

## A DRINK AT THE CASTLE

*By Fred Hobbs*

During the 1940s our family lived in a government housing project just north of Denver's former Lowry Air Force Base. It was called Encio Village (a fancy created word for the letters N-C-O ... non-commissioned officers). The population consisted mostly of the families of air corps sergeants and civilian wartime workers.

The homes were brand new, but very small modest frame structures designed to be temporary. By contrast, nearby was the neighborhood called Montclair that boasted handsome sturdy brick homes with manicured lawns and stately trees ... and an authentic castle built by a scion of an aristocratic German family, Baron Walter Von Richthofen. Walter was the cousin of Manfred Von Richthofen, the famous air ace known as "The Red Baron."

Construction of the first phase of the 35-room "uber-mansion" was completed in 1887. The original structure was typically Germanic and had a "fortress" look to it. Later, an addition created architectural features in a style more in keeping with an English country estate.

The 12-block walk from our house to Montclair Elementary School and back took us right past the castle. My buddies and I were intrigued by the sumptuous mansion and by the stories of the Baron, who founded Montclair as a separate town before it became part of Denver. Walter was a promoter and some say something of a con man, involved in several ventures, including at least one spectacular failure.

At the bottom of the hill below the castle was the Baron's "molkery" where cows gave milk along with effluvia that was supposed to have therapeutic value to the patients at the adjacent tuberculosis sanitarium he operated. Understandably, this undertaking was a bust.

The castle was surrounded by a stone wall. An iron gate at the entrance to the grounds kept out intruders including inquisitive school boys, until one day the gate was left open and one of the more adventurous lads in our circle issued the familiar childhood challenge ... "I dare you ..." in this case: "... to walk up and ask for a drink of water." We then invoked the old "one potato, two potato" elimination game you may remember with the deciding line, "my momma told me to choose this very one." My friend, Jerry was the chosen one.

Reluctantly, he passed through the gate and up to the massive wooden (probably oaken) door. As he described it, a servant opened the door, glowered at him and asked what he wanted. Jerry stammered the answer and was about to be turned away by the doorkeeper who then heard our giggles and guffaws. "Oh, alright, but I won't let you in the house. You can use the garden hose. Bring your friends too if you wish."

The episode wasn't quite as dramatic as we might have wished, but for eight year-olds in those more innocent days of yesteryear, it was pretty daring.

Years later, accompanied by a camera crew, I was given a tour while reporting a TV news

feature on the sale of the home. But more important, my friends and I from the “projects” could say truthfully, we had a drink at a real castle!