

# Casa Bonita

DIVE INTO MADNESS  
AT LAKEWOOD'S CULT RESTAURANT

story by MATT MASICH    photograph by JOSHUA HARDIN

WITH AN INCONGRUITY seldom found outside the realm of dreams, a pink Spanish colonial edifice rises up from a strip mall on Colfax Avenue in Lakewood, a mile west of Denver. Its 85-foot bell tower, seemingly borrowed from an old church in Puerto Vallarta, casts its shadow on an ARC Thrift Store, a Dollar Tree and the shopping center's other nondescript neighboring storefronts. This is Casa Bonita, a Mexican restaurant that has been making the surreal real since 1974.

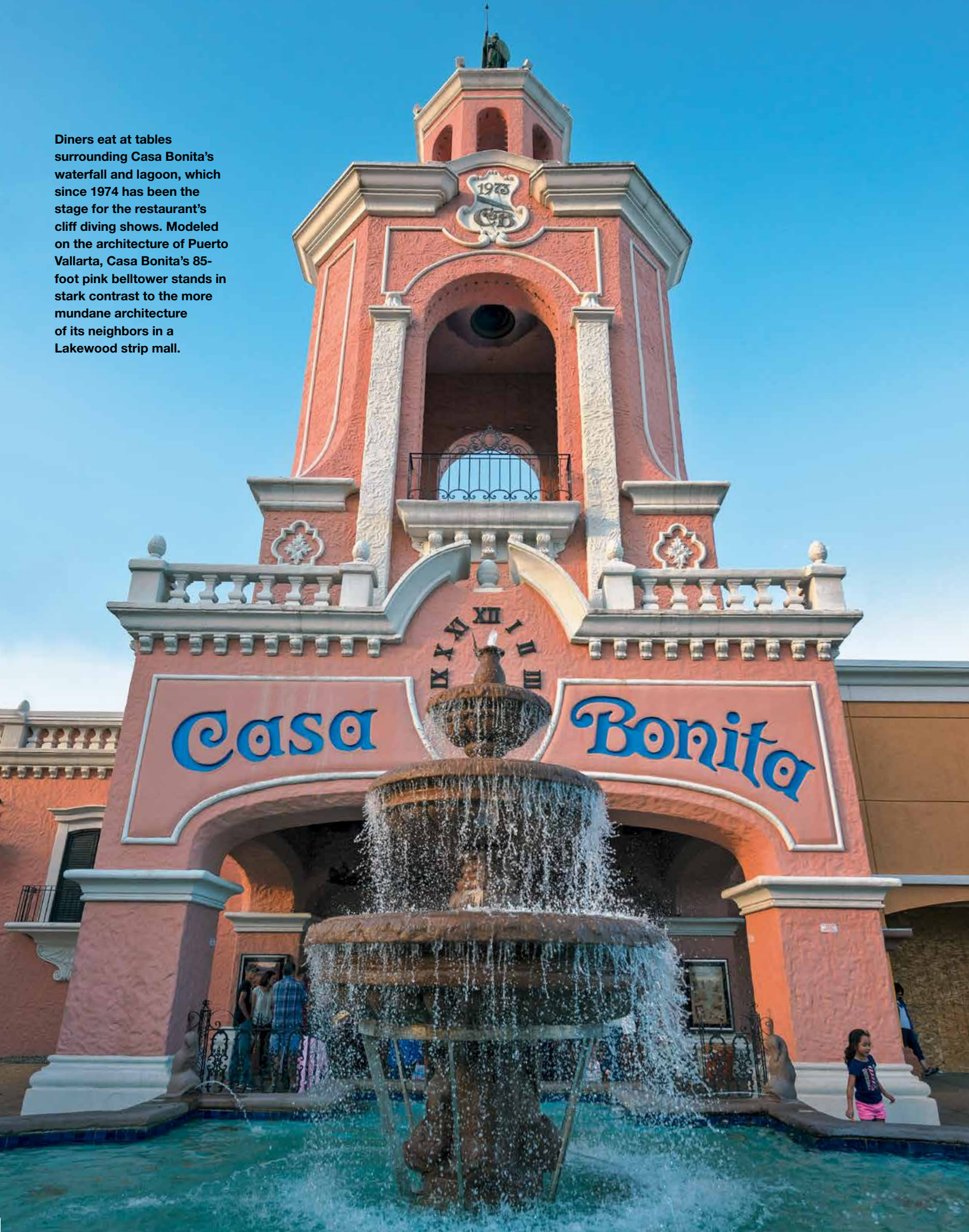
As unusual as the outside of Casa Bonita is, it only hints at the wonders inside. The cavernous interior seems impossibly large, filled with a jumble of architecture that gives the appearance of several Mexican villages crammed next to and on top of each other. The sun might be shining out in the

real world, but inside Casa Bonita it is perpetual night, as there are no windows, and the ceiling is painted black. Every day here is a festival, with mariachi bands often roaming the central plaza, but the music never entirely drowns out the most prominent sound: the crashing of the waterfall. At some restaurants, having a 30-foot indoor waterfall cascading off a huge volcanic cliff would be impressive enough, but at Casa Bonita it simply sets the stage for the Acapulco-style cliff divers who are the establishment's calling card. Every 15 minutes, someone dives from the cliffs into the pool at the bottom of the waterfall.

Presiding over it all is Casa Bonita's General Manager Mike Mason, who calmly strolls the premises with a dapper, unflappable demeanor. His deadpan countenance contrasts



Diners eat at tables surrounding Casa Bonita’s waterfall and lagoon, which since 1974 has been the stage for the restaurant’s cliff diving shows. Modeled on the architecture of Puerto Vallarta, Casa Bonita’s 85-foot pink belltower stands in stark contrast to the more mundane architecture of its neighbors in a Lakewood strip mall.



The hapless zookeeper never remembers to fasten the chains tight enough around Chiquita the gorilla in one of Casa Bonita’s recurring skits.

with the giddy, wide-eyed expressions on the faces of the children who make up a large proportion of the thousand or so patrons at the restaurant’s 179 tables. If Mason acts as though his bizarre surroundings are perfectly normal, that’s because, to him, they are.

Suddenly, gunshots erupt. Children scream, and the magazine writer in attendance flinches in momentary terror. Mason is unfazed. The gunshots are just blanks, part of the Black Bart skit that has just begun on the cliffside stage. The same gunfight plays out every evening at this time, followed by a dive show, sword-fighting pirates, more dives and an escaped-gorilla skit. So routine is the occasional pop of gunfire to Mason that once, not inside Casa Bonita, he was in a situation where real guns started firing, prompting everyone but him to hit the deck.

With so much going on, it can be easy to forget that Casa Bonita is a restaurant, albeit an unconventional one. People line up to order before entering the dining room, being served Mexican and American dishes on trays, cafeteria style. Patrons walk up a ramp, past real-looking concrete palm trees, to a “transfer person” who acts as a sort of air-traffic controller to direct people to their tables. There is a tiny flagpole on each table, and when diners are finished with their meals, they raise the flag to indicate to their server that it’s time to bring the sopapillas. Besides the cliff divers, sopapillas – squares of deep-fried dough served with honey – are the biggest draw at Casa Bonita. The entrees have their fans and detractors, but the sopapillas are universally loved.

CASA BONITA IS such a landmark in the Denver area that many are surprised that it didn’t originate here. It was the brainchild of Oklahoma-born Bill Waugh, who started the first Casa Bonita in Oklahoma City in 1968, branching out to a handful of locations

in Texas and Arkansas before opening in Lakewood in 1974. The Colorado version was the last Casa Bonita to open, and it is the last Casa Bonita remaining. It was by far the most ornate and elaborate of the restaurants, which might be the reason for its success. Another possible explanation for its staying power: The original Oklahoma sopapilla recipe had to be completely reconfigured for Colorado’s high altitude, resulting in a uniquely tasty product.

Mason, who grew up three miles north of Casa Bonita in Wheat Ridge, first came to the restaurant the year it opened for his 15th birthday party. “I hadn’t seen anything like it before,” he said. “It looked like a whole different world.” That very day, Mason decided he had to work here someday. As soon

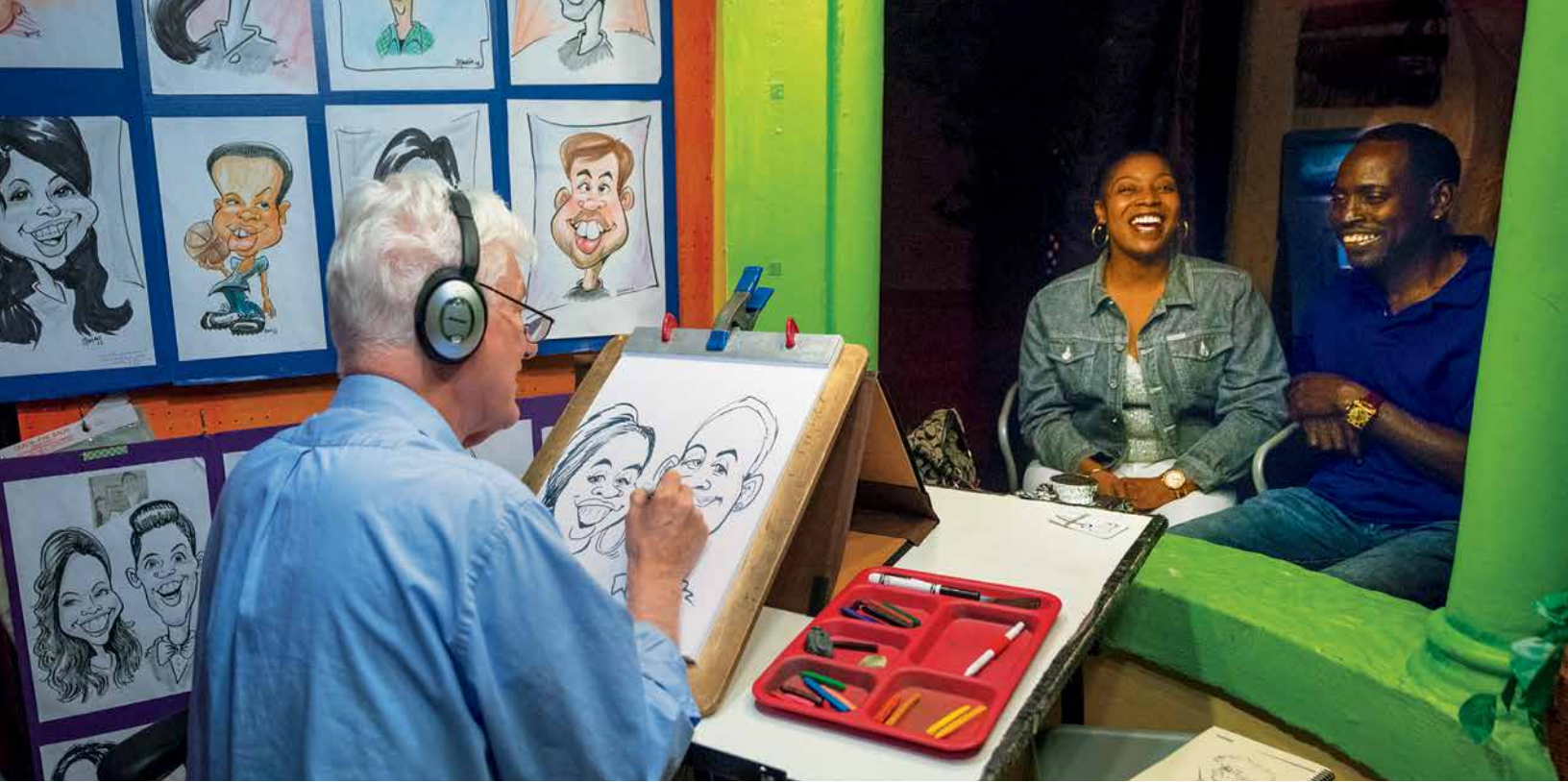
as he turned 16 and was legally allowed to work, he got a job at Casa Bonita, and he is still here 40 years later. As incredible as it seems, he isn’t the longest-tenured person on staff. Purchasing Manager Jim Gronert has been at Casa Bonita since opening day, and Mason’s colleague Eileen Mullen, who also joined the crew as a teenager, is another 40-year veteran. “It’s like a big, crazy family,” Mullen said.

Even when employees move on, Casa Bonita stays in their blood. Mason recently welcomed a reunion of servers from the 1980s who arrived wearing their old uniforms. “They have to wear bigger shirts and bigger pants, but they still had their old buttons and nametags, which they were showing off,” he said.

In some cases, this “big, crazy family” becomes real family. Mason met his wife when they both worked here, and he estimates around 20 more married couples met while working at Casa Bonita. Many other employees are part of the second and third generations of their families to work here. Mason’s father and brother-in-law worked here; Mullen’s mother used to work here, and her daughter currently does. Mullen’s brother comes to Casa Bonita with his wife

With so much going on, it can be easy to forget that Casa Bonita is a restaurant.





After finishing their meal, Michelle Alexander and Stephen Bolden have their caricatures drawn by Chuck Morris. The table featured in *South Park* is real – just ask to see the “Cartman table.”



## Yes, it's a real place

**THE LONG-RUNNING** television show *South Park* accurately depicted Casa Bonita's cliff divers, caverns and sopaipillas, making it seem so impossibly fun that many non-Coloradans assumed the restaurant was made up.

When Abby Hoffman and her husband, Peter, moved from Denver to Seattle, one of the first questions people asked about their hometown was whether Casa Bonita was real. When Hoffman confirmed it was real, and that she'd been there many times, people reacted with “pure delight,” she said. “One friend had to immediately excuse herself to call her husband and share this exciting news.”

Upon finding out Casa Bonita is an actual place, people from around the world have made pilgrimages here.

for their wedding anniversary – this was the scene of their first date.

As Casa Bonita has surpassed four decades in existence, it has become a family tradition for customers, too. People who once came here as children now bring their grandchildren. They have gotten older, and the city all around them has changed dramatically, but, remarkably, Casa Bonita looks almost exactly the same as it did the day it opened. Even the skits that the divers and actors perform on the cliffs are nearly identical.

One thing has changed in the last decade, Mason said. While families with small children have always been a big part of the clientele, there has been an influx of teenagers and young adults in recent years. This boom is attributable to one thing: *South Park*.

In 2003, Mason got a call from the producers of *South Park*, the popular animated show set in a fictional Colorado mountain town. The show's creators, Colorado natives Trey Parker and Matt Stone, wanted permission to depict Casa Bonita in an episode that was to air in less than a week. Mason was a little uneasy – he knew that *South Park* is famous for making fun of pretty much everything. However, the *South Park* folks assured him that this episode would pay homage to Casa Bonita rather than make a mockery of it. The restaurant gave its OK, then anxiously tuned in to Comedy Central to see the results.

The episode, titled “Casa Bonita,” exceeded their wildest dreams. The plot centered around foul-mouthed elementary schooler Eric Cartman's desperate attempt to get invited to his friend's birthday party at Casa Bonita, which he describes as “my most favorite place in the whole world.” Cartman dreams of seeing cliff divers, exploring the haunted Black Bart's Cave behind the waterfall and eating endless servings of sopaipillas. The episode ends with an epic finale at Casa Bonita, sending Cartman into a state of utter bliss. *South Park*'s creators really did go to childhood birthday parties at Casa Bonita. “That was your dream as a kid to go to Casa



Melissa Moonie juggles fire on the cliffside before diving into the water. In addition to juggling and diving, Moonie performs as the gorilla.

Bonita,” Parker said in the DVD commentary to the episode, which he rated as one of his favorites.

As a result of *South Park*, people around the world wished aloud that Casa Bonita was a real place, and when they found out that it was, they immediately put a visit here on their bucket list. Business surged, and more than a decade later, there's still a 10-percent spike in customers each time the Casa Bonita episode airs in reruns. People are amazed that what seemed like exaggeration on *South Park* truly was a faithful recreation of the restaurant. Even the table where Cartman ate sopaipillas exists in real life – just ask to see the “Cartman table.” When Parker and Stone returned to Denver for the opening of their musical, *The Book of Mormon*, they brought the cast and crew to dinner here.

As Casa Bonita grew from a Colorado institution to a worldwide phenomenon, it also increased local interest. *South Park* inspired a teenage Melissa Moonie, a native of nearby Golden, to come for dinner, and while she was here she saw a notice that Casa Bonita was hiring cliff divers. “I saw the diver out there, and I said, ‘He's pretty

good, but I bet I could do this,’ ” she said. Moonie, who had been a competitive gymnast through middle and high school, won the diving job, which she learned fairly quickly, though she confessed it was a bit difficult to train herself to land on her head rather than her feet.

Moonie learned other skills on the job, including fire juggling, which she performs on the cliff before swan diving with flaming torches in either hand. When she's not diving, she sometimes

dons the gorilla suit in a skit in which she leads a hapless zookeeper on a chase through the dining room, giving high fives to children as she races past.

As Mason and Mullen watched the scene unfold –

one they've seen thousands of times – he turned to her and said, “It's been 40 years, and it's still cool to people.” Mullen nodded, reflecting a moment before replying, “And it's still cool to us.” 🌿

**WANT MORE CLIFF DIVERS?** *More gorillas? More food and fun in a festive atmosphere? Visit [coloradolifemagazine.com](http://coloradolifemagazine.com) to see a web exclusive of all the great photos we couldn't fit in the magazine.*

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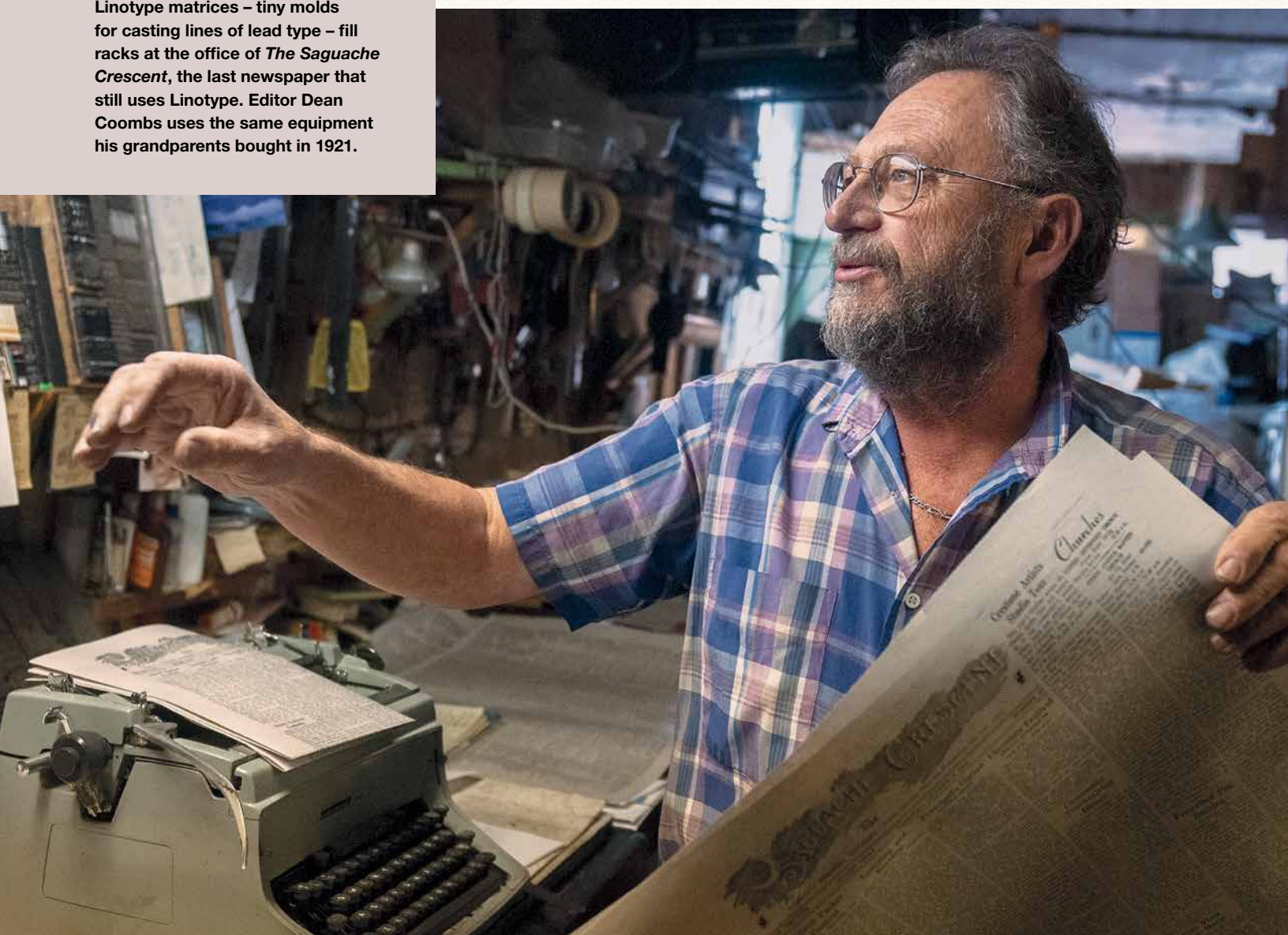


Hayden Jones dives into the lagoon after scaling the recreated volcanic cliffs. People watch from their tables or explore the restaurant to find interesting vantage points, such as the bridge in the cave behind the waterfall. The diving performances, which occur every 15 minutes or so, are inspired by the legendary cliff divers of Acapulco, Mexico.





Linotype matrices – tiny molds for casting lines of lead type – fill racks at the office of *The Saguache Crescent*, the last newspaper that still uses Linotype. Editor Dean Coombs uses the same equipment his grandparents bought in 1921.



# Saguache's Newsmen

## & LINOTYPE'S LAST STAND

story by MATT MASICH    photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN

THE LOCAL COWBOYS eating breakfast at the 4th Street Diner & Bakery in Saguache, a town of 500 in the northwest San Luis Valley, look like holdovers from another era.

IF THEY WERE to travel back in time to 1874, when Saguache, pronounced “suh-WATCH,” was founded, they wouldn’t look too out of place.

The cowboys give a nodding welcome as strangers step into the diner, out-of-towners who stopped in Saguache after zagging west on Highway 285 instead of going south toward the Great Sand Dunes. The travelers order some of the diner’s enormous cinnamon rolls, sit down at a table with their coffee, then immediately return

to the counter with a look of alarm.

“There’s a 100-year-old newspaper on the table,” they tell employee Kendra Adolph. “You’d better get it off of there before someone spills coffee on it.”

Adolph smiles and asks them to check the date on that seemingly ancient issue of *The Saguache Crescent*. What looked at first glance to be a historic newspaper, with its old-fashioned lettering and complete absence of photographs, turns out to be this week’s edition. The strangers feel

as if they’re in a time warp, and when it comes time to pay for their breakfast, they worry that the diner won’t accept such newfangled things as credit cards. Not to worry, Adolph replies, reassuring them that Saguache has, indeed, joined the 21st century. That’s true – mostly.

Saguache has changed over the years. For instance, the building that houses the 4th Street Diner has been, at various times over the past century, a saloon, an ice cream parlor, a plumbing shop and a laundromat.

But some things have never changed. A hundred years ago, the yellow-and-green wooden storefront down the street was home to *The Saguache Crescent*’s printing office, and it still is today. And nearly every day, Dean Coombs – the newspaper’s publisher, editor and sole employee – produces the *The Crescent* using the exact



same Linotype machine his grandfather purchased in 1921, four years after taking over as publisher.

Coombs' family has put out a new issue each week for 5,500 weeks and counting. Coombs, 63, has been running the show since the late 1970s.

"I've been at this almost 37 years straight," he said. "If it's not your life, then you can't do it."

While Coombs has been hunkered over his Linotype machine all these years, the world around him evolved. Linotype, a typesetting contraption that uses molten lead to cast a "line o' type" for printing, was cutting-edge technology in the 1880s and was standard newspaper equipment through the 1960s. Today, Linotype newspapers aren't just rare, they're practically extinct. As far as Coombs can tell, *The Crescent* is the only newspaper in the world that still uses this method. The paper has become such an anachronism that curious travelers regularly peek through the front windows just to watch Coombs work.

Coombs' Linotype machine – or machines, as he has a backup in the office and another in storage for spare parts – is a Rube Goldberg-esque marvel of the industrial age. Each black metal device is immense, standing as tall as Coombs. To the uninitiated, they appear confounding in their complexity, with their whizzing belts and wheels, spinning rods and swinging mechanical arms.

As Coombs sits at a strange-looking keyboard typing in letters, the Linotype's whirring sounds are joined by a tinkling clatter as tiny metal matrices drop into place. Each matrix is a little mold for one letter of type. When Coombs finishes a line, the machine injects hot lead onto the matrices to form a lead "slug" containing the line of type. In this way he creates *The Crescent*, line by painstaking line.

Coombs assembles the slugs into something resembling a lead newspaper page with all the letters backward and takes it to the printing press, which has been in the family for as long the Linotype machine. The printing press has moving parts that rock back and forth, and when Coombs was an infant, his parents hooked his baby carriage to this press to rock him to sleep.

## DECLINE AND FALL OF HOT-METAL TYPE

**THE SAGUACHE** *Crescent* is the last newspaper in the country produced using Linotype, the hot-metal typesetting system that once was the industry standard. In fact, *The Crescent's* editor, Dean Coombs, isn't aware of any other newspaper on the planet that uses Linotype.

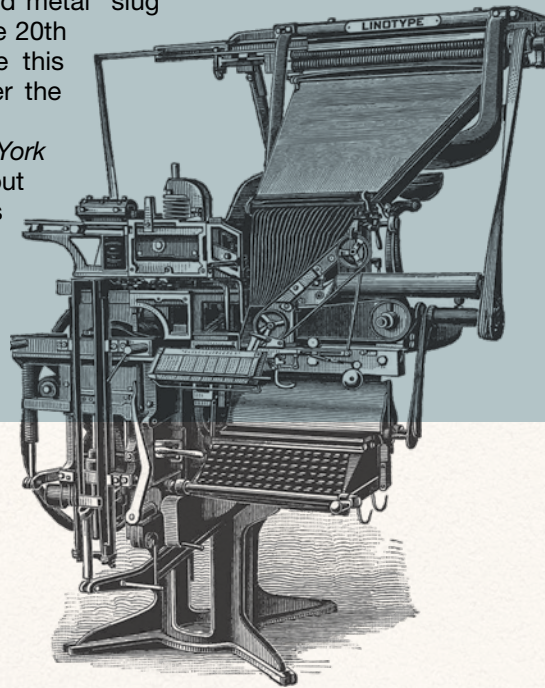
Coombs has two working Linotype machines in his press office. They are the same ones his late parents used, still bearing faded labels reading "His" and "Hers." Coombs' grandfather purchased one of them new in 1921, and his parents bought the other second-hand in the 1970s. There is no Linotype repairman to call when the devices inevitably break down, so Coombs has another machine that he cannibalizes for spare parts. Linotypes are so obsolete, and so massively heavy, that a used one can often be gotten for free – provided you're willing to move it.

Linotype was an incredible innovation when it was invented in 1884. Instead of setting type by hand, letter by letter, printers could type in an entire line of text and cast a solid metal "slug" from molten lead. For most of the 20th century, newspapers were made this way, before computers took over the job in the 1970s.

The last issue of *The New York Times* made with Linotype came out in 1978, the same year Coombs became publisher at *The Crescent*.

**Linotype was cutting-edge technology in the 1880s but now is long obsolete.**

International Printing Museum



Coombs' father died in 1978, and his mother died in 2002, but *The Crescent's* office is basically as it was when they left it. Calendars from years long past still hang on the walls. One of the oldest calendars, from 1958, lists a dozen or so businesses from Saguache and surrounding towns, nearly all of which closed their doors decades ago. A sign tacked to the wall, which reads, "The time to collect last month's bill is this month," was most likely put there by Coombs' grandfather, who died in 1935.

When it's time to fiddle with the Linotype machine, Coombs uses a century-old heirloom screwdriver. The most modern

equipment in the shop is a fax machine – he has never owned a cell phone and doesn't use email. Even the house keys in his pocket are the exact same keys he used as an elementary schooler in the 1960s, the brass worn and burnished with age.

If Coombs has assembled a sort of living time capsule around himself, it has



People in Saguache provide articles for *The Crescent*, and Dean Coombs types them into his whirring, clanking Linotype machine.

been more by accident than by design. He is too busy, he said, to bother updating anything that works fine just as it is.

"When you always have something else to do, you don't stop to change anything," he said. His focus is always on the next week's issue – and the next week never stops coming. When his father died of a sudden heart attack the day after

Christmas 1978, the grief-stricken family still printed the paper that day. "People said, 'You're crazy,'" Coombs said. "I didn't know what they were talking about. That's like saying, 'Oh, somebody died in the lifeboat – we'd better stop rowing.' No, I think we'll keep rowing."

Since he became publisher, Coombs has taken one sick day and has never gone on

vacation. Bill Hazard, a friend of his since childhood, said Coombs' parents were the same way. "They never went anywhere," Hazard said. "The paper was their life – it was everything to them." It's difficult to imagine Coombs without *The Crescent*, or *The Crescent* without Coombs, Hazard said. "The paper really is him. When he's gone, the paper's going to be gone with him."



*The Saguache  
Crescent* only  
prints good news.

That assessment is probably right. Coombs has no children to take over the family business, and the world's few experienced Linotype operators are long past retirement age. A college student sent him a letter asking to be his apprentice. Coombs never replied. He doesn't want to think about *The Crescent's* fate after he's gone. "If I worry about it, it'll just consume me with worry," he said.

Simply closing the paper and retiring is too daunting to consider, as it would be a lot of work to wind down an operation that has been going uninterrupted since the 19th century.



"It's almost easier to just do it," he said. "It's like falling in a river: You can either fight like hell to get out or just ride it downstream to the ocean." Joining Coombs on the ride is his partner, artist Judith Page, with whom he owns and operates the Magpie Gallery, where she

sells her art and African imports in the storefront adjacent to *The Crescent*.

Coombs carries on his family traditions, whatever the future may bring. He never wavers from his mother's mandate that *The Crescent* only print good news. People are going to find out about the bad



The Linotype creates lines of type from hot lead that are assembled into a newspaper; the slugs' text is upside-down and backwards, but Coombs can read it just as easily as regular text. At Saguache's 4th Street Diner, Kendra Adolph receives the latest issue of the paper.

news anyway, Coombs said, so there's no need for him to dwell on it.

He employs no reporters, relying instead on the citizens of Saguache to bring him their stories each week, sharing the latest on town festivals and school functions. A recent issue featured headlines such as "Social Media Event" and "Gluten-Free Diet More Than a Fad?" – sentiments that would likely have been incomprehensible to the newspaper's original Linotype operators.

While *The Crescent* provides community continuity by sheer dint of its sustained existence, it also preserves Saguache's collective memory by regularly featuring articles on local history. In addition to the occasional article on the infamous cannibal Alferd Packer, who was arrested in Saguache in 1874, the paper recounts stories about hometown legends like Red Buck, the supposedly unbeatable racehorse whose defeat in a dramatic 1880 race sent the town into turmoil.

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*The Crescent* has itself made the news in recent years. CBS News recently aired a television segment on the last Linotype newspaper, inspiring a wave of visitors to drop in to chat, or just gawk, as Coombs attempts to go about his routine.

Seated at the 4th Street Diner & Bakery, Saguache cowboy Dave Winter reads the latest issue of *The Crescent*. When he moved to Saguache a dozen years ago and read *The Crescent* for the first time, he was

amazed that it only covered good news.

"I thought it was the strangest newspaper I'd ever seen," Winter said. "There was no drama." He quickly came to appreciate it. "I'm a three-tour Vietnam vet, and I've been married and divorced five times," he said. "I've had enough drama."

*The Crescent* serves a vital role in the community, though Coombs laughs whenever someone refers to the paper as "the town's soul." That would be overselling

it, he said. But it is a comfort to the people of Saguache to know that the newspaper that traces its history to their town's earliest days still puts out a new issue each week, and will continue to do so as long as Coombs has anything to do with it. 🌻

TO SEE A VIDEO of Dean Coombs using his whirring, clattering, clanking Linotype machine at The Saguache Crescent's office, visit [coloradolifemagazine.com](http://coloradolifemagazine.com).

The newspaper office has been a downtown fixture for more than a century, while its yellow-and-green paint scheme dates to 1970.

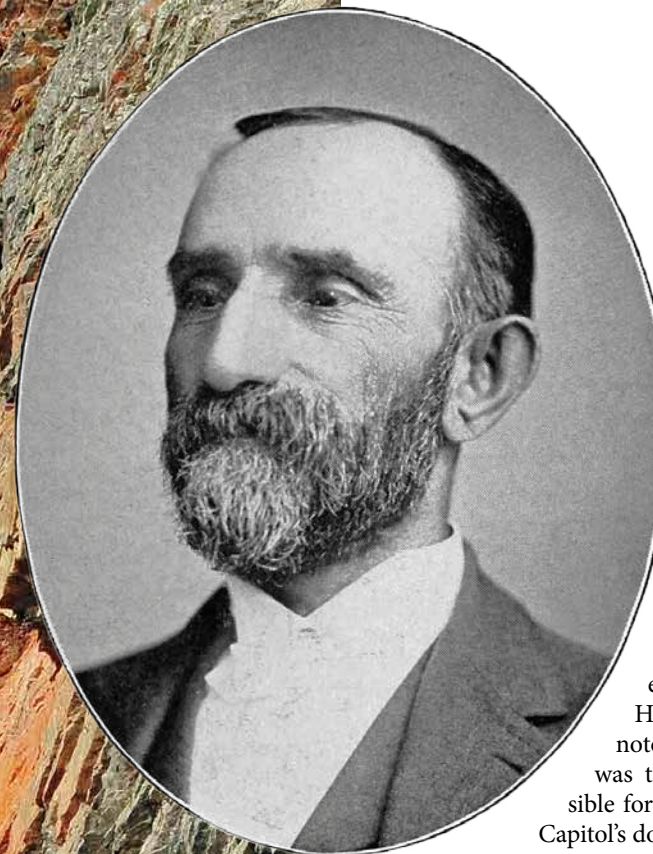




Colorado's Ute-speaking,  
cannibal-catching,  
*dynamite-blasting*  
**ROAD  
BARON**  
**OTTO MEARS**

by MATT MASICH

The Million Dollar Highway along treacherous Red Mountain Pass uses the roadbed Otto Mears built in the 1880s. His workers dangled down the canyon walls on ropes, lit dynamite fuses, then got pulled back up to safety before the charges exploded.



OTTO MEARS WAS known as “the ubiquitous Mr. Mears,” and for good reason – any time something interesting happened in Colorado’s early years, he tended to play a leading role. Mears was the pathfinder who blasted roads into canyon walls, linking the rich mines of the San Juan Mountains with the rest of the world. But he also was the Russian Jewish immigrant who spoke the Ute language with a Yiddish accent while brokering peace between whites and Indians. He was the amateur sleuth who captured notorious cannibal Alfred Packer. And he was the master of political intrigue responsible for putting the gold on the Colorado State Capitol’s dome.

OTTO MEARS MADE several fortunes in the course of his 91 years on earth and at one point was considered a more powerful figure in Colorado than the governor, but he started out with nothing. Whatever the opposite of a silver spoon is, that’s what he had in his mouth when he came into the world.

Born in 1840 to Jewish parents in the Russian Empire, Mears was orphaned by age 3 and spent his early life with various relatives. At 11, he was shipped to San Francisco to live with his uncle, only to find upon arrival that his uncle had moved to Australia. He had to work to survive, selling newspapers, milking cows, driving a dairy wagon, tinsmithing and running a general store. It was the start of eight solid decades of hustling.

Mears joined the 1st California Volunteer Infantry Regiment when the Civil War broke out. His enlistment papers described him as having black eyes, black hair, standing 5-feet-5-1/2-inches and weighing 150 pounds. As a soldier, he campaigned against rebels and Indian tribes in Arizona and New Mexico, but the resourceful young man still had time for a side business, making a large profit baking bread for his regiment.

He mustered out in 1864 and used his bakery money to buy a store in New Mexico, moving it the next year to Conejos in Colorado’s San Luis Valley. There he started a wheat farm, grist mill and sawmill to sell flour and lumber to the Army at nearby Fort Garland, moving his operation north in 1866 and founding the town of Saguache.

Left: Jay Krishnan  
Inset: Rowell Art Publishing Company





Joshua Hardin

Red Mountain, five miles south of the city of Ouray, gets its distinctive color from iron oxide rocks, but it was the area's gold and silver ore that brought an influx of miners and spurred Otto Mears to build his Million Dollar Highway here. Mears went from building toll roads to building railroads, the most famous being the Rio Grande Southern. Here he poses in front of his favorite engine, which he named Ouray after his friend, the Ute chief.



Denver Public Library

WHILE MEARS' EARLY business ventures in Colorado were successful, he made his first real fortune thanks to a chance encounter in 1867. He was traveling alone with a wagon laden with grain over 9,000-foot Poncha Pass, where the road was little more than a rude trail big enough for a single donkey. The wagon toppled on the rough terrain, spilling its contents everywhere. Just then a rider approached: William Gilpin, Colorado's eccentric former territorial governor.

Gilpin greeted Mears, who was scooping the loose grain back into the wagon. As Mears shoveled, the governor pontificated, launching into a speech outlining his vision for Colorado's future, a vision that saw the mountains' barely passable burro trails replaced by engineered stagecoach roads and eventually railroads. If Mears were to build a well-graded wagon road over Poncha Pass, Gilpin continued, he could easily recover his construction expenses by charging a toll. By the time Gilpin finished his pep talk, Mears had decided on a career as a toll-road baron.

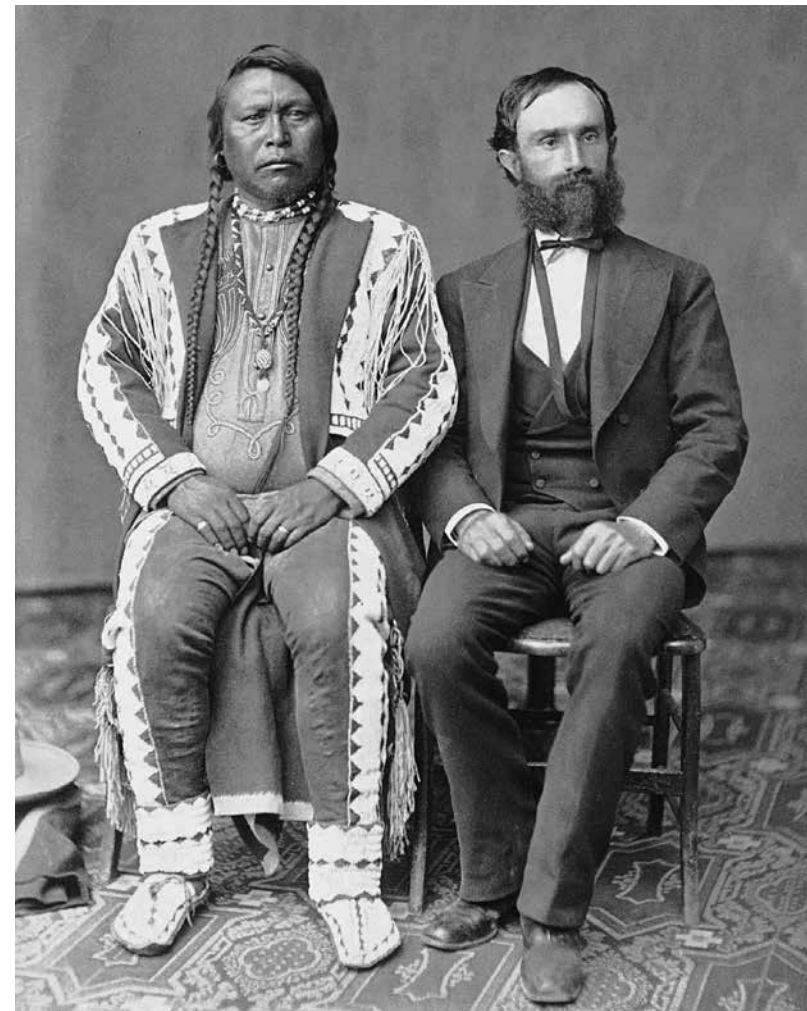
Mears opened the Poncha Pass toll road in 1870, kicking off a roadbuilding spree that continued for the next two decades. He had an uncanny knack for walking through treacherous mountain terrain and finding routes with relatively gentle grades that wouldn't kill the poor draft animals pulling wagons uphill. Mears was no engineer, so he enlisted a team of talented associates to work out the details. By the time he was through, Mears had created 450 miles of new roads, connecting the booming San Juan mining towns of southwest Colorado and allowing people, supplies and money to pour in.

Making the impossible possible was Mears' specialty. His road from Ouray to the Mount Sneffels mining district succeeded where five other road builders failed, and his road from Ouray to the Red Mountain mining district to Silverton, known as the Million Dollar Highway, astounds travelers to this day.

Between Ouray and Red Mountain Pass is the Uncompahgre Gorge, which posed two major problems, even for the dauntless Mears: Building a road at the bottom of the gorge would be futile, as the flooding river would wash away any road each spring; but building a road above the river would be incredibly difficult, too, as the gorge has nearly vertical walls in some places, ascending as high as 800 feet above the canyon floor. Mears opted for the route along the walls of the gorge. To blast a ledge for the roadbed at the steepest parts of the canyon, workers would be lowered down on ropes, light long fuses on sticks of dynamite, then get hoisted up to safety before the charge exploded. It was incredibly hard work – and expensive, too.

Construction cost \$10,000 per mile on average, but along some stretches it was a staggering \$1,000 per foot. Despite these huge expenditures, which earned the road its Million Dollar nickname, Mears made a profit thanks to the tolls he charged. Modern motorists don't have to pay tolls, but they can still admire Mears' handiwork along the Million Dollar Highway, now called U.S. Highway 550, which follows the same roadbed.

The toll road system funded Mears' next big project: railroads. In 1887, two years after completing the Million Dollar Highway, Mears began work on a railroad connecting Silverton, which had become his home base, to the Red Mountain mines. The Silverton



Denver Public Library

Otto Mears advised Chief Ouray in negotiating treaties.

Railroad was joined in a few years by his Rio Grand Southern and Silverton Northern lines. He employed thousands of men laying track at the height of his railroad baron phase, and he personally oversaw the operation.

"Otto now works 22 hours per day, leaving two hours for sleep and scheming; he never eats," the *Ouray Solid Muldoon* newspaper wrote.

MEARS NAMED HIS favorite locomotive Ouray, and the city of Ouray was the northern terminus of his Million Dollar Highway. Both were named after Chief Ouray, the Ute leader who was close friends with Mears. At the height of Mears' roadbuilding career, he took more than a year off to help Ouray and his people.

The pathfinder and the chief met not long after Mears came to Colorado, when he got a government contract to trade with the Utes. Mears was one of the few white men to learn the Ute language, and he was possibly the only person who ever spoke Ute with a Yiddish accent. In the 1860s, Ute land encompassed nearly all of Colorado's Western Slope, but their right to that land was threatened when silver and gold were discovered in the San Juan Mountains.

Mears realized there was no stopping prospectors from invading Ute territory, so he tried to persuade Ouray to sign a treaty giving



## OTTO MEARS & THE *Colorado Cannibal*

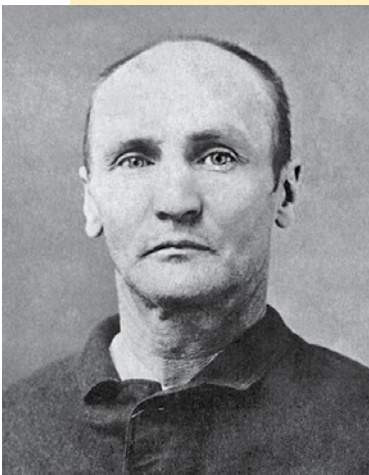
OTTO MEARS KNEW something was off about Alfred “Alferd” Packer from the moment they met in April 1874. Packer arrived in Saguache, the town Mears founded, looking remarkably well-fed for a man who claimed to have been lost in the San Juan Mountains without food (“The Mystery of Alfred Packer,” March/April 2013). He claimed his five companions had gone ahead without him, yet no one had seen them since. And for a man who was flat broke when he began his trip, Packer had a lot of money to spend at the local saloon.

Perhaps sensing people in Saguache were getting suspicious, Packer went to Mears’ store to purchase a horse and saddle to leave town. Packer took out his wallet and handed over some cash. Mears took a careful look and deemed one of the bills to be counterfeit. He demanded Packer use genuine currency, so Packer produced a second wallet to get it. Mears’ suspicions were heightened: Not only was it odd that Packer carried two wallets, he also saw in the second wallet a Wells Fargo check exactly like those carried by one of Packer’s missing comrades.

Mears told a local federal agent that he believed Packer was involved in foul play. The agent, perhaps joined by Mears, questioned Packer for hours until he made a confession: His companions were dead, and he had eaten their corpses to survive, though he claimed he only killed one man, and only in self-defense. After a futile search for their bodies, Packer was imprisoned on a Saguache ranch – the town had no jail.

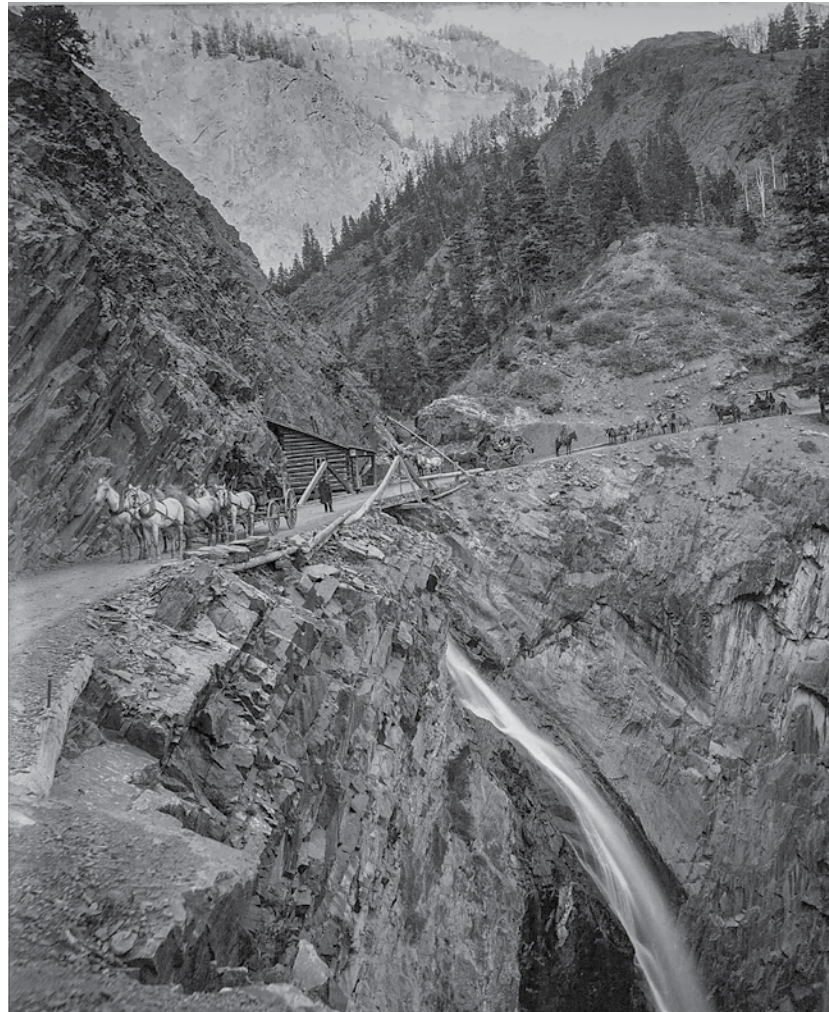
Packer spent three months in the makeshift jail, but no charges could be brought because no bodies had been found. Mears was more concerned with Saguache’s finances than solving the mystery, so he hatched a plan to help Packer escape. Mears’ friend John Lawrence later recalled: “Otto Mears came to me and talked the matter over in regard to Packer. ... It cost four or five dollars a day for the sheriff to keep Packer. We had no jail. We had no evidence that the men were dead or that Packer had done any wrong. We agreed to turn Packer loose.”

The bodies were discovered shortly thereafter, but it was another nine years before Packer was found, put on trial and convicted of murder based largely on Mears’ testimony. In another Mears connection, the trial was held just a few miles from the scene of Packer’s cannibalism in Lake City, which Mears had founded months after the incident.



History Colorado

Alfred Packer in prison.



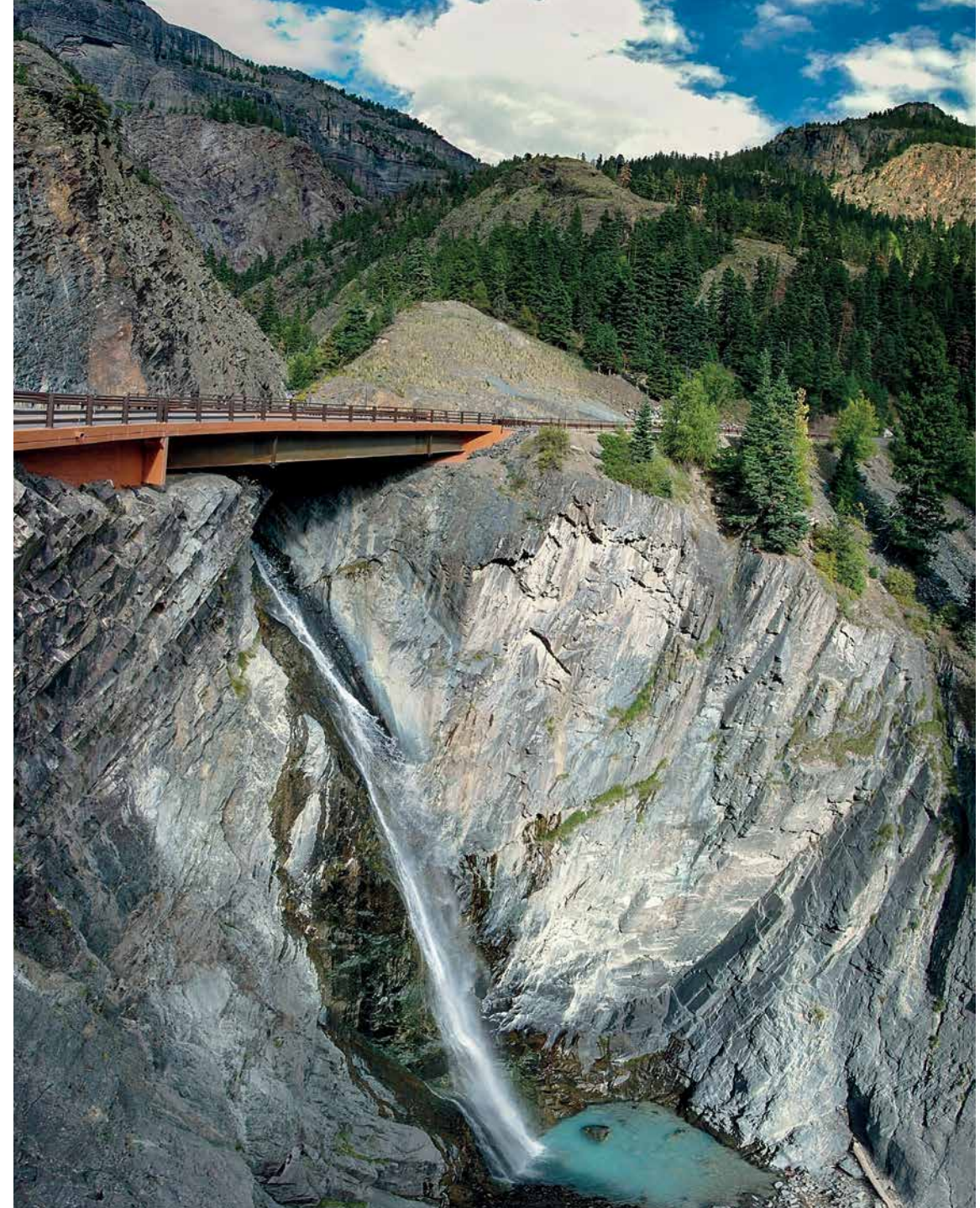
Denver Public Library

up 4 million acres of the San Juans in exchange for payments and a guarantee to the rest of their land. If the Utes didn’t try to get something for it, Ouray reasoned, the whites would take it all anyway with no compensation. “It is much better sometimes to do what does not please us now, if it will be best for our children later,” Mears told him.

Ouray and other chiefs agreed to the treaty in 1873, and afterwards Mears accompanied them to Washington, D.C., where he served as interpreter when they met President Ulysses S. Grant. Before returning to Colorado, Mears took Ouray and the Utes to New York, where the Indians were impressed by the Central Park Zoo. They coveted the camels, which they thought would be even better than their horses to ride, and dubbed the monkeys “long armed creatures trying to look like men.”

Many Utes back home were outraged that Ouray had signed away the San Juans. When Mears took his wife, Mary, and two daughters to visit the chief near Montrose after the treaty, they witnessed Utes executing a fellow tribe member who was trying to incite a rebellion against Ouray. The Mearses continued traveling north, and when they passed by Ouray’s home 10 days later, the executed man still lay in the middle of the road.

The trouble for the Utes got worse in 1879, when some Northern Utes took arms against whites in what was called the Meeker Massacre. Many white Coloradans were outraged and called for vengeance. The next year, Mears once again traveled with Ouray to



Alastair Roberts

**Otto Mears charged tolls to use his Million Dollar Highway, and he put a tollbooth in a place no one could avoid it: at the bridge over the precipitous Bear Creek Falls. Present-day U.S. Highway 550 has a bridge at the same location, and a nearby marker honors Mears as the pathfinder who created this road.**

Washington, D.C., this time to negotiate a treaty that would send the Utes to much smaller reservations to avoid a major war. While changing trains in Pueblo, Mears was with the Ute delegation as an angry mob pelted them with coal and threatened to lynch them.

Ouray, who had long been sick, died shortly after returning from the nation’s capital, leaving the treaty process in limbo – the agreement wouldn’t be valid until a 3/4 majority of Utes had ratified it. Mears took up his friend’s cause, traveling across Ute territory and paying \$2 from his own pocket to any Ute who would sign the agreement until he had collected enough signatures.

The treaty offered a choice of two reservation locations: Colorado’s Grand Valley or Utah. Mears pushed for the Utah reservation, either because he wanted the Utes to be safely away from encroaching whites or because he wanted to enrich himself by developing the Grand Valley. In all likelihood, it was both. Further

muddling the question of whose interest Mears was looking out for in the Ute case, he charged the Army \$100,000 in tolls when they used his roads to resettle the Utes in Utah.

MEARS’ NAME BECAME familiar to Coloradans thanks to his roads and his exploits with Ouray, but also for his political scheming. During the first decades of Colorado’s statehood, he was one of the big players in Republican state politics. He was a state legislator for two years, where he helped decide what to do with the recently evacuated Ute land, but his real skill was behind the scenes.

Mears made no distinction between persuasion and bribery. He was called “the joker in the Republican deck” while in office for changing his vote under questionable circumstances. In later years, when bills adverse to railroads came up for vote, legislators often found free railroad passes on their desks, compliments of Mears. A



state legislator once accused him of offering a \$500 bribe, but the allegation was dismissed as implausible, and not because people thought him incapable of bribery – it was simply that everyone knew Mears would never offer such a small bribe.

It was common knowledge that any bill Mears favored was guaranteed to pass, and any he didn't was doomed. For years, it was said no one could become governor or U.S. senator without Mears' consent; some people considered him Colorado's de facto governor. In 1895, not long after Gov. Albert McIntire took office, he boarded a Denver streetcar only to realize he had no money to pay the fare. When McIntire pleaded with the conductor that he should be allowed to ride anyway, as he was the governor, the conductor replied, "Can't help that. If you were Otto Mears himself you would have to pay or get off."

The Colorado State Capitol Building owes a lot to Mears, who chaired the board overseeing its design and construction in the 1890s. The Capitol was completed in 1901, looking much as it does today, with one exception: Its dome was clad in copper. The copper dome was tarnished in a few years, which Mears found inexcusably ugly, so he persuaded the Colorado Mining Association to donate 200 ounces of gold to gild the dome in 1908.

In recognition for all Mears had done for Colorado, the state legislature commissioned a stained-glass-window portrait of him, which has been displayed since 1904 in the Capitol above the entrance to the Senate chamber. The legislature passed a resolution stating it was "a well recognized fact" that Mears had "done more than any single individual, by the construction of roads, railroads and otherwise, to open for settlement and development an immense area in southwestern and western Colorado ..."

It seems appropriate, somehow, that Mears himself was thought to be the driving force behind the resolution and the portrait window.

MOST MODERN VISITORS to the Capitol don't notice the Mears window. In fact, since his death in 1931, Mears' memory has been largely overlooked by subsequent generations of Coloradans. One of the few monuments to him is a stone marker along the Million Dollar Highway near the spectacular Bear Creek Falls where his tollbooth once stood. It reads: "In Honor of Otto Mears, Pathfinder of the San Juan, Pioneer." But more than this little marker, the Million Dollar Highway itself stands as a monument to a man who dreamed big and made those dreams real. 🌄

**A stained-glass window depicting Otto Mears is directly above the entrance to the Colorado Senate chamber.**

Joshua Hardin







# *Telluride*

## *Where life begins at the DEAD END*

story by MATT MASICH

photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN

The San Juan Mountains surround Telluride on three sides, leaving only one way in and out of town. A free gondola takes passengers up to Mountain Village and Telluride Ski Resort.



NO ONE PASSES through Telluride on their way to somewhere else. They can't. The only paved road into town is a dead end, its progress blocked by the San Juan Mountains. Enclosed in a box canyon, Telluride is physically isolated from the rest of the world, but that hardly matters: The world comes to Telluride.

This town of 2,300 doesn't have a single spotlight, yet there's more going on here than in many cities 100 times its size. Recent Oscar-winning films *Argo*, *The King's Speech* and *Slumdog Millionaire* debuted at the Telluride Film Festival. Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Mumford & Sons have all played the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Great thinkers and creative types of all stripes are regular visitors or residents – and on top of all that, there's the Telluride Ski Resort.

The constant buzz of activity can make locals feel like Telluride is the whole world, or at least the most important place in it,

said poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, who lived for years in Telluride. When that feeling threatened to get overwhelming, she would hike up the Jud Wiebe Trail to a ridge overlooking the valley to remind herself that this town was, in fact, just a little grid, 12 blocks long and five blocks wide, dwarfed in scale and significance by the enveloping mountains.

THOSE MOUNTAINS ARE absurdly beautiful. Driving in along State Highway 145, people see red mountainsides, evergreens and golden aspens so vivid that folks swear, only mostly in jest, that the real-life scene before them must have been digitally enhanced. As grand as the scenery is, the gold miners who founded Telluride along the San Miguel River in 1878 were more interested in extracting the mountains' mineral wealth than appreciating their beauty.

The town's name comes from a compound of the element tellurium, which



Families congregate at Telluride Town Park. The view down Telluride's Victorian Main Street to Ajax Peak never gets old, even for lifelong residents.

is often found alongside silver and gold, although the old tale that Telluride is actually a contraction of "to hell you ride" is too good for people to stop repeating.

The fact that Butch Cassidy committed his first bank robbery here in 1889 corroborates Telluride's reputation as a wild place in its early boom days, but even then it was also a place for groundbreaking ideas. In 1891, the Gold King Mine started getting its power from the Ames Hydroelectric Generating Plant, marking the first time in history

alternating current was transmitted over long distances for commercial use.

Mining lasted exactly one century in Telluride, with the last mine closing in 1978. Six years earlier, skiing had taken over as the town's lifeblood, with hippies moving in alongside old miners. Newcomers arrived with utopian visions for Telluride, eager to revamp the Victorian town that had been half deserted after a decades-long economic slump.

Anticipating the new ski area, George Greenbank moved here in 1971 immediately after graduating from the University of Colorado with an architecture degree.

"I didn't even pick up my college diploma," he said. "I resurrected an old car I hadn't driven in two years, got a 50-pound bag of rice and drove straight here." His grandmother was from Telluride, so he knew it in its old days and was excited by the prospect of ushering in a new era.

SOME OLD-TIMERS WELCOMED their new neighbors. Town Marshal Everett Morrow didn't. Morrow made no secret of loathing the hippies. If Greenbank and his long-haired friends walked to the grocery store, Morrow would follow them in his police cruiser. He would put his hand on

his holstered pistol while getting in verbal confrontations, his harsh words delivered in an Oklahoma twang.

Fearing Morrow might use his gun one day, the newcomers put together a slate of candidates for the 1974 town election to make Telluride a more harmonious place to live. After the slate won a majority of Town Council seats and the mayor's office, they asked Morrow to hand in his badge and gun. "The badge is yours," he said before leaving. "But the gun is mine."

Telluride's original hippies are grayer and less wild these days, but their imprint on the town's character remains strong.



One of the best-loved parts of their legacy is the Telluride Free Box, which is actually a row of shelves along a wall off of Colorado Avenue, the town's Main Street, where people leave what they don't need for anyone, local or visitor, to take. There's clothing, toys, camping equipment and anything else you can think of. Nearly everyone has a story about their favorite Free Box find: a pair of new Prada sandals, a Patagonia down jacket, an actual Rolex watch.

Festivals are another tradition that dates back to Telluride's rebirth in the 1970s. While the epic Fourth of July celebration began in the mining days, the Telluride Bluegrass Festival and Telluride Film Festival debuted in 1974, and more new events quickly followed. By 1991, there was only one summer weekend without a festival, so locals founded a tongue-in-cheek Nothing Festival with a blank schedule of events. The Nothing Festival eventually fell by the wayside, as a real festival emerged that weekend, too.

Telluride's secret local heroes are the delivery drivers who supply the isolated

town, braving festival traffic in summer and dangerous blizzards in winter. Most Main Street business owners have formed meaningful, long-lasting friendships with their stalwart drivers. As a UPS man at the end of a long shift arrived with a delivery

You can hike the Sneffels Highline Trail for six hours and not see another living soul.

for Over the Moon, a thriving cheese and fine foods shop, co-owner Maura Coulter greeted him warmly.

"Do you need something to drink?" Coulter asked.

"I need a time machine, a couple of fast horses and a helicopter," he replied.

VISITORS COME TO Telluride to go skiing, biking, hiking and four-wheeling in the mountains, but the people who

live here take their love of the outdoors to another level. When John "Coop" Cooper skis, which is nearly every day in the winter, he is on a mission. In 2014, he set out to ski the double black diamond Kant-Mak-M mogul trail 1,000 times that season; by closing day, he had done it 1,080 times.

In summer 2015, he ran or hiked the Jud Wiebe Trail 250 times, a personal best he is trying to top this year before the snow returns. "It's this Zen discipline thing to do the same thing over and over and get better at it," Cooper explained. "I'm seeking out perfection, trying to become a better person."

In addition to extreme athletes, Telluride is a magnet for creative people who came for the outdoors and stayed for the nurturing community. Screenwriter Jeffrey Price, co-writer of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and other films, and his wife Jennie Franks, artistic director of the Telluride Playwrights Festival, moved here in 1993.

Price ended up becoming a San Miguel County deputy sheriff reserve, and in the



Max Cooper works on a bike at Paragon Outdoors. The superhero Tellurider, popular when the ski area opened in the 1970s, is in an exhibit at the Telluride Historical Museum. Sophia Karimpour takes an art class with instructor Ann Cheeks at the Ah Haa School for the Arts, one of the town's creative hubs. People stroll along The Beach near the Mountain Village gondola station.



course of that work was struck by the complicated relationship between some of the wealthier newcomers and the hardworking ranchers outside of town.

When a wildfire struck the area, he stood beside ranchers who watched stoically as flames licked their 100-year-old property. Meanwhile, he heard a panicked call come over the radio from a homeowner exhorting a firefighting plane to divert from its course and save his multimillion-dollar home, saying, "I'll pay for the plane." The incident inspired him to write *Improbable Fortunes*, a surreal yet incisive novel about cowboy Buster McCaffrey, millionaire Marvin Mallomar and the sometimes uneasy mix of people in a fictional town set in the same valley as Telluride.

Price's novel quickly sold out at Between the Covers, the beloved bookstore on Main Street. Local authors aren't the only ones who regularly stop in, said Daiva Chesonis, who co-owns the store with her "bookend," Bobbi T. Smith. Between the Covers doesn't



have to ask famous authors to do book signings at the store; authors call the store, as they will be in Telluride anyway for a festival, or skiing, or something or other.

Telluride is an international destination, a place where people come to be seen. It's also a place where people come to see no one. Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, the Western Slope's official poet laureate, is inspired by the solitude of Telluride's surrounding wilderness.

On a recent hike along the Sneffels Highline Trail, which connects directly to Telluride, Trommer saw two people on the trail a few minutes outside town – and not another living soul for the next six hours as she walked through stunning mountain basins, shoulder-deep in wildflowers. “It's this amazing playground with an incredible sense of vastness,” she said. “The natural beauty is always so humbling, and we have such easy access to it. It's right here.” 🍂

## Colorado's Festival Capital

**HARDLY A WEEKEND** goes by without a festival in Telluride. Here's what's happening next.

**Telluride Film Festival** Aug. 31-Sept. 5

The past six best picture Oscar winners screened at this event. Passes are already sold out for this year.

**Telluride Blues & Brews Festival** Sept. 16-18

Musicians Joe Walsh, Mick Fleetwood and more share the spotlight with Colorado's best craft beers.

**Telluride Festival of Cars and Colors** Sept. 29-Oct. 3

Classic cars cruise against a backdrop of incredible golden aspen leaves.

**Telluride Horror Festival** Oct. 14-16

Movies from around the globe debut at an event dedicated to the horror genre.



At the eastern edge of the box canyon, Bridal Veil Falls tumbles down the mountain next to the historic Smuggler-Union Hydroelectric Power Plant, which opened in 1907 to power the Smuggler-Union Mine some 2,000 feet below.



Chase King grabs lunch at Denver's SAME Cafe, which makes fresh meals using organic, locally grown produce. If customers can't pay, they can work 30 minutes in the kitchen.



# NO MONEY,

Customers work for their meals

# NO PROBLEM

at Denver's SAME Cafe

story by MATT MASICH  
photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN



**I**F YOU CAN'T pay for your meal in a restaurant, you can just work off your bill by washing dishes. This scenario is plausible in just about two situations: a rerun of *I Love Lucy* and SAME Cafe in Denver.

SAME stands for “so all may eat,” and it’s a credo that couple Brad and Libby Birky live by at their nonprofit restaurant on East Colfax Avenue. Customers pay what they can. If they have a little extra money, they give a little extra; if they have no money, they can work 30 minutes washing dishes, sweeping floors or cleaning off tables. It’s a business model based on the idea that human beings are inherently good and won’t try to take advantage of the system, Libby said. Considering SAME Cafe just marked its 10th anniversary, it’s fair to say their faith in humanity has been well-founded.

At first glance, SAME looks like a cute, cozy fast-casual eatery rather than a charitable operation. Some people wander in without knowing there’s anything unusual about the restaurant until they notice there are no prices on the menu board and no cash register. Homeless people who are referred to SAME sometimes approach the counter uncertainly, thinking they are in the wrong place – they were expecting something that looked like a soup kitchen.

The Birkys founded SAME to be the opposite of a soup kitchen, Brad said. They had spent years volunteering in soup kitchens in their native Illinois, and while they loved helping people, they didn’t love the food they served. “The meals

cook, but they realized one of them would have to go to culinary school if their dream restaurant was to succeed. They each wanted to take cooking classes, so they flipped a coin to see who got to do it. Brad won. He attended culinary courses at Metropolitan State University by day, did his IT work in the evenings, then returned home each night to teach Libby the cooking skills he’d learned. The couple took out loans and drew from their IRAs to revamp a former coffee shop on Colfax. They were down to their last \$200 by the time SAME Cafe opened in late 2006.

One of their first regular customers was a man who called himself Kidd. “The first time he walked in we were a little nervous,” Brad said. “He looked big and burly, wore three or four coats, a trucker cap and big boots that were falling off his feet.” He slept under a tarp in City Park every night, and it showed. But Kidd’s gentle nature shone through his rough exterior. All he wanted was some salad – hot meals were relatively easy to come by, but it had been so long since he’d had fresh greens of any kind.

Kidd was a member of what Brad calls the “shovel brigade,” homeless men who earn money shoveling sidewalks when it snows. There was a lot of snow that winter, as a wave of blizzards buried Denver before and after Christmas. Kidd kept SAME’s sidewalks clear all season in exchange for meals, and he shared his story with the Birkys as he ate salad after salad.

## SAME also stands for the idea of treating all people with the same dignity and respect. Everyone is on equal footing here.

sustained life, but that’s about the best you could say about it,” Brad said. They would pick through bags of rotting lettuce and moldy strawberries, trying to cobble together a decent dish. At SAME, the food looks and tastes like it belongs in a trendy bistro, and it is made from organic produce, most of which is grown locally. A typical three-course meal might feature corn and potato chowder, garden greens and fresh tomato-and-pesto pizza.

**THE BIRKYS ARE** unlikely restaurateurs: Brad was an IT expert in his first career, while Libby was a teacher. Both liked to

Kidd had been a church maintenance worker in New Orleans, but he was evacuated to Denver after Hurricane Katrina destroyed his church. He was living on the streets, trying to earn fare for a bus ticket back to New Orleans to help with the rebuilding effort. By the time springtime arrived and the snow had melted, he had shoveled enough walks to pay for his ticket, but before he left Denver he stopped back into SAME to say goodbye. Brad didn’t recognize him. Besides his fresh shave and haircut, he had a new set of clothes. Without his mountain of overcoats, it turned out the hulking Kidd was

“a little bitty dude,” Brad said. Kidd delayed his departure so Brad and Libby could give him a proper going-away party.

**AS FAR AS** the Birkys can tell, there was just one other pay-what-you-can restaurant in the nation when they opened SAME Cafe. Now there are 60 from coast to coast, and many have been directly influenced by SAME’s success. Rock star Jon Bon Jovi opened a nonprofit restaurant in New Jersey, and Panera Bread Co. opened several more in various states. Both ventures were inspired by a 2009 NBC Nightly News feature on SAME Cafe.

Success is a tenuous thing for the Birkys. Money from paying customers covers less than half of SAME’s operating costs, which are already modest thanks to a mostly volunteer staff. The rest of the funding comes from grants and private donations.

A young woman named Kim is one of the people who sends a check every month to keep SAME running. She couldn’t always give so generously. She was couch-surfing with friends, barely making ends meet with two part-time jobs, when she began coming to SAME Cafe. Kim worked off her meals by cleaning the dining room, and when she eventually found a good job and was able to donate to help others eat, she wept with gratitude. Three years after her first visit, she has found a home and was recently married; SAME catered the wedding.

The real key to SAME Cafe’s success is right there in its name. SAME might stand for “so all may eat,” but SAME also stands for the idea of treating all people with the same dignity and respect. Everyone is on equal footing here.

On a typical lunch hour, you might find someone like Zachary Shell, a high school English teacher at Southwest Early College Charter High School, or James Robertson, who is building a new life after struggling with addiction and homelessness. Robertson often comes here with members of his 12-step recovery group after meetings. Working in the kitchen is a rewarding way to contribute to his community, and being able to dine out in a restaurant is more than just a luxury for someone on a tight budget.

“Sometimes you need this to feel civilized,” Robertson said. “You can buy food at 7-Eleven, but then you’re sitting on the sidewalk eating with plastic silverware. Eating here helps you feel ... human.” 🍴



Pat Bernard, Cole Chandler and Bev Strok help prepare food, including SAME Cafe’s beloved lemon shortbread cookies.

