

America's Rooftop: The State Nearest Heaven

By Loweta Kimball

For many years Colorado seemed too stark and desolate to attract even the heartiest of explorers and settlers. As early as the 17th and 18th Centuries, French trappers moved from the Mississippi and Spaniards moved north to Santa Fe. But both groups were turned away by the proud Indians of the Colorado Plains and in the mountain valleys by the powerful Utes.

In 1820 when Major Stephen H. Long led an expedition across the high plains in the eastern part of the state, he pronounced it, "A useless desert, unfit for cultivation." The writer, Washington Irving, commenting on the report said, "The mountains will always remain a wilderness because there is nothing to tempt the curiosity of the white man."

Irving was wrong! There was temptation aplenty in 1868 when gold was discovered at a site called Cherry Creek in what is now Central Denver. Within a year, over 100,000 hopeful souls poured into the territory and the slogan became "Pikes Peak or Bust."

While cattle barons and vacationers were civilizing the eastern plains and the Rockies, the part of Colorado west of the Rocky Mountains remained relatively untouched. For all of the stark beauty of Western Colorado, the high ground of central Colorado is the state's real treasure.

Colorado has an average elevation of 6,800 feet with some 1,100 peaks soaring more than 10,000 feet high and 53 peaks above 14,000 feet – making it literally the state nearest heaven. And although its scenery has made it a magnet for tourists from all over the world, until the 1860s, it was hardly known.

Nicknames for Colorado are The Centennial State, The Highest State, Rocky Mountain State, and Switzerland of America.

Leading Colorado industries have been agriculture, coal and molybdenum mining, gas and petroleum production, tourism, food processing, aerospace, and electronics. Of late, micro-breweries and marijuana are two industries rapidly narrowing the gap between budding new endeavors to leading industrial enterprises.

The sport of skiing is synonymous with Colorado which has two of the nation's most famous winter resorts – Vail and Aspen/Snowmass. From these two and other Colorado ski resorts, more than 10 million lift tickets are issued each year.

As a state with a young healthy sports minded population, do you sense a clash brewing among the skiing industry, micro-brewing industry and marijuana industry?