

He was in his cave on his sod bed, trying to cure his dyspepsia using a crackpot remedy, eating baked dirt and sand, with which he was well supplied. And with that, Uberto Gibello, the Human Mole, bit the dust.