

Soapy Cleans Up in Denver

by Dennis Payton Knight

Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith, II, came from Round Rock, Texas, to Denver in 1879 at the age of twenty, established his lucrative business peddling soap on Larimer Street and promptly cleaned up, or cleaned out, the local gullible. His "Prize Package Soap Sale" was the ingenious con that made him famous.

With a flair for selling, he would set up a stand and, with bystanders beginning to take notice, methodically remove bars of five-cent soap from a suitcase. He would wrap some with paper currency of different denominations, then wrap those and the others in his bag in plain paper, mix them up with due drama, and peddle them to the now sizable crowd at up to five dollars a bar.

Soon a thrill in the crowd would purchase a bar and excitedly unwrap it to find a hundred dollar bill. With that, the crowd would quickly snap up the entire inventory consisting mostly of only soap.

It was a swindle Soapy Smith would continue for nearly two decades and expand into other large scams including fake stock exchanges and sham lottery offices. He soon organized other conmen in the city and proclaimed himself boss of Denver's underworld.

He wisely targeted only travelers and businessmen passing through. Not only did he not scam the locals, he also built a reputation as a philanthropist with donations to churches and the poor. He kindly offered his saloons to preachers for Sunday services, and all the while dispensed kickbacks to lawmen and town politicians on the payroll.

Soapy Smith owned the popular Tivoli Saloon and Gambling Hall, over the door of which Soapy Smith hung a sign reading "Caveat Emptor." Few of his patrons could read anything, yet alone Latin, and so they didn't know the warning meant, "Buyer Beware." It is said Bat Masterson at one time worked as a dealer at the Tivoli.

Smith's younger brother Bascom came to Denver and opened business with a cigar store in front and in back a gambling parlor. Bogus diamond auctions were also part of the action the two brothers dealt in.

Eventually the citizenry began to frown on the wide-open vices and city officials changed their welcoming attitude, so in 1892 Smith moved his attention to similar operations in Creede, Colorado. But the silver panic happened and by 1893 Soapy was back in Denver operating the Tivoli which had never closed.

Soapy Smith's legitimate operations and occasional cons continued in Denver until 1897 when he left for another gold-rush fortune at Skagway in the Alaska Klondike. A year later, in July, 1898, vigilantes cornered him demanding return of \$2,600 in gold he won from a miner in a Three-card Monte game. He claimed it was all fair and honest. His last words were "My God, don't shoot!"

Soapy Smith's grave, saloon and legend are still in Skagway. You are welcome to visit the sites and learn about his story. But don't buy the soap.