HISTORY COLORADO | FALL / WINTER 2025

THE COLORADO MAGAZINE

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THROUGH THE EYES OF OUR FOREBEARERS

"When you put your feet on the ground, you can smell freedom," shared Jeannie "LaDonna" Potts Dixon as she testified to Colorado's National Register Review Board about the Hicks Homestead, founded by her ancestors. In Weld County, this historic site is a full-sensory lesson of the history of Black settlement in Colorado. Ms. Potts Dixon's words serve as a testament to the power of place and the promise of our nation.

The timing of these words feels especially resonant, as we—across our state and country—gear up for next year's dual anniversaries of statehood and nationhood. Motivated by this moment, History Colorado has been hard at work on a number of initiatives that connect our shared history to our shared future. And, we are intentionally rooting our work in the real—authentic artifacts, buildings, sites, and belongings connected to this place.

Our ambitious Colorado Heritage for All initiative just hit the midpoint of adding 150 sites from underrepresented histories to the State and National Registers of Historic Places. From the Manzanola Methodist Church to the baseball fields of the Mexican-American Sugar Beet Leagues, the power of place-based history comes from the immersive connection to the past alongside tangible evidence of existence. Most importantly, our Heritage for All endeavor is an investment that roots Colorado's future in the land and where we come from.

We are also proud to open a new exhibition tomorrow—*Moments That Made US*, which centers on fifty artifacts that witnessed pivotal moments in American history. From the solid strength of Jackie Robinson's bat to the dented, fragile-yet-enduring ink well used by Generals Grant and Lee to sign the Treaty of Appomattox, we are reminded that the destiny of our country was not inevitable but defined by human choices. It's also a palpable reminder that we have the obligation to continue shaping our nation.

We live in an increasingly virtual world that eagerly embraces Artificial Intelligence (AI). Even in this era, there is power in a tangible history—the realness that roots us to our past and to each other. Architect futurist Ronald Rael, rooted in Conejos County, argues for a different type of AI—Ancestral Intelligence. We don't have to start from scratch to build a beautiful future. There are touchstones and traditions that can guide us. The once-in-a-generation moment of milestone anniversaries invites us to tap into the knowledge and gifts that our ancestors left for us. Because sometimes—as the Hicks Homestead descendants noted—when we look through the eyes of our wiser forebearers, we can smell freedom.

President/CEO & State Historic Preservation Officer

We acknowledge that the land currently known as Colorado has been the traditional homelands of Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. We are grateful to work in partnership with the fifty-one sovereign nations who continue to call this land home. Together, we plan exhibits; collect, preserve, and interpret artifacts; do archaeological work; and create educational programs to share the history of Colorado.

THE COLORADO MAGAZINE

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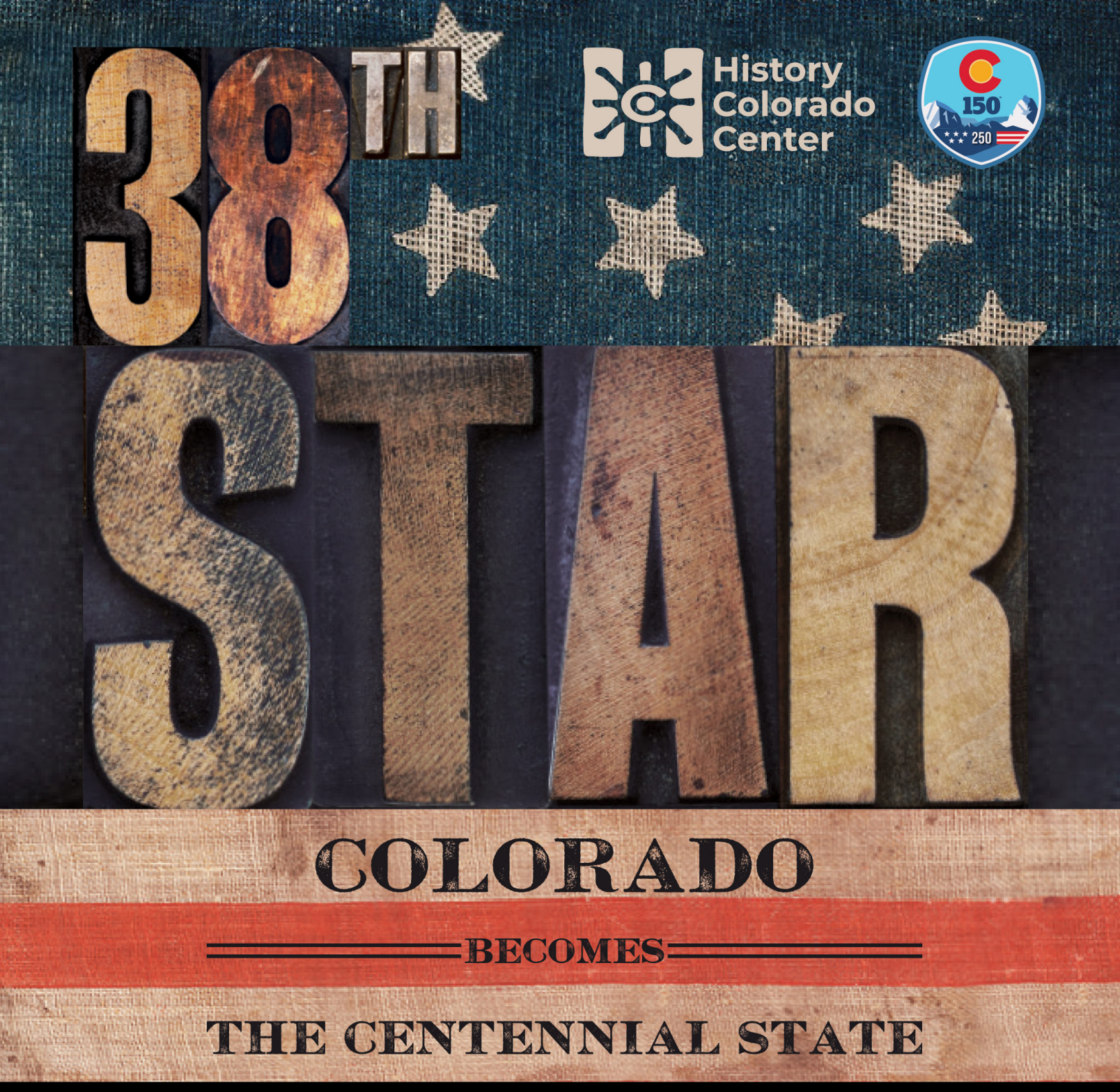

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United Farm Workers Constitutional Convention, September 1973. Photo by Juan Espinosa, History Colorado, 2016.87.30

COVER: A man next to the destroyed tail section of Flight 629 in the field, photographed for the *Rocky Mountain News*. Denver Public Library Special Collections RMN-026-0365

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THE FORUM

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COLORADO'S OLDEST PHOTO

In the last issue, Managing Editor Sam Bock and researcher Jim England brought us the story of the oldest photo of Colorado. Readers have been writing in, sharing their enjoyment and even some new insights!

I truly enjoyed your article on Colorado's oldest photograph. There is even more to the story (and I only know some because I collect daguerreotypes and am from Colorado). A modern daguerreotypist, Robert Schlaer, recreated Fremont's route and published his images in 2000 (front of his book attached). I own one of these unique daguerreotypes. Schlaer's book describes a further tantalizing reason for Fremont's 5th expedition on the "central route." The southern states were pushing for a railroad through the south. Abolitionists wanted to avoid the railroad's placement through slaveholding states. Thank you and your colleagues for a great publication!
—Leslie Gura, via email

Your piece on the 1853 photograph resonated with me more than I expected. I've always thought of Colorado history beginning with mining camps and railroads, but this article made me realize how narrow that view is. The image of the Cheyenne village felt both intimate and unsettling—a reminder that whole communities lived rich, ordinary lives here long before the territory was transformed. I appreciated that the article didn't romanticize the past, but treated the photograph as an entry point into a fuller and more honest history. It left me wanting to see the image myself and learn more about the people behind it.
—John Grayson, via email

DOMÍNGUEZ AND ESCALANTE RESONATE

Colorado's newest member of the State Historian's Council, Dr. Charles Nicholas Saenz, brought us a compelling new way to look at some of the first Spanish forays into Ute territory.

Dr. Nick Saenz's treatment of the 1776 Domínguez–Escalante expedition provides a welcome alternative to traditional accounts of Western exploration. He made me appreciate the indispensable role of Ute guides and frames the journey as an exchange of knowledge rather than a simple tale of European discovery. His analysis raises important questions about how mapping, documenting, and later settlement reshaped Indigenous homelands. Reading his piece prompted me to rethink the narratives I learned in school and to consider whose voices were left out.
—Daniel Mayfield, via email

Reading Dr. Nick Saenz's piece on the Domínguez–Escalante expedition felt a bit like having the ground shift under me (in a good way). I've heard the old stories of "explorers heading west," but the article nudged me to see that tale from a wider angle. The Ute presence wasn't background scenery; it was the center of the story, the very reason the expedition survived at all.
—Rowan Teller, via email

A NEW LOOK AT BABY DOE'S DRESS

Tara Kaufman's fresh look at one of Colorado's most famous figures, and it's been resonating with readers who thought they knew her story well.

Tara Kaufman's article "Against Great Odds" brought back memories of seeing that very dress on display at the old History Colorado museum. I remember being struck by its detail and the way it carried her story. Reading about its history now, I better understand the challenges the woman who wore it faced and how much determination is stitched into every seam. It's remarkable that a single garment can hold so much history, and I'm grateful the dress continues to remind visitors of the strength of the people behind it.
— Eleanor "Ellie" Vargas, via post

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The Shattered Tombstone:
Doc Holliday and the Paupers' Field

Musings on life and legacy from the purported grave of America's most famous dentist.

BY DEVIN FLORES

I recently took a road trip through the Colorado High Country, with the goal of visiting some mountain towns and picturesque passes I'd never seen before. As a history nerd, I was looking forward to visiting the lingering echoes of times long past—ghost towns, historic sites, old mines, the works.

But as I wound my way along the serpentine highways up and down mountainsides, an unexpected theme kept rolling back and forth in my mind: death.

Not in the sense of the fear of death, or of mourning. But I kept coming back to two sites I had visited in the first days of my trip, and what they said about how we, as a society, handle our dead. The legacy they leave. What, and who, we choose to remember.

When I visited Glenwood Springs, I knew I had to visit Doc Holliday. Aside from the titular mineral springs, the fabled gunslinger was what made the town a destination. If you look up Glenwood Springs, Doc Holliday's Grave and the Doc Holliday Museum are featured prominently on the list of attractions.

It makes sense. The dentist-turned-gunslinger is practically synonymous with some of the most famous pieces of "Wild West" Americana. He's portrayed in dozens of books and films, sometimes as the star of the show, sometimes as a sidekick to the Earp brothers. The legend of Doc Holliday

A cracked and only partially legible tombstone, choked by grass and weeds, in the Linwood Cemetery.
Courtesy of Devin Flores

LEFT: The gravel trail winding up the side of Lookout Hill, leading to Glenwood's Linwood Cemetery. Courtesy of Devin Flores
RIGHT: One of many signs in south Glenwood Springs which points tourists to the Doc Holiday's Grave & Pioneer Cemetery trail. Courtesy of Devin Flores

was making waves in American pop culture as recently as the 1993 blockbuster *Tombstone,* in which he was played by the late Val Kilmer.

So when I rolled into that little riverside city, that very afternoon I made for the Doc Holliday Museum. What I found was enjoyable, but not exactly informative. It was less an exhibition about the man John Henry Holliday, than a shrine to his legend. Memorabilia and movie posters lined the walls.

It reminded me of the time I visited Graceland.

Not long after, I made my way to the edge of town where, at the foot of Lookout Hill, a series of signs directed me to the "Doc Holliday Grave Trailhead." From there it was a short hike up a snaking gravel path, rimmed on either side by high-desert scrub and gnarled pines, to the historic Linwood Cemetery.

What I found at the top of the trail was pretty typical for a historic pioneer cemetery—worn, cracked tombstones, overgrown grass and bushes, paths that were little more than game trails. Rising out of the rustic surroundings were new, shiny signs marking a well-worn dirt path through the cemetery to the scenic lookout. And very near the edge of the cliff was the man himself: Doc Holliday.

Or so I thought. Because, as I learned from that very monument, it was not a tombstone—it was a memorial. According to the engraving Doc Holliday was buried somewhere nearby, in or around the cemetery, in a shallow and unmarked grave.

In the long, deep shadow of that legend, even the real John Henry Holliday seems forgotten.

He died a pauper in 1887, driven to destitution by a lifetime of gambling, vice, and illness, and as such, had been given a pauper's funeral. Nobody actually knows where his final resting place is. It might even be beneath the hill, under somebody's house or in their backyard.

As I learned over my time in Glenwood Springs, John Henry "Doc" Holliday took a while to enter the public consciousness. Long after the real man, known as little more than a drunk or gambler, had passed away, and all those who knew him in life had followed him in death—that's when the legend of Doc Holliday was reborn. With the coming of twentieth-century dime novels and movies, he was resurrected as the quintessential gunslinger. And it was only then, in the decades after his fame was secured, that the Chamber of Commerce of Glenwood Springs erected a memorial to him in the old pioneer cemetery.

Except, it's not really a memorial to him. It's a memorial to his legend. Like the one-room Doc Holliday Museum, it's a shrine to an idea, a myth that looms in American culture.

Standing amongst shattered tombstones and barely-legible markers, I

The Leadville Irish Miners' Memorial, which was erected in 2024 in the memory of the over 1,200 Leadville miners and their families who are buried in the Cloud City's paupers' field. Courtesy of Devin Flores

was struck by the contrast. All of these other people, many of whom had surely lived lives just as rich and wild as Dr. Holliday's, had been long forgotten. Their names worn away by the elements. But the legendary ghost—not even the specter of the real man, but an echo of silver screen portrayals—looms over all of them.

In the long, deep shadow of that legend, even the real John Henry Holliday seems forgotten. People remember "I'm your huckleberry," but how much do we really know of the real man? What was he like? What were his hopes, and—given his life was cut short by tuberculosis—his regrets?

The new Doc Holliday Memorial in Linwood Cemetery. Courtesy of Devin Flores

Glenwood Springs viewed from the peak of Linwood Cemetery, only a few steps from the Doc Holliday Memorial. Courtesy of Devin Flores

What was it like to know him? Was it a joy, or a tragedy?

Just a day before my arrival in Glenwood Springs, I visited another graveyard: Leadville's equally old Evergreen Cemetery, where just two years ago the Leadville Irish Miners' Memorial had been unveiled. That memorial stands at the edge of the Catholic paupers' field for that city, where more than a thousand Irish miners and their families were laid to rest. Desperate and destitute, few of them ever had grave markers. Those that were there have long vanished.

Most of those impoverished people lived at the same time as Dr. Holliday. Many would have heard of him. Some might have even met him as he passed through on his way to Glenwood to die. And like him, they died impoverished, ignored by society at large and usually remembered by only a few. They lived lives just as deep, rich, and meaningful as Dr. Holliday, if not as violent or dramatic. But a century and a half later, many of us have forgotten the mothers and fathers who raised our grandparents, the miners, blacksmiths, bricklayers, and carpenters who built the world we live in today.

It's the gunslinger whose name we know. It's dentists we forget.

There's no condemnation in that fact, I think. It's just a bare statement about who we are, and a reminder of the mundane truths behind the drama of history. But even days after I left, I couldn't shake the contrast between those two memorials—one an empty grave dedicated to a famous legend almost to the exclusion of the man whose name it bears, and the other a sombre monument standing at the doorstep of an entire nameless community, resting beneath the soil only a few paces away.

It's those thoughts that followed me all the way home, drifting along in the shadow of my little car as I wound my way back down the mountains.

Devin Flores is the Assistant Editor for *The Colorado Magazine* and the managing editor for the *Colorado Encyclopedia*.

Echoes from the Valley:
Bats Rise from Colorado's Mining Past

Hundreds of thousands of bats emerge from an abandoned mine, bringing life to a Colorado valley once shaped by miners and industry.

BY JEREMY MORTON

Surely we weren't the only ones staring up at the sky in this alpine valley, known as much for its stargazing as its stories of alien abductions. During the tail end of the Perseid meteor shower, Megan and I strained to spot fireballs dimmed by the glow of a waning gibbous moon. High above, meteors streaked through the atmosphere while Mexican free-tailed bats flitted through the air, feasting on insects and pollinating plants. That's what brought us to the San Luis Valley. Bats. There, a colony of 250,000 emerges at dusk, forming a swirling, fuzzy-black commuter cloud of aerial acrobats taking flight near the ghost of Orient City.

The bats rise each night from the Orient Mine, a place once excavated for valuable ore before being abandoned. What people left behind, the bats claimed, turning absence into abundance. Their flight is more than an evening migration. It's a reminder that Colorado's story is as much about reinvention as it is about ambition. Towns fade, mines collapse, but life adapts, persists, and even flourishes. To watch the colony lift into the sky is to glimpse life's larger rhythm and to feel, for a moment, part of it. Peering into the mine for the first glimpse of emerging bats, the sheer effort of those who worked here becomes clear. The walls still bear the scars of pickaxes. It's easy to imagine the miners chipping away at the rock day after day. Hands calloused, faces streaked with dust, they monotonously carved this shaft that looms as a reminder of the town and industry that once thrived here.

THE ORIENT MINE

The Orient Mine opened in 1880, carved into the eastern wall of the San Luis Valley to feed iron ore to Colorado's growing steel industry. A year later, a narrow-gauge rail line snaked over Poncha Pass, and a bustling camp called Orient City took root. At its peak, 400 people called it home. It boasted a general store, library, barber shop, saloons, boarding houses, and a school for miners' children.

Rugged laborers occupied the town and each day crowded into the mine, many of them immigrants chasing the promise of steady wages. An eclectic chorus of European languages mixed in the thin mountain air, rising and falling with the clink of hammers and the scrape of shovels. They were earning better pay than other laborers of the era, but they were also stepping into danger every day. Suffocating gas pockets, collapsing ground, runaway ore cars, sudden floods, and even mule kicks were all part of the job. Six fatal accidents are recorded at the Orient, each one a reminder of how narrow the margin was between routine

Dirt road leading to the Orient Land Trust. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

Hiking up the rugged BLM road. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

labor and tragedy.

Iron dust hung in the air as twenty-nine-year-old George Malich worked in the Orient's narrow, timbered stope. The Austrian-born miner spent many days shoveling and hauling rock, surely listening for whatever warnings the mountain offered. When a chunk of ore broke loose and struck him on November 15, 1894, the echoing crash must have rattled the tunnel, startling the men around him and carrying the news of disaster through the mine. Those who shared shifts and meals with him felt his abrupt absence. And somewhere, whether in Orient City or across an ocean, someone who once knew him simply as George likely carried the quiet weight of losing him, as so many miners' families did.

For nearly two decades, the back-breaking labor of miners like George Malich made the Orient the most productive iron mine in Colorado. Approximately two million tons of iron ore came from its tunnels. But by the early 1900s, the best ore veins had thinned, and newer mines outpaced the Orient. The town's pulse softened. In 1905 the post office closed, often the final breath of frontier settlement. Orient City, once a vital link in Colorado's industrial rise, slipped into quiet decay, its glory days tucked into the folds of the valley hills.

Small pockets of ore were still mined until 1932, when the lodes were finally exhausted. To close mines, workers typically stacked timbers and rocks at key tunnel entrances and then set carefully calculated charges of dynamite to collapse the shafts. The goal was to seal off the passages, discourage trespassers, and prevent accidental injuries. Closing mines in this way reduced the risk of cave-ins, flooding, and exposure to toxic gases. By accident, the blast designed to seal the Orient opened a cylindrical tube with side tunnels, quiet and dark, a perfect bat refuge. No one knows exactly when the bats moved in, but humans first spotted them in 1967. Over time, the Orient became a destination for bat lovers, and nearly sixty years after they were first spotted, Megan and I made the journey to see them for ourselves.

DRIVING TO THE MINE

Our Subaru Crosstrek never stood a chance against the second half of that rock gauntlet the Bureau of Land Management referred to as a road. We pushed the car hard, but barely got further than a nearby Tesla. Somehow the low-clearance sedan had clawed its way up here too. I could only assume its driver loved bats more than we did. I might have kept grinding uphill, but it was Megan's car. Her tires, her undercarriage, not mine to sacrifice. So we eased off the road, parked, and added a mile to the hike.

We soon overtook a toddler and her mom, proud pilots of that improbable Tesla. They confirmed we were on the right road to the mine. The child knelt to marvel at a lumbering beetle, then nearly crushed it when her attention drifted. We stumbled past the young mom and daughter, over rocks, and up a rugged path that confirmed we made the correct decision by parking and hiking a little further.

Bright blue pinyon jays zipped past in a last-ditch dinner rush. Megan pulled out her bird app, which confirmed they were rare. Certified rare birds. You don't see that every hike. Most people don't get excited about a rare bird until they cross a certain birthday threshold. My bird enthusiasm graphs neatly against my age. Both keep trending upward. Hiking might be a young man's game, but ornithology is ruled by the old.

As we scanned the sky for more birds, we glanced down now and then to avoid ankle-eating ruts and yucca spears waiting to stab us. The air was hot and stagnant. That's the curse of dusk hikes. You have to wear a coat for the return trip. Our light jackets soon had us sweating, so we gave in and tied them around our waists.

We reached the official trailhead just as a guide led a group up from Valley

Foundations from a building in Orient City. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

View Hot Springs. Perfect timing, I thought. The guides must plan it so the hike tops out at the Glory Hole just as the bats pour out. That's really what they call it. Every evening, thousands of bats stream from the Glory Hole. We pushed ahead of the tour group, hoping to reach the end of the trail before them.

THE ORIENT LAND TRUST

The hike winds past the remnants of Orient City—crumbling foundations, weathered water wells, rusted rail tracks, and towering piles of rock left behind by miners. Today, the surrounding landscape is protected by the Orient Land Trust, whose story begins in 1872, when the Everson family homesteaded a 760-acre ranch.

Shortly after establishing the ranch, a prospector named Frank Haumann discovered a rich deposit of limonite and iron ore on the property. The find caught the attention of the newly formed Colorado Coal and Iron Company based in Pueblo which leased the land to develop the Orient Mine and the nearby company town.

Decades after the mine and town faded, and not long after bats made the abandoned shafts their home, Neil Seitz began working for Roy Everson on the ranch. In 1975, he and his wife Terry became caretakers of Valley View Hot Springs. Today, that's the main draw for visitors—the warm, mineral-rich, clothing-optional waters that Indigenous people had long sought in this part of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, long before European settlers arrived.

With limited capacity and a strict reservation system, Valley View Hot Springs remains intentionally uncrowded. I reached out for an interview. They gave it serious consideration since I was approaching the story from a historical angle. That's more than most writers ever receive. Ultimately, however, the Executive Director of the Orient Land Trust, Crystal England, politely declined: "As a rule, we don't advertise or give interviews, and we typically ask organizations not to write about us. It doesn't usually work, but I do ask!"

The Seitzes eventually purchased the land from the Eversons. Committed to preserving the springs and surrounding landscape for education and public enjoyment, they established the Orient Land Trust in 2001. By 2009, they donated the property to the Trust, safeguarding it from future development. Over time, the Trust expanded its stewardship to include the old mine, maintaining the area as both a living archive of history and a sanctuary for nature and reflection. As we hiked up to the bat cave, the unspoiled views across the sweeping San Luis Valley inspired gratitude for the decision to keep this remote, special place as protected, and as secret, as possible.

THE SWOOSHING OF BAT WINGS

Megan and I read the signs lining the uphill path, each one recounting the history of the mine. As we climbed, the setting sun dipped toward the horizon under wispy clouds, its crisp yellow beams slicing across the western edge of the valley. A San Luis sunset on a clear evening is hard to beat. Light spills over fields of green and gold revealing a harvest festival paused just long enough for you to breathe it in. It carries a sense of timelessness, the quiet urge to leave everything behind and take up ranching. The Eversons must have felt that same peace and equanimity all those years ago.

You smell the cave before you ever see it. For a bat enthusiast, there is nothing unpleasant about it. When the guano hit my nose, a broad, unforced smile spread across my face. It was a signal to my brain that something extraordinary was about to happen. We were about to witness a bat flight, a phenomenon Megan and I had only seen before at Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Both colonies are made up of the same species of Mexican free-tailed bats. The one at the Orient houses mostly males and is known as a bachelor colony. The bats at Carlsbad, on the other hand, are female. Like a fraternity and sorority, each colony retreats to its own gender-specific cave, maintaining secret hierarchies and unwritten rules.

For fifteen minutes we waited in silence, broken only by those who missed the signs to stay quiet or simply did not care. At Carlsbad the exodus trickles and grows. Here it erupted. I looked down for a moment, heard a gasp, and looked up to see a flood of hungry bats swooping ten to twenty feet above. A steady, surprisingly loud white noise rose from the swoosh of wings as bats poured out in an unbroken stream for nearly twenty minutes. Halfway through, they began darting up and down as they exited the cave. It was as if the performance had reached a crescendo, and they were signaling the final act of the show.

The guide from Valley View Hot Springs rounded the corner, his face falling as he realized the bats had already taken off. Their wings caught the sunlight as they flew toward their nightly meal, making each bat glow gold. The guide said this was a rare treat, something he had seen only a handful of times in over

A railing guards the steep dropoff of the bat cave. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

The bats take flight. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

a hundred trips to the cave.

Megan noticed a small child stomping along the rocks, her black jacket flaring with every exaggerated step. As she lifted her arms the bat wings stitched under her sleeves fanned out. She added sharp, high-pitched squeaks that echoed the calls of the bats swirling overhead. It was the same kid we met near the Tesla at the start of the hike. I couldn't help telling her mother how adorable the child's bat imitation was. She smiled, a gentle warmth in her eyes, and explained that her daughter had first heard about the Orient Mine bats at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Since then, her fascination only grew, compelling the long, three-hour drive to the valley. They had battled the rough road, the Tesla jolting over jagged stones, plunging into deep ruts, and skidding on loose gravel. Now it all made perfect sense.

Hannah Evans-Hamer and her daughter. Courtesy of Jeremy Morton

THREADS OF CONNECTION

Standing there, watching the last of the bats vanish into the growing dark, it's impossible not to see the threads that connect human curiosity to the natural world. It's the urge to witness something larger than ourselves, to marvel at wonders beyond our control, that draws us to places like the Orient Mine. Whether it's the thrill of a meteor streaking overhead, imagining the grit of forgotten miners, admiring the swirling dance of hundreds of thousands of bats, or a child's delight at showing off the wings stitched into their jacket, we are compelled to observe, to understand, to feel connected.

The Orient Mine, once a symbol of Colorado's industrial ambition, now shelters creatures that remind us of resilience, adaptation, and the quiet persistence of life. In its decay, the mine and the towns that sprang up around it tell a story repeated across Colorado. Humans arrive, shape the land, sometimes flourish, sometimes fade, but the landscape endures, reshaped by nature and memory alike. Perhaps that's what Colorado has always offered, a place where human ambition collides with natural beauty, leaving both transformed.

Jeremy Morton is an exhibition developer and historian for History Colorado. He grew up in Lakewood going to the Villa Italia mall with his brother. Now he lives in Denver, and holds a master's degree in history from the University of Colorado, Denver.

Woman's Work: The Wild Life of Martha Maxwell

She didn't just mount animals—she mounted an entire challenge to nineteenth-century science, one fox and one fearless quote at a time.

BY DUSTYN DEERMAN

You've probably walked through a natural history museum and marveled at a fox frozen mid-leap or a grizzly mid-roar, staged in a landscape so vivid you could swear you heard the wind blow.

You might have thought, "Wow, nature is impressive."

You probably didn't think about the people who pioneered that immersive style—like a five-foot-tall vegetarian woman from nineteenth-century Colorado who hunted bears, tanned hides, sculpted poses, and built entire lifelike scenes by hand—all while being told she had no business doing any of it.

But maybe you should've.

This is the story of Martha Maxwell, a woman who refused to stay in the parlor where society tried to park her.

She didn't just break into the boys' club of science and taxidermy. She gutted it, stuffed it, and mounted it for public display. Long before women were "allowed" in labs or given space in scientific institutions, Martha was hunting, preserving, and building immersive exhibits that would change museum culture forever.

She wasn't invited to the table, so she built her own—sometimes literally, out of rocks and bones.

She wasn't interested in becoming "an exception." She was there to work. And when someone had the audacity to ask why a woman was doing a man's job, she didn't offer an apology or excuse. She made it clear she belonged.

So yeah, this isn't just a history lesson. This is a reclaiming. A resurrection. A reminder that some pioneers carried scalpels instead of compasses—and had just as much grit.

THE GIRL IN THE WOODS

Martha Maxwell didn't exactly ask for permission to be remarkable. She just went ahead and did it.

Titled *In the Field*, Martha Maxwell poses with a gun and an animal. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Born on July 21, 1831, in a log cabin in Dartt's Settlement, Pennsylvania, by adulthood Martha stood barely five feet tall but packed the stubbornness of a mountain lion. Her earliest years were marked by separation and grief. Her father died suddenly of scarlet fever when she was just two-and-a-half.

Her mother's chronic illness meant Martha spent much of her childhood with her fiercely independent grandmother, Abigail Sanford—a woman who took her on long walks in the forest, showed her wild plants, and taught her to look nature in the eye, not from behind a window.

This was more than childcare. It was an immersive, backwoods education in curiosity and resilience.

Despite the family's limited resources, her stepfather, Josiah Dartt, recognized her hunger for learning. In 1847, they managed to send her to Oberlin College, one of the few schools in the country that admitted women.

But she was forced to return home after just one term. The cost of tuition and living expenses proved unsustainable, and her family needed her. Like many working-class women of the era, she was expected to set aside her ambitions and contribute to the household.

Although her time at Oberlin was brief, it left an indelible mark. The exposure to formal education sharpened a drive that would resurface in her scientific work years later.

REVOLUTION IN FUR AND FORM

Fast forward to 1860, and Martha was in Colorado, chasing a new life with her husband James during the Pikes Peak Gold Rush. He was into gold; she was into wilderness.

After a failed stint running a boarding house (lost to fire), they moved to a cabin outside Denver, only to find it occupied by a squatter.

When the squatter left, he didn't take all his belongings. Namely, he left behind a box of poorly mounted animal specimens—heads askew, eyes staring in different directions, limbs where limbs probably shouldn't be. Most people would've screamed, gagged, or at least called it cursed.

Martha was fascinated. This was her lightning strike.

There's something deeply poetic about it: a woman out of place, finding inspiration in animals out of proportion. She studied the odd lumps, the lumpy seams, and decided she could do it better. She had to. This was where fur met fate.

She dove in, first teaching herself from whatever scraps of technique she could find, then—in classic Martha fashion—convincing a professional taxidermist in Wisconsin to take her on as a student. Some sources even suggest she disguised herself as a man to gain access to proper training—not exactly confirmed, but let's be honest: It sounds like her.

When doors closed, Martha kicked them off the hinges.

At the time, taxidermy was basically corpse-stuffing. Think glassy eyes, rigid limbs, and animals frozen in poses that made them look less like wild creatures and more like poorly sewn puppets.

But Martha wasn't in it for trophies. She was telling stories.

She studied animal behavior with the patience of a predator—watching, learning, sketching—and then recreated what she saw with remarkable precision. Her animals weren't dead things on display. They were caught in the act: a fox mid-pounce, a hawk mid-screech, a weasel sniffing for prey. She placed them in full, elaborate habitats with native plants, stones, and even the suggestion of weather.

It was immersive. It was theatrical. And it was decades ahead of its time.

Martha pioneered what we now call the diorama—the centerpiece of modern natural history museums—long before institutions were willing to admit a woman could innovate anything in science, much less redefine an entire medium.

She didn't just mount animals. She resurrected their world.

MUSEUMS, MOUNTAINS, AND MISCONCEPTIONS

By 1874, Martha Maxwell wasn't just collecting, she was curating an empire. She opened the Rocky Mountain Museum in Boulder, Colorado, filling it with over 600 specimens: bears, bobcats, birds, foxes, owls—a full tour of the region's wild inhabitants.

And she didn't just mount them. She found them, studied them, and yes, she shot them.

It's true: Martha hunted. Not because she relished the kill, but because the scientific world wasn't about to deliver dead animals to her doorstep. If she wanted to be taken seriously in a male-dominated field, she had to do it all—rifle in one hand, scalpel in the other.

She insisted on being called a naturalist, not a huntress—a distinction that mattered to her deeply. To Martha, death was not about domination. It was about understanding. Every animal she collected was not a conquest, but a lesson in anatomy, movement, ecology—and reverence.

But Boulder was still a frontier town with a population barely topping 300. Visitors were fascinated, but the museum struggled to stay afloat. Eventually, she moved it to Denver, hoping for more foot traffic and a fresh start.

The money didn't follow. But her moment was barreling toward her like a bull elk through the brush.

That brings us to Philadelphia, 1876. America's big 100th birthday bash. There

Martha Maxwell stands with specimens and preserved animals. Courtesy of Carnegie Library for Local History, Museum of Boulder Collection

A collection of preserved animals in Martha Maxwell's showroom. Courtesy of Carnegie Library for Local History, Museum of Boulder Collection

were steam engines and telegraphs and marble busts of white men with deeply judgmental facial hair. But tucked inside the Kansas-Colorado Building was something entirely different. It was wild, raw, and shockingly lifelike: a fully reconstructed slice of the Rocky Mountains, teeming with taxidermied animals, native plants, and even a live prairie dog scuttling around like he owned the place.

Martha Maxwell, underfunded and underestimated as ever, had hauled the entire thing across the country herself. She didn't just show up. She built her way in.

Visitors were entranced. Her diorama was one of the most talked-about attractions in the Kansas-Colorado Building—until, of course, they learned it was the work of a woman. That's when the Victorian pearl-clutching kicked in. A woman? Doing science? With a gun and a glue pot?

Martha wasn't having it.

She hung a sign right in the middle of her exhibit: "Woman's Work." Not a footnote. A billboard. A mic drop. And when one particularly clueless man asked what she was doing there, she didn't blink.

According to accounts, she coolly asserted that she had every right to be there—a quiet but powerful rebuke to the gatekeeping norms of her time.

That moment—one woman standing alone in a building full of men and exhibits that had tried to exclude her—wasn't just personal. It was political. It was revolutionary. And it's a line that still belongs stitched into every lab coat, ranger jacket, and museum curator's lanyard.

LEGACY IN DIORAMAS: DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURE & SCIENCE

Today, Martha Maxwell's fingerprints are all over modern natural history museums, especially in her home state of Colorado. At the Denver Museum of Nature & Science (DMNS), her legacy isn't behind glass—it's in the glass itself, in the curated wildernesses, and in the immersive magic that's become standard.

Jeff Stephenson, science liaison at the museum, says that although the institution hasn't produced new taxidermy since 2009, Martha's signature style—lifelike, immersive, and biologically precise—still shapes the museum's approach.

"Certainly, the wave of lifelike and accurate animal mounts took hold here by the time we were making diorama halls with themes," he explains. "Most of our dioramas from the 1930s–1980s represent a specific place in time and space. All the organisms, including plants and animals, were documented in situ by our teams, with careful attention to season, day, and time."

Sound familiar? It should. That obsessive detail, that insistence on accuracy, on story, on natural drama frozen mid-beat—that's textbook Maxwell. She didn't just want animals on display. She wanted people to understand them, to see them.

She hung a sign right in the middle of her exhibit: "Woman's Work." Not a footnote. A billboard.

And the museum has evolved with that same spirit. Stephenson notes that in recent years they've added touches Martha could've only dreamed of: soundscapes, artificial waterfalls, and interactive features to help bring the exhibits to life.

"We have been making changes that are fun, engaging, accurate, and innovative," he says.

Even the ethics of collection—something Martha wrestled with in her time—have changed in ways that would likely earn her approval.

"We don't collect specimens for exhibition, not since the 1980s," Stephenson explains. "We do collect scientific research specimens in many fields, abiding by strict international, national, and state laws. We will not hunt endangered species, and the days of massive collecting expeditions are over."

Today, the museum serves as a federal repository for threatened and endangered species, sometimes receiving specimens from the US Fish and Wildlife Service or the Denver Zoo. That means the mission has shifted: less about possession, more about preservation. And it's hard not to imagine Martha—rifle slung, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued—nodding with quiet approval at the evolution of the work she helped pioneer.

Most poignantly, Stephenson reflects on what her reaction might be if she could walk through the museum today:

"I think Martha would be impressed with the stories behind the creation of many of our dioramas," he says. "I'm also inclined to think that Martha would enjoy watching the many, many visitors who come into our diorama halls, often pausing for grandparents to tell stories to their grandchildren. Because I think that Martha thought about her work in the same way: as a gift to the people."

A gift, indeed. Wrapped in moss and mountain air, in fur and feathers, in careful angles and lived knowledge—left for future generations to unbox with wonder.

ETHICS, EDUCATION, AND THE FUTURE OF THE CRAFT

If Martha Maxwell were around today, there's a good chance she'd be elbow-deep in resin, wire, and ethically sourced rabbit bones at The Terrorium Shop, a Denver-based taxidermy and entomology studio run by Ian Johnson and Amber Hage-Ali. And while you won't find any corseted Victorian formality in their workspace, you will find her spirit—fierce, resourceful, and deeply committed to honoring nature, not exploiting it.

"We want to aim to use things that are like scraps—byproducts of other industries, things that were found naturally," says Ian. "Nothing that was just intently killed for the use of taxidermy."

Sound familiar? That echoes Maxwell's own approach. While she hunted out of necessity and access, she didn't kill for

The Gray Wolf diorama in Bonfils Hall, DMNS. Courtesy of Denver Museum of Nature & Science

Martha Maxwell poses at her desk with animals she has preserved, in a photograph titled *In the Work Room*. Courtesy of Library of Congress

glory. She collected specimens herself because no one else was going to do it for her, and she used every part with intention.

Terrorium goes even further: They work directly with local farmers to repurpose stillborn livestock and other unavoidable losses. "It kind of helps the farmer recoup some costs as well," Ian explains. "It's a really good symbiotic relationship because there's so much work that goes into farming animals, and they just lose those animals. So it allows them to cope with some of that loss while giving us a sustainable outlet."

This ethos—using what nature already gives—marks a broader shift in the taxidermy world, one that blends education, reverence, and radical creativity. Just like Martha did with her prairie dog and painted backdrops, Terrorium is about connection, not conquest.

"I think if we all appreciate nature more, we're going to respect her more," says Amber. "And I think that's a really important piece, especially with everything going on right now." To that end, the shop doesn't just mount animals—it teaches. Through hands-on workshops, it shows people how to preserve, learn, and reconnect.

"Something I feel like we've kind of lost with time is that connection to nature," Amber says. "I remember growing up and playing outside until nine at night, hiking and collecting things. I really hope that our store can kind of ignite that excitement again for people to get out there and collect and share the joy of creating."

This is taxidermy reimagined—not a dusty Victorian relic, but a living, evolving form of ecological storytelling.

Modern taxidermists, much like Martha in her day, are confronting the ethics of the practice head-on. Laws like the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and CITES are reshaping what's permissible—and what's responsible—in the world of specimen work. Ian sees it firsthand. "What I've seen with the boom in oddities is amazing, but there's also a lack of education right now. I feel like there's a lot of questionable sources out there," he says.

His advice? "I always encourage people to call their local US Fish and Wildlife Service if they have questions, because they're there to educate and help, not to be feared."

Beyond legality, the field is also embracing technology. Martha sculpted her animal forms by hand. Today's taxidermists are molding with two-part AB foam and even 3D printing. "I do see a

lot of different transformations coming in the industry—3D printing is one of them," Ian notes. "It's going to evolve, and it's going to be cool to see that."

And then—maybe most importantly—there's the shift in who gets to do the work.

"There are so many cool female taxidermists coming up now," Amber says. "Before, they didn't really get recognition, but now they're making an impact. And there's more inclusivity in general—not just for women, but for the LGBTQIA+ community as well. I love seeing that, because it shows how we're growing as a culture."

In a field once monopolized by mustachioed gatekeepers with rifles, there's now space for queer artists, feminist scientists, and scrappy outsiders, just like Martha was. She may not have received the credit she deserved in her own time, but her legacy laid the bones—literally—for a future that's more thoughtful, more inclusive, and far more alive.

MARTHA'S GHOST IS LAUGHING

Martha Maxwell died in 1881, broke, exhausted, and too far ahead of her time to get the kind of credit she'd earned ten times over. She passed away at just 49 years old, in Rockaway Beach, New York, after years of dragging a taxidermy empire across states, fighting for recognition, and working herself into the ground.

But her story didn't end there. Because when she reimagined the lifeless animal mount into a lifelike diorama, she didn't just change a craft, she changed how people understand nature. She made museumgoers see animals as living beings in living systems, not as trophies or oddities. And while she may not have lived to see the wave she started, we are standing in it now.

We see it in every museum hall that pauses time to show a wolf stalking a snow-covered ridge. We see it in the ethical studios like Terrorium that teach

A wall featuring multiple taxidermy mounts, vintage-style mirrors, and framed specimens at The Terrorium Shop. Courtesy of Amber Hage-Ali

A taxidermy reptile specimen poses on top of a piece of wood. Courtesy of Amber Hage-Ali

preservation, not just presentation. We see it in every woman and every outsider who steps into a space they were never invited into and makes that space better—more honest, more dynamic, more wild.

Even her daughter, Mabel, didn't quite understand what she was building. She remembered the long, cold hunting trips as miserable. She craved warm shoes and normalcy. But Martha wasn't interested in comfort. She was interested in contribution.

Martha Maxwell never had a degree. She never had a patron. But she had a rifle, a scalpel, a homemade exhibit, and the clearest sense of purpose a person could carry. When the world questioned her presence, her intellect, her right to build, she responded with steady determination—not with loud protest, but with unwavering action and the deep conviction that she did, in fact, belong.

Because in the end, what Martha Maxwell built wasn't just taxidermy or museum displays. It was a legacy of persistence and presence. She helped redefine what "woman's work" could look like, turning a label of limitation into a declaration of power.

Her hands shaped animals and ideas alike, and the echoes of that work still call to anyone who's ever been told they don't belong.

Dustyn Deerman is a writer and communications professional who's worked everywhere from newsrooms and classrooms to government offices and creative agencies. She currently handles press and community engagement for Colorado's Lieutenant Governor, helping shape how stories are told across the state.

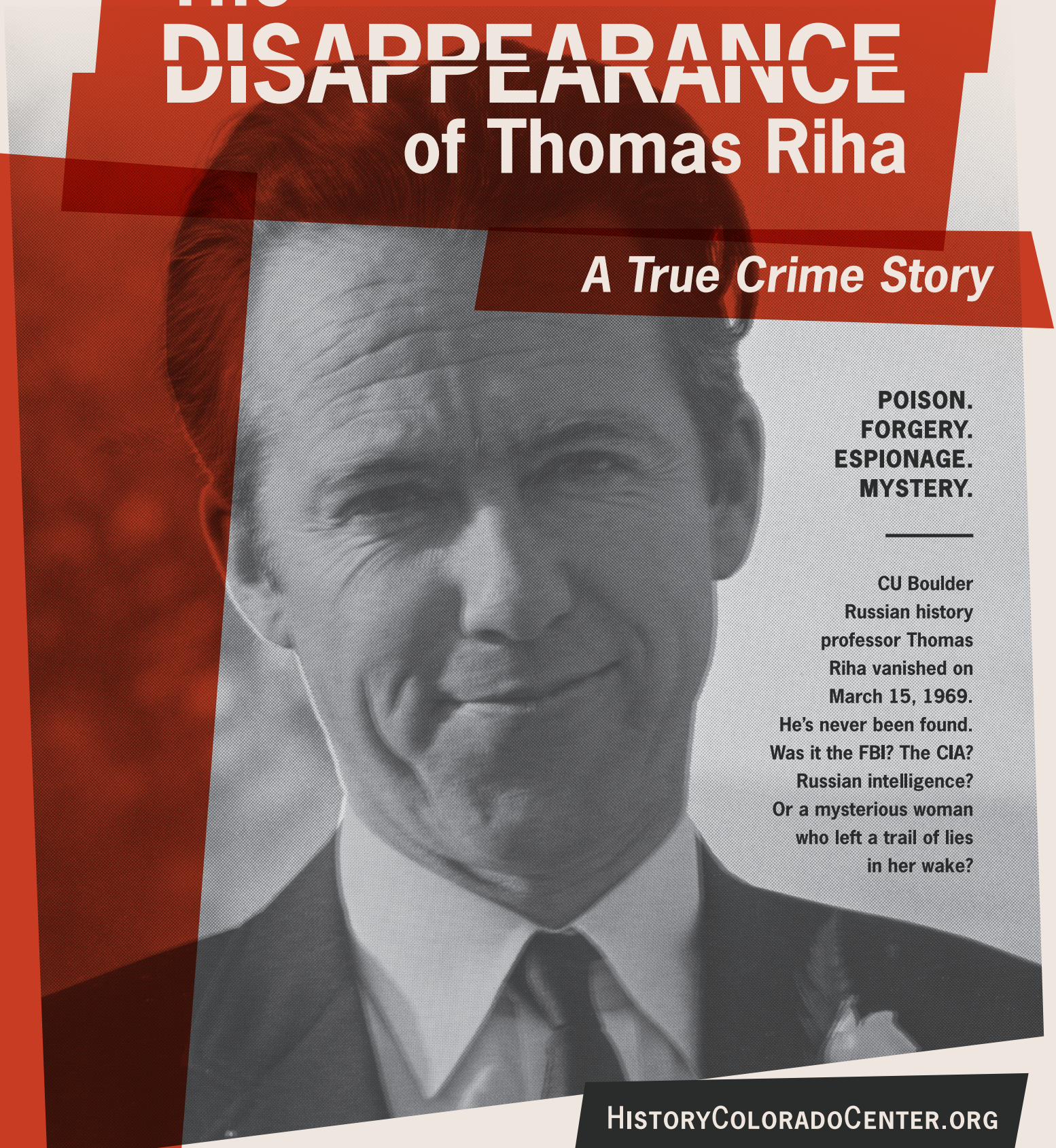
Image taken from the right side of the bighorn sheep diorama. Courtesy of Denver Museum of Nature & Science

Exhibition Now on View

History Colorado Center

The DISAPPEARANCE of Thomas Riha

A True Crime Story



POISON.
FORGERY.
ESPIONAGE.
MYSTERY.

CU Boulder Russian history professor Thomas Riha vanished on March 15, 1969. He's never been found. Was it the FBI? The CIA? Russian intelligence? Or a mysterious woman who left a trail of lies in her wake?

HistoryColoradoCenter.org

The Sabotage of United Flight 629

Seventy years ago, United Flight 629 exploded over Longmont, killing everyone aboard. The investigation that followed unveiled the tragedy, betrayal, and senseless malice behind one of America's earliest and deadliest air disasters.

BY JOE RASSENFOSS
SPECIAL TO THE *COLORADO SUN*

The sugar beet harvest in Colorado can be a race against time. The crop is the first planted in the spring and not harvested until late October, when an early snowstorm can leave farmers with a fraction of the yield they planned.

So on November 1, 1955, young Conrad Hopp worked feverishly alongside his family on their Weld County farm to take out the beet crop. But when the clock struck 7 P.M. that evening, the crop was all in and Conrad was hungrily devouring dinner in their farmhouse.

Three minutes later the eighteen-year-old's life changed forever.

"We heard this loud explosion that shook all the windows in the house," Hopp would tell Denver's 7 years later. "We looked outside, and we could hear the roar of the engines—that's how you knew it was a plane—and the ball of fire coming through the air."

That ball of fire was United Air Lines Flight 629, known as Mainliner Denver, which had taken off just eleven minutes prior from Stapleton Air Field en route to Portland. Now the 91,746-pound DC-6-B, brimming with 3,400 gallons of fuel, was plummeting toward the Hopp family farm eight miles west of Longmont.

Scrambling outside, Conrad and his brother Kenneth jumped in a car and drove across a field toward the crash, swerving around debris, until an irrigation ditch stopped them. Conrad remembers parking the car, its headlights focused on the back of an airline seat sitting alone in the field. The brothers got out and walked to a fence, which Kenneth climbed and then ran toward the fiery crash site, yelling back at Conrad

As part of the investigation, the wreckage of Flight 629 was collected and organized in a hangar so all the pieces could be examined in relation to each other. Courtesy of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

to get them coats to ward off the night's cold.

When Conrad turned to get the coats from the truck, he saw the front of the airline seat—and the lifeless body held secure in it by the seatbelt. Conrad was stunned: "My stomach hit the ground."

Daisy Brubaker and her husband, tenants on the nearby Heil Farm, also were eating dinner at the time of the explosion. The view from their window was terrifying. "It looked like the main part of the plane was going to hit our house," Daisy told the *Rocky Mountain News*. "We just stood there scared to death. It landed a few yards away."

The Hopps and Brubakers weren't the only ones who heard the explosion, which the *News* reported "lit up the eastern skies for miles." Callers by the hundreds were dialing the Longmont Police Department. Scores of others, from as far as fifty miles away, made a beeline to the crash site.

Longmont police chief Keith Cunningham alerted the Colorado State Patrol and dispatched every available police officer, firefighter, and ambulance to the scene. The severity of the moment became clear, the *News* reported, when a patrolman on site radioed that no ambulances were necessary—all forty-four onboard had perished. A helicopter from Lowry Air Force base soon arrived to train its searchlight on the dark field below to support the recovery of bodies while throngs of onlookers, including families who brought along young children, clogged the surrounding roads.

Meanwhile, twenty-three-year-old John Gilbert Graham, his wife Gloria, twenty-two, and son Allen, twenty months, were dining in a Stapleton Airfield coffee shop. They had just seen off John's mother, Daisie King, on the Mainliner Denver.

"As we were leaving, I heard the cashier say that there had been a wreck of an airplane about forty miles from Denver," Graham would say afterward. "Later on that evening, after my wife and I had returned home, we heard over the radio that all the passengers aboard had been killed."

PRIOR CRASHES LED TO QUICK RESPONSE

Commercial air travel today is largely a model of safety and reliability—in 2024 it safely delivered a staggering 1.1 billion US passengers to their destinations—in part because of the unreliability of air travel in the 1950s. The 1956 midair collision of a TWA Super Constellation and a United Air Lines DC-7 over the Grand Canyon, which killed all 128 in the planes and rained debris on the canyon that remains to this day, was a prime example that while air traffic had more than doubled since the end of World War II, regulation of that traffic had not kept up.

Which is not to say no one was minding the skies. The Bureau of Air Commerce, created in 1934, took over the first air traffic control centers created by the airlines in 1936 and continued to expand their number. The Civil

United Air Lines photo postcard showing passengers disembarking from Mainliner Denver, the plane destroyed in the bombing of Flight 629.
Courtesy of United Airlines

John Gilbert Graham in handcuffs.
History Colorado, 2022.57.2412

The wreckage of Flight 629 scattered across the fields of Longmont. History Colorado, 2022.57.23591.27

Aeronautics Board (CAB) was created in 1940 to oversee economic regulation, safety rulemaking, and investigation of civil aviation accidents.

And so it wasn't long before CAB investigators arrived at the Mainliner crash site. Evidence might have been plentiful, but it was dispersed over six square miles. The largely intact tail of the plane was nearly a mile away from the main crash site. The plane's enormous amount of fuel meant that flames persisted at the site for three days, defying efforts to douse them, much less investigate that part of the plane.

One thing quickly became apparent to CAB investigators, who noted in their report: "An explosion had occurred of such great intensity that it would have been unusual for it to have been caused by any system or component of the aircraft. This awareness was strengthened by smudge marks and odor characteristic of an explosive that persisted on fragmentized wreckage known to be part of the fuselage structure in the area of the No. 4 baggage compartment."

On Monday, November 7, 1955, the CAB delivered its report to the Denver office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation so that the "apparent criminal aspects involved could be pursued." The investigation swung into action on multiple fronts, including the painstaking job undertaken by the CAB, United, and manufacturer Douglas Aircraft to reassemble the shattered plane in a hangar near Stapleton—the first time ever for such a procedure. Technicians soon confirmed the CAB finding that a "dynamite-type explosion had occurred within the No. 4 baggage compartment."

The number four compartment had been emptied after the plane arrived from Chicago, owing to a call from a Windy City baggage handler who thought he had lost his keys in the compartment. Denver workers didn't find the keys but, crucially, reloaded that luggage in compartments one, two, and three. As a result, all mail, luggage, and cargo originating in Denver were loaded into four.

The FBI was combing through more than wreckage: Agents did exhaustive outreach and background checks on the forty-four victims, surviving family members, relatives, and friends. The legwork soon yielded a suspect: John Gilbert Graham, the man who brought his family to see off his mother Daisie King.

Dr. J. William Magee displaying metal to the jury during the trial of John Gilbert Graham. History Colorado, 2022.57.2382

An agent learned that Graham had purchased $37,500 in flight insurance (nearly $450,000 in today's dollars) for his mother. The policy signed by King named Graham as the beneficiary. Suspicions grew when another agent turned up Graham's criminal record, which included forgery, theft, illegal alcohol transport and, pointedly, suspected insurance fraud.

The act of sabotage was confirmed on November 7. "The sidewalls of the baggage hold were pushed out, and the floor was in pieces. It is a bomb-type explosion," CAB investigation division chief James Peyton told the *Rocky Mountain News*.

While the flight would prove the deadliest case of air sabotage to that date, it was not the first. United Air Lines Flight 23 exploded and crashed in Indiana on October 10, 1933, killing all seven aboard. While investigators confirmed a bomb caused the crash, no suspect was ever identified.

Peyton added that luggage in the baggage hold smelled "like gunpowder, or an exploding firecracker." While he would not confirm to the press the precise location of the blast, the investigator stressed "there still has been no evidence of malfunction and the rumors of metal fatigue being responsible for the accident are not true."

A hunter's unexpected find added to the evidence pointing at Graham. "We didn't bag a single pheasant. Never even flushed one bird," John Martin, who was hunting four days after the crash with friends on a farm near Brighton, told *The Denver Post*. But Martin bagged a trophy of a different kind. "I stopped to rest next to this bush and there it was."

"It" was a folded ticket from the downed United flight that clung, neatly folded and undamaged, to a bush some fifteen miles from the crash site. "And not another piece of paper anywhere in that field," Martin told *The Post*. Understanding it might have value ("I collect any damned thing," the Denverite said), he stuffed it in his pocket.

The following Monday, November 7, Martin gave the FBI the ticket. It wasn't just anyone's ticket: It was Daisie King's. Handwritten on the ticket was her itinerary (Denver, Portland, Seattle, Anchorage) and a charge of $27.82 for thirty-seven pounds of excess luggage. Investigators had to wonder: Was the luggage overweight because it was loaded with explosives? If so, could her son—the beneficiary of her flight insurance policy—have put it there?

A SHOCKING CONFESSION

"Where do you want me to start?"

It was 12:07 A.M. on Monday, November 14, when John Gilbert Graham posed that question to FBI agent Roy Moore. The query ended a game of cat and mouse that started at 1 P.M. Sunday, when Graham and his wife Gloria arrived at FBI offices to identify Daisie King's luggage.

Gloria was excused after that task; Graham was asked to stay for a few more questions, which continued all afternoon. Just past 6:30 P.M., after comparing the answers Graham had given an agent three nights prior to his responses on Sunday, Moore felt like he had his man.

"There were so many discrepancies we decided to tell Graham he was a suspect,"

Moore told the *Denver Post*. "I informed Graham of his constitutional rights, told him he could use the phone to call an attorney, said the door would be left open and he could leave at any time and that he didn't have to say anything and that anything he did say could be used against him. I then said, 'Jack, I accuse you of blowing up the plane.'"

Not only did Graham deny Moore's charge and decline the services of an attorney, but he also signed waivers allowing the search of his home, car, the Crown A Drive-In restaurant he co-owned with his mother, and other locations. Meanwhile, questioning continued, with agents shuttling in and out of the room. Shortly after midnight, Moore confronted Graham again.

"You've been lying to us all night," the agent said. "We are going to charge you with this crime. Why not make it easy for us?"

Graham finally relented, giving a fifteen-minute oral confession. The FBI then called in a stenographer to take a written confession. Just before 3 A.M., Graham reviewed, approved, and signed the confession, then was examined by a physician to confirm he had not been physically harmed during the interrogation.

So what did he confess? David Stolberg wrote it this way in the *Rocky Mountain News*: "The tall, muscular youth told how he fashioned a dynamite bomb, maneuvering his family so he could hide the device in his mother's suitcase, and of how he dawdled over dinner at Stapleton Field until word of the crash came."

Graham also told investigators he collected the parts and built the bomb on October 18 and 19. The device included twenty-five sticks of dynamite, a timing device, an EverReady six-volt dry cell Hotshot battery, and two dynamite caps, each connected to about eight feet of wire. On the day of the flight, Daisie King went ahead to the Denver Motor Hotel, where she was leaving her car while she was in Alaska to visit her daughter Helen Hablutzel. That allowed Graham to put the homemade bomb in her luggage before picking up his mother, wife, and child en route to the airport. Once there, he carried the luggage for Daisie. "After my mother checked in," he told the FBI, "my wife and I went with her to the passenger gate where we told her goodbye and watched her board."

That's right: Graham brought his family to bid bon voyage to his mother and, by extension, the other forty-three innocent victims on the doomed flight. And then the family retreated to an airport coffee shop for dinner, where Graham waited long enough to hear that the plane had crashed.

His confession completed at 3 A.M., Graham was arrested, photographed, and fingerprinted. That morning he had a preliminary hearing on federal sabotage charges, but Graham would never stand trial on those charges. The reason? At that time, the lone federal statute for airline sabotage had a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and a $100,000 fine.

A passenger jet on the tarmac at Stapleton Airfield in the late 1940s. Denver Public Library Special Collections Z-117

There was a federal statute that made sabotage of a train punishable by death, but nothing similar existed for planes.

A *Post* story would later note that in 1953 the "Department of Justice tried to have the federal train wreck law amended to cover killings in the air. But the bill did not get out of committee. Apparently, the nation's lawmakers felt there was no danger of someone committing a crime by blowing up an airplane. But now we know that such a thing can happen."

Colorado Senator Gordon Allott swiftly announced plans to advance a federal legislative solution. And eight months later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Public Law 709, which authorized capital punishment for acts of aircraft sabotage resulting in death. But that was of no help in the Mainliner case, so federal authorities transferred Graham's case to the State of Colorado on Tuesday, November 15, when District Attorney Bert Keating charged Graham with his mother's murder.

Keating pledged to pursue the case as soon as possible and vowed to, in his words, "push for the maximum penalty—death in the state gas chamber."

Photo of Daisy King, mother of John Gilbert Graham and the target of his attack. History Colorado, PH.PROP.5440

MAKING A MURDER CASE

Graham's confession was a breakthrough, but now an investigation had to develop the evidence and motive required for a conviction. Significant resources were aimed at the task, including the FBI. And another group of investigators joined the hunt: newspaper reporters.

Denver's population of close to 420,000 in the mid-1950s was watching TV news in growing numbers. KFEL (Channel 2), the first Denver station to sign on in 1952, had been joined by KBTV (Channel 9), KLZ-TV (Channel 7), and KOA-TV (Channel 4). But *The Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News* had far more reporters, which led to breakthroughs in the ensuing mornings (*News*) and afternoons (*Post*).

But a police investigator told the *Post* "burglars aren't interested in blowing things up."

Days after the November 16 confession the *News* broke the story of Graham's "chance remark" about a gift for his mother. After the crash Graham told relatives, including his mother-in-law Christine Elson, that on the day of the flight he purchased Daisie King a jewelry-making tool she had coveted and hid it in her luggage as a surprise for her upon reaching Alaska. Elson, after much soul searching, reached out to FBI agents on November 9 to share the story, including that "Graham claimed he had a premonition of his mother's death before word of the explosion reached him." The FBI already had strong reason to suspect Graham; the revelation that he had opened King's luggage to insert the gift cemented that suspicion.

Post reporter Ed Olsen detailed on November 19 how Graham bought the timer used for the bomb. Ryall Electric Supply Company salesman Joseph T. Grande recalled how the accused, who identified himself as an employee for the fictitious Texas Colorado Pump Company, decided the first timer he had ordered wasn't the right one and had Grande order a second—only to ultimately buy the first timer. Grande called the FBI when he saw a photo of Graham after his confession.

The *News* followed that on November 20 with the story that Graham bought twenty-five sticks of dynamite and two detonating caps for $2.60 three days before the flight at the Brown Brothers Super Sav-R Shopping Center in Kremmling. Owner Lyman Brown, who said the accused bomber "didn't seem to know much about the stuff," remembered Graham from when he was younger and living on a ranch near Yampa with his mother and her husband Earl King. "He didn't talk much," Brown said of the encounter. "I assumed he was prospecting and asked if he wanted the dynamite for open ground (above ground) work… He said 'Yes.' "

Then came a November 21 *News* report that the accused worked briefly at Ward Electric Company to learn "electric fundamentals" that could have helped him build the fatal time bomb. Owner Damon Ward thought it "peculiar" Graham would want the job after learning he owned a restaurant. But Graham explained he had "motors and fans in the restaurant which occasionally needed repairs." More significantly, Graham asked about timing devices; when Ward showed him some, the suspect said he wasn't interested because they required an outside source of electricity and he wanted a timer that didn't need an outside source—just like the timer ultimately used in the sabotage.

News reporter Al Nakkula scored the first jailhouse interview with Graham, who denied his confession and claimed it was obtained under duress. "Yes, I signed a statement," he told Nakkula. "But it's

A passenger jet on the tarmac at Stapleton Airfield in the late 1940s. Denver Public Library Special Collections Z-117

not true. They told me they were going to put my wife in jail and I'd better get it straightened out myself."

US Attorney Donald E. Kelley was emphatic in his reply to the *News*: "Agents working on the case would not allow Graham to sign the confession until he told them it was made voluntarily and that he understood it might be used against him."

ESTABLISHING MOTIVE

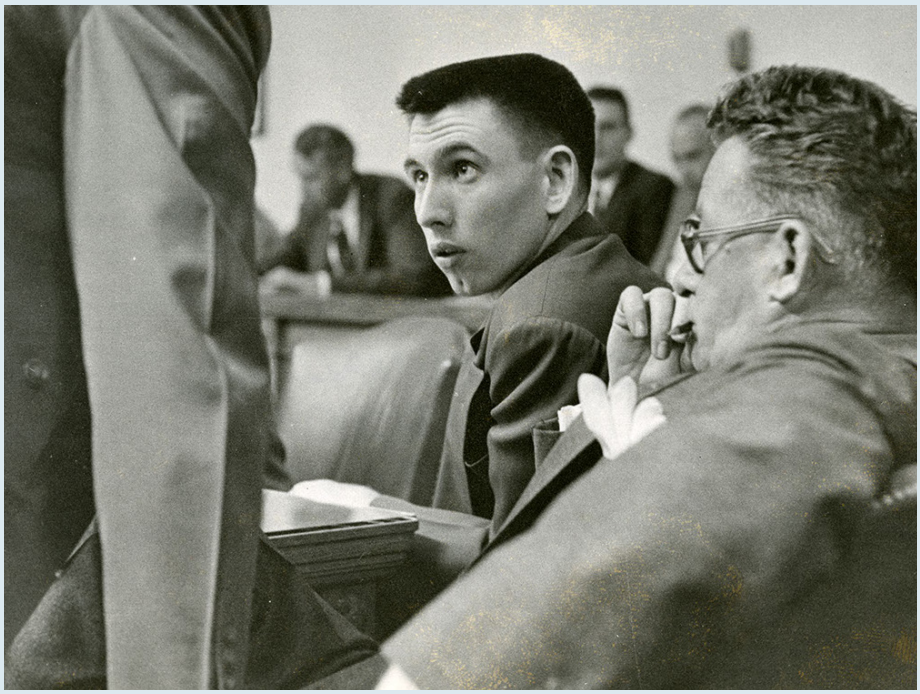
The investigation also began to shed light on motive. Conflict between mother and son may have started the day Daisie sent her six-year-old son to the Clayton College of Denver orphanage after she was widowed and unable to afford his upbringing. Not only was the boy unhappy at the orphanage, often disciplined for his behavior, Daisie kept him there long after her subsequent marriage to Earl King, a wealthy rancher who could support his care.

Graham's desire for money ("I'd do anything for money," a *News* story reported he once told his neighbor Elvin West) could have played a role. After Daisie reclaimed her son from Clayton College, he engaged in a series of criminal acts focused on money. Graham was convicted of check forgery at a Denver job; that earned him probation. He later served sixty days in jail in Lubbock, Texas, after a conviction for selling "illicit liquor," according to the *News*. And then Graham left his pickup truck on railroad tracks south of Denver in what investigators considered a case of insurance fraud but could never prove.

The *Post* got further at the money motive in a story about the Crown A Drive-In. Daisie purchased the rotisserie chicken eatery on South Federal Boulevard for her son to operate, but issues arose between them over its management. "They seemed to be in financial trouble," eighteen-year-old Eleanor Schrader told the *Post*. "They argued frequently. When the arguments started in front of the girls (employees) they would go in the back room and finish it. When Mrs. King came out you could see she had been crying."

Carhop Naomi Harger confirmed the animus: "He used to fly off the handle at her even if she made just the littlest mistake. He used dirty and foul language at her, too."

Jerry Holmes owned a Kremmling restaurant where Daisie would stop en route to a home she owned in Steamboat Springs. Holmes told the *Post* that



John Gilbert Graham speaking with his lawyers at trial. History Colorado, 2022.57.2388

Daisie came in looking "awfully tired and worried" two months before the plane explosion. "I asked how the business was doing." Daisie responded: "Pretty good. But the kid is taking (money) out as fast as we get it."

A few days later, in the early morning of September 5, an explosion rocked the Crown A. The police report said the blast was caused by escaping gas from a "deliberately disconnected fuel line being ignited by a pilot light on a hot water tank." A passing driver saw the blaze at 1:30 A.M. and called the fire department, which extinguished the blaze, limiting the damage to just $400. Graham told investigators $3 was missing from the cash register and he suspected the thief caused the explosion. But a police investigator told the *Post* "burglars aren't interested in blowing things up."

Insurance adjuster Richard Conley, who evaluated the blast, flashed back to the incident when he saw Daisie King's name in the list of Flight 629 victims. "I mentioned to my wife that if this boy was nutty enough to blow up his own place of business—which we thought he did, although we couldn't get any proof—he was a logical suspect for the plane accident," Conley later told the *Post*. He didn't call the police, as there was no report of sabotage yet, but he told the story to associates, one of whom ultimately called the FBI.

After those failed attempts at a big score, the fact that Graham stood to inherit 25 percent of Daisie's estate of $150,000 might have seemed like a quick way to make money; the flight insurance payout would be icing on the cake. But Graham never cited money as the driving force of his actions.

While awaiting trial in February of 1956, Graham unsuccessfully attempted suicide in his jail cell by strangling himself with socks. Guards found him unconscious, and he was placed under closer surveillance. Was that a sign of mental illness? Defense lawyers later would order a psychiatric examination, but doctors declined to diagnose him as insane.

Still, it's hard not to wonder about the mental state of someone who condemned the other forty-three passengers on Flight 629 to death and later told *Time magazine*: "As far as feeling remorse for those people (on the plane), I don't. I can't help it. Everybody pays their way and takes their chances. That's just the way it goes."

THE ORDEAL OF JURY SELECTION

Colorado law protects jurors' safety by restricting what information about them is available to the public. But during jury selection for the trial, the *Rocky Mountain News* and *Denver Post* listed the names, addresses and (often) occupations of every potential and selected juror. And it was an enormous list. The *News* noted it took just sixty-eight jurors in the first two days of selection for twelve potential jurors and an alternate to be tentatively identified. But then "one side or the other exercised a peremptory challenge (to dismiss a juror) and the search for a substitute was on again."

By day four they had surpassed the Colorado record of 114 jurors called during the 1954 trial of accused murderer Leroy Leick, with the *News* reporting that only five of the original thirteen remained. Their reward if they made the jury: $6 a day for serving on the trial, for which they would be sequestered. (That said, a *News* story did report the jurors would "live it up" one night on a chartered bus to Mt. Vernon Country Club for dinner followed by "a ride through the Idaho Springs area.")

After day six, 216 jurors had been called. Of those, the *News* reported eighty-eight had been excused for opposing the death penalty, sixty-eight for holding fixed opinions concerning guilt or innocence, and twenty-five owing to personal hardship. On the latter, the *Post* reported that Nick Ursini was suffering from an "acute anxiety reaction" resulting in severe abdominal pain. The chief resident at Denver General, Dr. Donald Hanna, told the court it was imperative that Ursini, a butcher, be excused because his "condition will tend to increase as the emotional tension increases."

There also was levity. The *News* cited "a breath of fresh air" in the courtroom when the judge asked Mrs. Virgil S. Pankey if there was "anything personal that would keep her from being an attentive juror." Pankey responded: "Well, I'm having a party at my house tonight." Once the laughter subsided, Pankey was

excused after she stated her opposition to the death penalty, which the story noted gave her a "chance to attend her party."

After nearly seven days the *News* reported that the final jury of seven men and five women "come from all walks of life and live in north, east, southeast and southwest Denver." These everyday Denverites included housewives and bachelors, with jobs ranging from sales to civil engineer, truck driver to lithographer. Ralph W. Bonar, assistant to the president of the American Film Co., was the only remaining juror from the original thirteen initially empanelled.

News reporter Jack Gaskie explained the daunting job ahead for jurors: "Wipe your mind clean. You've never heard of John Gilbert Graham. You know nothing of the burst of light in the night air over Longmont on November 1. Is that difficult, impossible? This is what the jurors must do."

WORKING THE INSURANCE ANGLE

No one had reason to suspect John Gilbert Graham was up to no good at the airport on November 1 when he started pumping quarters into a Mutual of Omaha flight insurance vending machine. After all, *The Denver Post* reported thirteen other passengers bought insurance totaling $655,000. They had reason to buy: Just weeks earlier on October 7, United Flight 409 had crashed into Medicine Bow Peak west of Laramie, killing sixty-six people in what was then the worst air disaster in US history.

That said, the safety record wasn't so bad that the insurance industry wasn't willing to bet on it. Starting in the late 1940s, insurers began underwriting flight insurance. But unlike today's trip insurance, which reimburses you for unused flights or hotel stays, these policies offered protection against accidental death or injury during a flight.

Sales boomed with the arrival of vending machines made by Tele-Trip Insurance Co. that enabled policy purchases at the airport. The *News* reported that Mutual of Omaha, which bought Tele-Trip in 1955, had machines in eighty-six airports and "in one month … sells as many as 100,000 policies across the country." The *Post* reported that in 1955 passengers could deposit up to $2.50 in the coin-operated machines at a cost of 4 cents per $1,000 of insurance, with a maximum of $62,500.

Graham bought six policies at the airport, according to evidence sent by Mutual of Omaha to District Attorney Bert Keating. Oddly, the first two policies were blank. (In a jailhouse interview with the *Post*, Graham explained that happened "because we just didn't know how to work the machine.") Of the remaining four, two were to pay out $37,500 and two were to pay out $6,250 each.

What harm could result in portraying by photo, film, radio, and screen to the business, professional… the true picture of the administration of justice?

While there was uncertainty about who filled out each form, Keating said that the signature appeared to be that of Graham's mother, Daisie King.

NEWS COVERAGE ECHOED THE TIMES

The story of United Flight 629 is an enormous tragedy of betrayal and murder. At any time in history, journalists would have delivered wall-to-wall coverage. But in 1955 many of the guardrails in place today—anonymity for jurors, the accused rarely (if ever) giving interviews—were not the norm. The result was a reporting free-for-all between the *Rocky Mountain News* and *The Denver Post* that delivered news beat after news beat, a "diary" written by Graham about a day in the life of the accused murderer, and even the imagined conversations of those involved.

All of it was delivered in punchy prose that veered toward florid. A private eye "gumshoed" for the defense, the accused is "dark and handsome," the president of United Air Lines "paces like a tiger," and personalities are "magnetic." If new details were slow to develop, reporters found ways to generate drama in stories such as: The *News* story "Death for 44 cost Mrs. King 27 dollars" described how Daisie King "had to pay the freight for her own death and that of 43 others" when she was charged extra for her overweight luggage; and the breathless Associated Press yarn that began: "This is a drama of the kind Hollywood feeds on. Forty-four persons are thrown together by chance in a 4-engined airliner high above mid-America…Unbeknown to each of them, the 44 are winging together to a common destination–violent death."

Then there was potential juror Elva Prouty, described in the *Post* as an "attractive and shapely wife." Rather than dwell on her legal obligation, the story highlighted her beauty-queen career in the "flapper era"–which included a second-place finish in the Denver Post-American Theater beauty contest, earning her the sobriquet "Queen of Pulchritude." It also reported her three marriages (and one that was annulled after she discovered her intended was still married) and past role as a "worthy high priestess of Damascus, Shrine No. 1, orders of the White Shrine of Jerusalem." Whatever Prouty's history, when the final jury was seated, she was among the twelve.

Some of the journalists working then are lost to time, but *News* reporters Al Nakkula and Walter "Dusty" Saunders were still plying their trade at the Colfax Avenue newsroom of the Rocky into the 1980s (and Dusty well beyond that). Robert Chase, a respected reporter who

later became the paper's Managing Editor, had married *News* reporter Mary Chase, better known as the playwright who created *Harvey*, which was adapted into a 1950 movie starring Jimmy Stewart.

Pasquale "Pocky" Marranzino Sr. of the *News* might have been the most flamboyant of all. It was Pocky who convinced Graham to write a diary about a day in his life. It was Pocky who interviewed that pacing tiger of a United president after the FBI had "collared" Graham to end "one of the most bloodcurdling chapters in American aviation history."

DRAMA, BUT FEW SURPRISES

It's inaccurate to say the trial that started on April 16, 1956, lacked drama—every day it attracted large crowds and intense media coverage by outlets across the country. But it was hardly surprising, since virtually all of its evidence already had played out in the press. Readers would have known about the fractious nature of the relationship between Daisie King and her son, Graham's previous attempts at insurance fraud, the location of the stores where he bought the dynamite and bomb timer, and that the accused freely authorized the searches that turned up the initial evidence against him. On top of all that: Graham had willingly confessed!

There was one novel twist: a TV camera was allowed into a courtroom for the first time in state history. (The first use ever of a TV camera in court happened over four days in April of 1955, when KWTX in Waco, Texas, did a live broadcast of a murder trial.) In Colorado, courts had long abided by American Bar Association rules that prohibited photography in the courtroom. Given the massive public interest, news organizations led by KLZ-TV united to successfully protest the prohibition to the Colorado Supreme Court.

Justice Otto Moore—who once told a reporter "I may be wrong, but I'm never in doubt"—wrote the decision that reversed the ban. It opened with a backhand swipe at those who would attend a trial: "Generally only idle people pursuing 'idle curiosity' have time to visit courtrooms in person.'"

Once he got that off his chest, Justice Moore continued: "What harm could result in portraying by photo, film, radio, and screen to the business, professional, and rural leadership of a community, as well as to the average citizen regularly employed, the true picture of the administration of justice? Has anyone been heard to complain that the employment of photographs, radio and television upon the solemn occasion of the last presidential inauguration or the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was to satisfy an "idle curiosity?"…The answer (is) obvious. That which is carried out with dignity will not be undignified because more people will be able to see and hear it."

In the wake of the ruling, Judge Joseph M. McDonald approved still photography and allowed television station KLZ to place a camera in a small wooden booth at the back of the courtroom. The proceedings would not be broadcast live, but the film could be shown later on news broadcasts. The judge had a remote switch to cut off the cameras as needed and decreed that if anyone objected to being photographed, their wishes would be respected.

Only one person objected: John Gilbert Graham.

Spectators lining up outside the courtroom, hoping to watch the trial of John Gilbert Graham. History Colorado, 2022.57.2400

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PLANE DYNAMITING IS CONFESSED!

Denver Youth Gives Details on Killing Mother and 43 Others for Her Insurance

—MORE PHOTOS AND STORIES ON PAGES 3, 5, 8, 11, 13, 14, 32, 34 AND 35

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Mrs. Helen Ruth Hablutzel of Anchorage, Alaska, wrings her hands nervously as she hears her brother, John Gilbert Graham, being charged with blowing up a United Air Lines plane. Among the 44 killed was Mrs. Daisie King, Mrs. Hablutzel's mother.

John Gilbert (Jack) Graham, Denver restaurant operator, is led to jail by Dep. U.S. Marshal Oscar Crist, right, Monday after he confessed to setting a dynamite time bomb that killed his mother and 43 others on a United Air Lines plane which exploded near Longmont Nov. 1.

Front page of the *Rocky Mountain News*, reporting on Graham's confession.
Rocky Mountain News, 15 November 1955, page 1. Colorado Historic Newspapers

A VERDICT, AND RESIGNATION

The Mainliner Denver trial of John Gilbert Graham started on April 16, 1956, and concluded twenty days later on May 5, 1956, when the jury was sent out to deliberate just before 10 A.M.

The verdict didn't take long: Slightly before 11 A.M. news came that a decision had been reached on the first ballot. Once the jury had settled in the box, Judge Joseph M. McDonald asked if they had reached a verdict. Jury Foreman Ralph Bonar delivered a folded sheet of paper to the bailiff, who brought it to the judge.

"We the jury," read Judge McDonald, "find the defendant, John Gilbert Graham, guilty of murder in the first degree and find that he acted with premeditation and a specific intent to take life as charged in the information herein, and fix the penalty at death." Press reports would later say that Graham showed no emotion at the verdict.

Today that verdict would launch a series of appeals by the defendant, which could continue for years. But a few days after the verdict Graham wrote a letter to Judge McDonald. "I don't desire my attorneys to file a motion for a new trial," he wrote. "It is not my intention to appeal my conviction to the Supreme Court of Colorado or any federal court. I accept the verdict of the jury and desire that it be carried out with all convenient speed."

Despite the request, defense attorneys launched one appeal, which was rejected by the state Supreme Court on October 22, 1956. On the same day at the Colorado State Penitentiary in Cañon City, prisoner John Gilbert Graham was informed that his execution in the gas chamber had been set for the week ending January 12, 1957.

On Sunday, January 6, Graham's wife Gloria made her last visit. She later told a reporter in her home: "Naturally he's frightened, but he didn't break down." Then she looked over at her infant children, Allen and Suzanne, and said "Someday I'll have to tell them."

At 7:57 P.M. on January 11, 1957, a prison guard turned a handle outside the gas chamber to release two cyanide pellets into a vat of sulfuric acid below where Graham sat secured and blindfolded. At 8:08 P.M. a doctor officially pronounced him dead.

IMPACT, MEMORIES LIVE ON

The story of the Denver Mainliner didn't end with the execution of John Gilbert Graham.

Public outcry at the time urged better examination of luggage and passengers on commercial flights. But those changes would wait decades owing to airline industry concern that those procedures would discourage people from flying. And the sale of trip insurance at airport vending machines? That didn't end until the 1980s, largely because personal insurance policies increasingly covered instances such as plane crashes—not because it might prevent a similar sabotage.

It was this completely senseless tragedy. It breaks your heart.

It was only in recent years that Conrad Hopp, who today still lives less than two miles away from where the plane crashed, began to shake the emotional toll exacted on him after he plunged into that chilling night with his brother Kenneth. In fact, the brothers could never bring themselves to discuss the horror they had faced searching for the mangled bodies of victims spread across their farm.

The impact on the victims' families and descendants can never be precisely measured, but it certainly changed the course for each family.

The forty-four who perished on Flight 629 ranged in age from eighty-one to just thirteen months old. United Captain Lee Hall was a veteran of World War II. John Bomelyn, superintendent of the county humane society in Seattle, was headed home from a convention. Barbara Cruse was a United stewardess on vacation. Frank Brennan, Clarence Todd, Elton Hickok and James Purvis had just attended an Associated General Contractors meeting in Denver. Virgil and Goldie Herman were flying for the first time.

No memorial exists to mark the death of these innocent victims as we approach the seventieth anniversary of the crash on November 1. Michael Hesse, president of the Denver Police Museum, has led the effort to change that with the creation of a memorial at Flyteco Tower, the site of the old Stapleton International Airport control tower. Fashioned in the shape of an airplane fuselage, the memorial points northwest, the plane's heading at takeoff.

The memorial, which includes the names of victims and honors first responders, was dedicated on Saturday November 1, 2025 as part of a weekend commemoration in Denver of the sabotage that will bring in descendants of victims for the dedication and other events, including a panel discussion about the crash and its lingering impact.

Hesse said the tragedy simply can't be lost to history.

"They were all human beings," he told Denver's 7. "There were countless birthdays and anniversaries that were missed. It was this completely senseless tragedy. It breaks your heart. We want to make sure the families know that their loved ones are not forgotten."

Joe Rassenfoss toiled at newspapers, including the *Rocky Mountain News*, for more than a quarter century. He still can't resist a good story.

This article was prepared in collaboration with *The Colorado Sun*. The article can also be found on their website. *The Colorado Sun* is a nonprofit reader-supported news outlet. To learn more and subscribe to free newsletters, go to coloradosun.com.

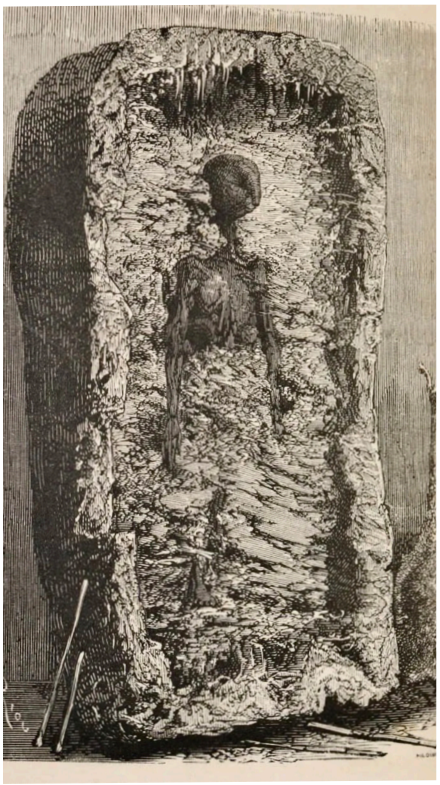
ROCKY MOUNTAIN MARTIAN

At the height of the Civil War, an international (and interplanetary) humbug straight out of science fiction dazzled the world.

BY KEN FEDER

In the summer of 1864, it was reported that scientists from across the globe gathered in the Colorado Rockies, at the base of James Peak, to investigate what was being heralded as "the greatest scientific discovery of times past and present"—undeniable evidence of extraterrestrial life!

But if you've never heard of this truly momentous scientific discovery, that's really not very surprising. The entire affair was a marvelously elaborate hoax, a humbug that played out from June of 1864 to April of 1865, not in Colorado but, instead, in the pages of a trusted French newspaper.



This engraving from *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars* depicts the quite alien-looking body of the Martian embedded in stone and propped up, after he was "discovered" in Colorado in 1864. *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars* by Henri de Parville, 1865

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT—AND SOME THAT ISN'T

While their primary purpose is conveying the news, newspapers have also long been a source of entertainment. Admittedly, some come down overwhelmingly on the entertainment side of the ledger. Consider, for example, the absurd tabloids that until fairly recently were positioned on racks by grocery store cash registers. Many of us remember the guilty pleasure of reading their hallucinatory headlines while waiting to pay for our groceries.

Among the best known of the tabloids is the *National Enquirer* focused on salacious celebrity gossip, but for my money the best of the breed is the *Weekly World News (WWN)* filled with incredible stories that used to enthrall me with deliciously insane headlines like: "Noah's Ark Was Alien Submarine"; "Belgium Destroyed by Rogue Asteroid"; "Archaeologist Discovers Lost Arms of Venus de Milo"; and "Aging Space Alien Applies for Social Security."

Perhaps the WWN gave the game away in 2004 when it began publishing a disclaimer in each issue, suggesting that "the reader should suspend disbelief for the sake of enjoyment." The story I am about to tell required more than just a little disbelief suspension. In fact, it required a lot.

Long before the supermarket tabloids, from the 1800s and into the early twentieth century, even serious newspapers published hoax articles in a conscious effort to gin up sales. They presented these stories as actual news without any disclaimers and with plots that rivaled anything tabloid writers would conjure up decades later.

For example, the April 8, 1885 edition of the otherwise staid *Evening Chronicle of St. Louis* carried the story of the discovery of an abandoned city, 360 feet deep, in a coal mine in Moberly, Missouri, located about 150 miles northwest of St. Louis. The newspaper account included descriptions of a "LITERAL WORLD OF WONDERS" (the Internet did not invent shouting in all caps) filled with statues, some carved in stone and some cast in bronze, accompanied by the skeleton of a giant human being who in life must have been more than fourteen feet tall. Though the story was retracted soon after its publication, people continued believing it was true for some time. They would show up to Moberly in droves to investigate the subterranean city for themselves. One property owner was so put out by the crush of visitors that he erected a sign at the entrance of the mine: "No burryied sity lunaticks aloud on these premises." He was apparently neither amused by the attention, nor a particularly strong speller.

Then there is the Lost City in the Grand Canyon, announced in the *Arizona Gazette* on April 5, 1909. The

Long into the 1900s, newspapers continued to use extraterrestrial life to drum up sales. This illustration, titled "Terrors of Life on the Planet Venus," accompanied an article containing wild speculation about what extraterrestrial life might be like. *The San Francisco Examiner*, November 17, 1912. Courtesy of Newspapers.com

article ostensibly was based on an account provided by a Mr. G.E. Kincaid (or Kinkaid) who claimed to have discovered a secret cave located in a cliff 2,000 feet above the Colorado River in the newly minted national monument (the Grand Canyon wasn't designated a National Park until 1919). Kincaid reported the discovery of a trove of wonderful things in the cave, including a monumental statue of a cross-legged Buddha alongside Egyptian artifacts allegedly dating to the reign of the Pharaoh Ramses. (Problematically, there actually were eleven pharaohs named "Ramses" so that name didn't really narrow down the age of the supposed lost civilization.) Kincaid suggested that the extensive cavern could have housed a civilization of as many as 50,000 people. It was further reported that a Professor S.A. Jordan of the "Smithsonian Institute" was currently conducting excavations at the site.

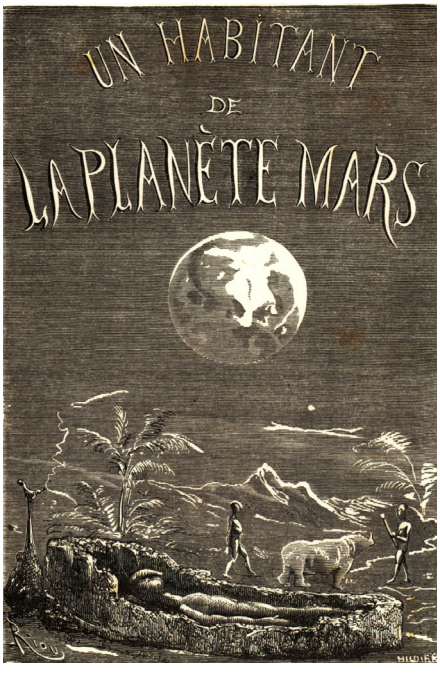
It was troubling to some readers at the time that no such person worked at the "Smithsonian Institute" which, by the way, is close to, but not the actual name of our national museum. It's the Smithsonian Institution. So it is possible that misstatements like those were intentionally left as breadcrumbs meant to lead the discerning reader to the conclusion that the entire story was a fabrication. No evidence of any such cave has been found but, unlike Moberly's nearly forgotten underground city, the Grand Canyon's lost civilization has had great staying power and is still touted across the Internet as real.

As readers of *The Colorado Magazine* will know from the recent article on the Solid Muldoon, the Centennial State was not immune to such journalistic silliness. For those unfamiliar, the Muldoon was a supposedly ancient petrified man, complete with a tail, "discovered" near Beulah in 1877. As absurd as that story was, the claim I am about to discuss may be even more outrageous.

LETTERS FROM AMERICA

The stunning discovery at the heart of this tale was revealed to the public through a series of fourteen letters submitted by "A. Lomon," (Alexandre Lomon), an actual correspondent for the popular and highly regarded French newspaper *Le Pays: Journal des Volontès de la France (The Country: A Journal of the Wills of France)*. Lomon was stationed in Richmond, Virginia, having been sent to America expressly to cover the Civil War. There is no indication that he traveled to Colorado during his tenure in America and he does not name a direct source for the extremely detailed accounts he provided to the paper. Lomon appears merely to be an intermediary, a conduit for passing along letters written by an unnamed eyewitness to the events transpiring in what was then the Territory of Colorado. I cannot be certain but I suspect that Colorado was chosen as the backdrop for the hoax precisely because it was considered rough, remote, and isolated enough that likely no one living there would even hear about it, much less question the story's veracity.

The initial report concerned the remarkable discovery in the Rocky Mountains of a mysterious object that baffled investigators. According to the author of the dispatch from America published in *Le Pays* on June 17, 1864:



The frontplate of the book *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars*, published in 1865, shows the body of a Martian in repose in his sarcophagus. As the image also shows a couple of his compatriots walking nearby, the scene would have occurred on Mars before a wayward meteor snatched him up and then deposited him on James Peak near Denver. *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars* by Henri de Parville, 1865

Henri de Parville. He originally presented himself as the liaison between his newspaper's correspondent in America and the public in revealing the spectacular discovery of a Martian body in Colorado. Obituary of Henri de Parville, *La Nature*, 1909

The extremely peculiar composition of this mass left the geologists in no doubt. The mass encountered at the foot of James Peak is not of terrestrial origin; it is an aerolith, and certainly the most curious ever seen…

The account went on to claim that the aerolith (a stony meteorite) had so captivated the public's imagination that, "The war has almost been forgotten, and curiosity-seekers are flocking to the Arapaho region."

A second letter was published in a following edition of *Le Pays*, and twelve more letters and a revelatory post-script quoting yet another note from the same source followed over the next eight months. The whole affair was then compiled in an 1865 book titled *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars (An Inhabitant of the Planet Mars)* edited by the paper's science correspondent Henri de Parville. (That was his pen name; his given name was François-Henri Peudefer). In the preface to that book, de Parville describes the mysterious delivery of the letters: "At dawn, after waking up, almost every day for a fortnight, on a regular basis, we found a new letter with an American postmark on our work-desk, already open. The origin of this mysterious correspondence remains unknown to us, despite the most scrupulous research." I assume in this context that by "we" and "our," de Parville really means "I" and "my." He was, after all, the most obvious recipient of a science news report delivered to the paper.

So, inspired by the mysterious delivery of undated letters reporting a stunning scientific discovery in Colorado, and without any direct sourcing or material evidence for any part of the tale, first a respected French newspaper and then a book publisher deemed it appropriate to print some (the newspaper) or all of them (the book) verbatim. The paper published a soft disclaimer for the first letter, saying its contents caused "great astonishment" and they published it "with all reservations" but they did not "doubt the honor of [Lomon]." In other words, whoever wrote the letter, *Le Pays* trusted Lomon for its authenticity.

It was considered rough, remote, and isolated enough that likely no one living there would even hear about it.

THE MAN FROM MARS?

The tale told in the letters was quite astonishing. While drilling for oil on his property at the foot of James Peak, a Mr. Paxton encountered the remains of an egg-shaped aerolite made of a material certified by geologists not to be native to our planet. Scientists further determined that the peculiar meteorite, astonishingly, was hollow, inspiring them to slice into it to examine its interior.

A hollow space rock found in an ancient geological stratum in Colorado certainly was both interesting and perplexing, but what the scientists discovered in the aerolite's interior was a scientific bombshell:

The watching men could not restrain a cry of astonishment. Before their eyes was a rectangular space about three feet deep and six feet wide, most certainly hewn out of granite. The empty space was heaped almost everywhere with calcareous concretions, something like stalagmites, which sparkled in the lamplight. In the center, a human form of short stature, seemingly enveloped in a calcareous shroud, was clearly visible. He was lying down, fully extended, and measured scarcely four feet in height.

The claim that this was "the greatest scientific discovery of times past and present" had apparently not been hyperbole. The meteorite housed the preserved remains of an extraterrestrial alien, the first evidence ever found to reveal that we are not alone in the universe!

A careful inspection showed that the body was anthropomorphic—that is, it was generally human-shaped—but there were obvious differences between the extraterrestrial and us. For example, the creature's arms were quite a bit longer than the human norm, with the tips of its slender fingers reaching well below the thighs.

It was in the morphology of his head, however, that the creature most greatly diverged from the human form. It appeared flattened on both sides, tapering toward the front and quite flat in the back, making the face look more like that of an insect than a human being. The most remarkable part of the face though was this: Just above where the nose would be expected, the creature had a small-but-discernible appendage that looked like an elephant's trunk. Yes, a trunk.

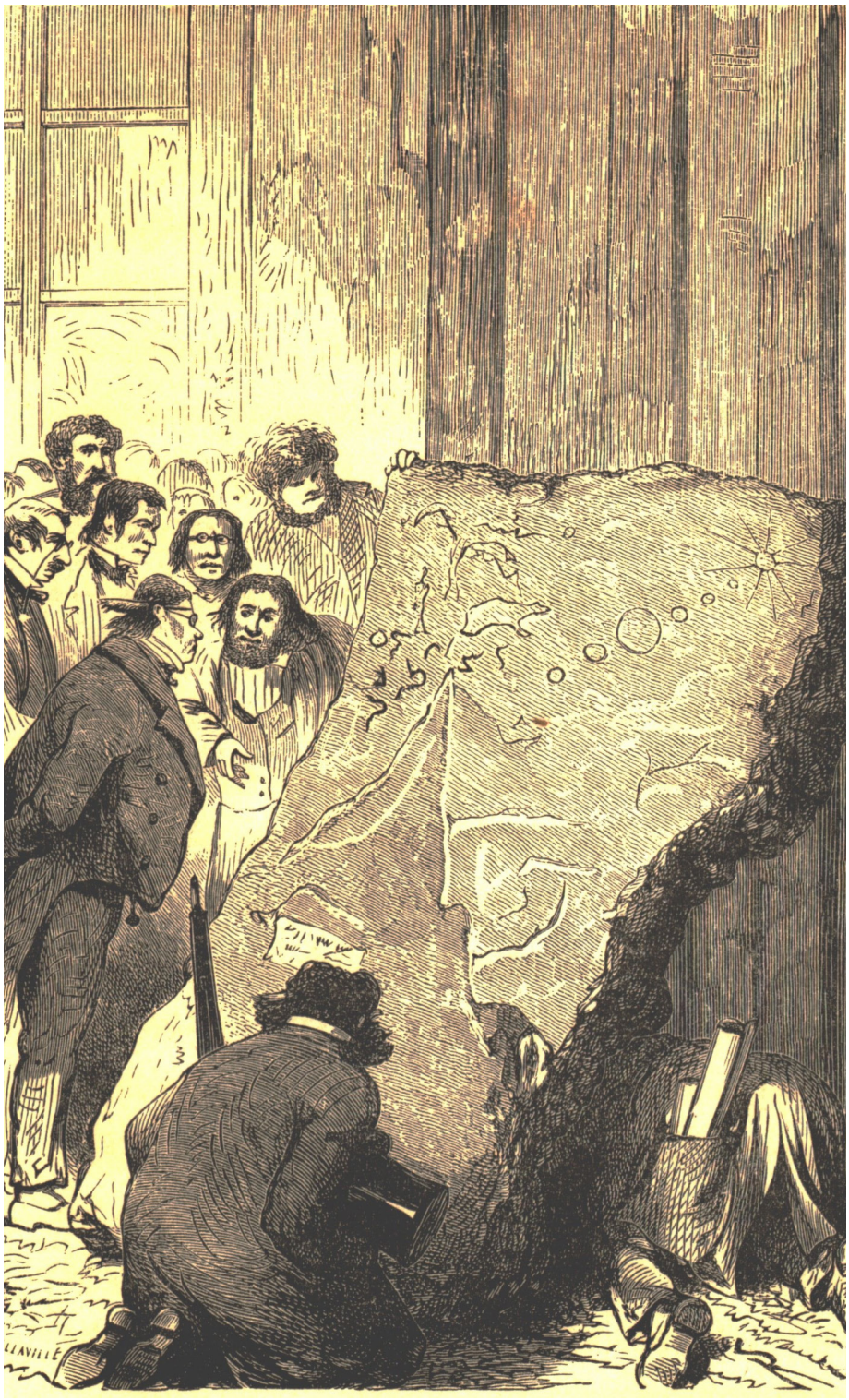
Subsequent letters (the ones that were compiled in the book by de Parville) reported an ongoing debate within the scientific community in residence at the site about the ultimate origins of the extraterrestrial being, with some arguing he was from the Moon and others suggesting Mercury or Venus. However, there was one piece of evidence that appeared to clinch the case that the alien found in Colorado was, instead, from Mars.

Among the artifacts recovered with the body were metallic amphorae, yellow rods of indeterminate function, and, most significantly, an inscribed silver/zinc plaque. Images etched onto the plaque included an animal that looked like a rhinoceros, a plant that looked like a palm tree, an outline interpreted as representing a mountain, an inscription in an unknown language, and a schematic illustration of what appeared to be our solar system. This final image was the key for tracing the planetary pedigree of the alien.

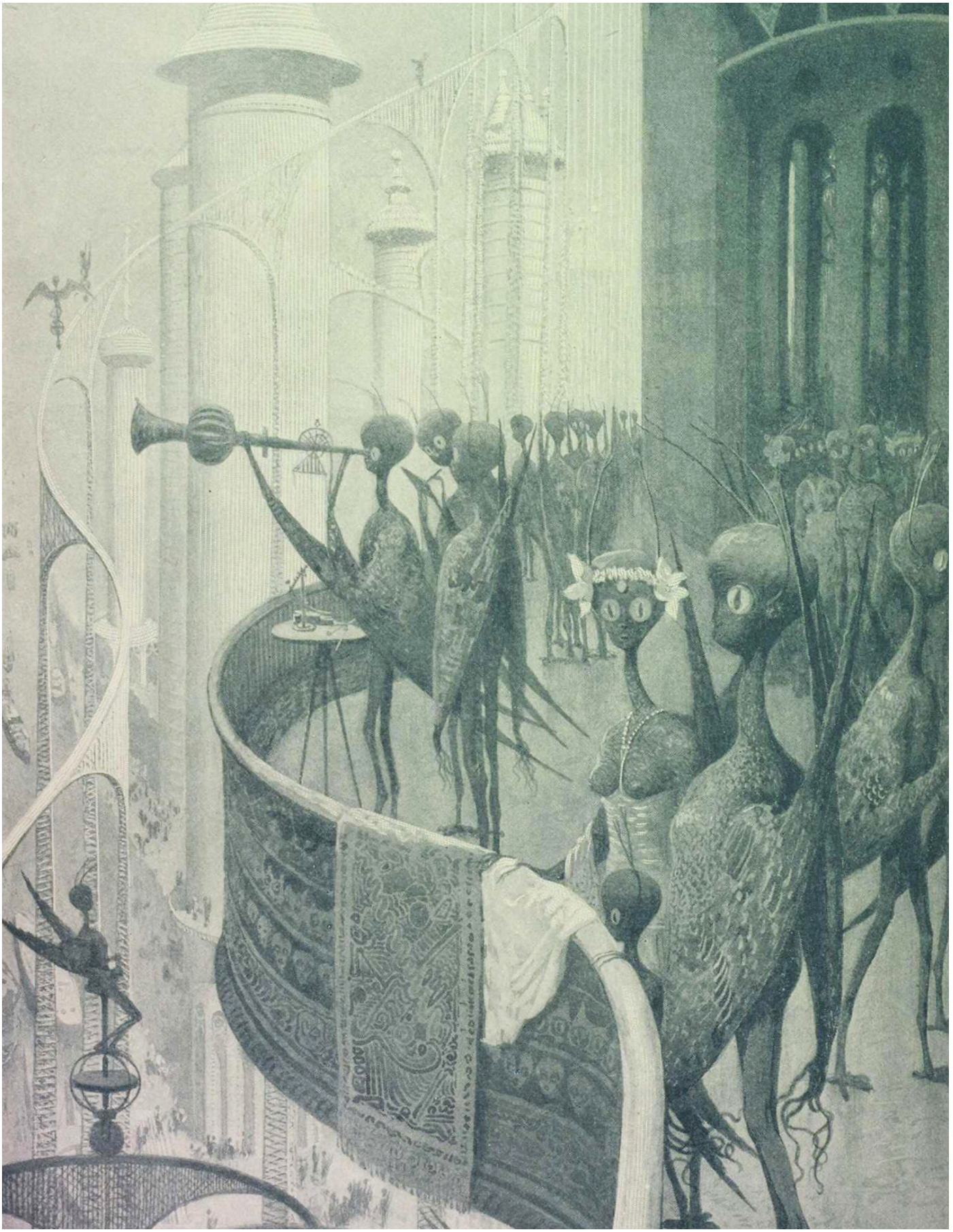
In the early '70s, NASA launched two probes—*Pioneer 10* and *11*—towards deep space, each carrying a special plaque. Designed to leave the solar system, those probes are now, more than fifty years after entering space, "boldly going where no one has gone before." A team directed by Carl Sagan designed the plaques with the faint hope that an intelligent extraterrestrial life form might someday encounter one or both of them. The images etched onto the Pioneer plaques include those of a male and a female human being adjacent to a map of our solar system with the sun and planets in their orbital order. Further, there was a line connecting a schematic drawing of the spacecraft itself to the third planet, an existential "we are here" waypoint on the map.

Getting the jump on NASA by more than a hundred years, the plaque recovered in the alien's sarcophagus also presented a map of the solar system. There was a celestial body depicted on one edge of the plaque, interpreted as the Sun, and then, in order away from our local star there were what appeared to be the planets Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune (planet or not, Pluto would not be discovered until 1930). The planets were identified by their respective locations, reflecting their actual distances from the Sun.

One of those planets was depicted differently, being disproportionately



This image from *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars* shows the engraved plaque claimed to have been found alongside the Martian in his tomb. The scientists visiting Colorado are shown carefully examining the engraving on the plaque, a schematic drawing of our solar system, highlighting the planet Mars. *Un Habitant de la Planète Mars* by Henri de Parville, 1865



An illustration of a Martian city from H.G. Wells's article "The Things that Live on Mars," in which he tried to predict what life on Mars might truly be like. *The Cosmopolitan*, March 1908. Courtesy of Library of Congress

larger than all of the others. That planet is the fourth one from the sun, in other words, Mars.

Highlighting Mars in this way, by showing it as greater in size and, therefore, greater in significance, was interpreted by the learned men supposedly meeting in Colorado as the extraterrestrials telling us what planet they called home.

But how did the Martian in his sepulcher land in Colorado? It was speculated that the burial had originally been located on the top of a mountain on Mars, the same one drawn on the plaque, where it was struck by a meteor and displaced, itself becoming an interplanetary object. After being hurled into space, it entered the Earth's atmosphere and crash landed at the base of James Peak in the "Arrapahys (Arapaho) country." The geological stratum in which it was found suggested that this had occurred many thousands of years ago.

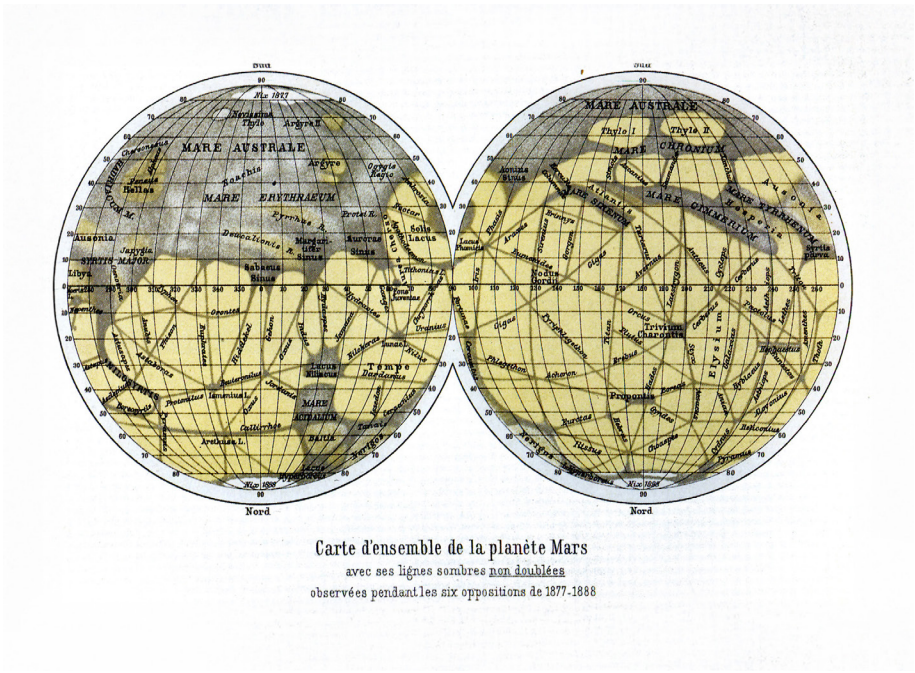
The assembled scientists agreed that this was the most likely scenario and found it ironic that the tomb of such an obviously important Martian had been snatched from its home and dropped on Earth. As they pored over the shattered mountain:

"The archaeologists of Mars must have spent more than one sleepless night over these incomplete vestiges of another age…The scientists of Mars still have the base of the mountain; but what we have is a faithful representation of the entire mountain, the sepulcher and the dead man."

It was as if the tomb of King Tut had been blasted into space, leaving Earth's scientists in the dark about the young pharaoh, as Martian archaeologists reveled in the "wonderful things" Howard Carter and the rest of humanity would never have the opportunity to examine.

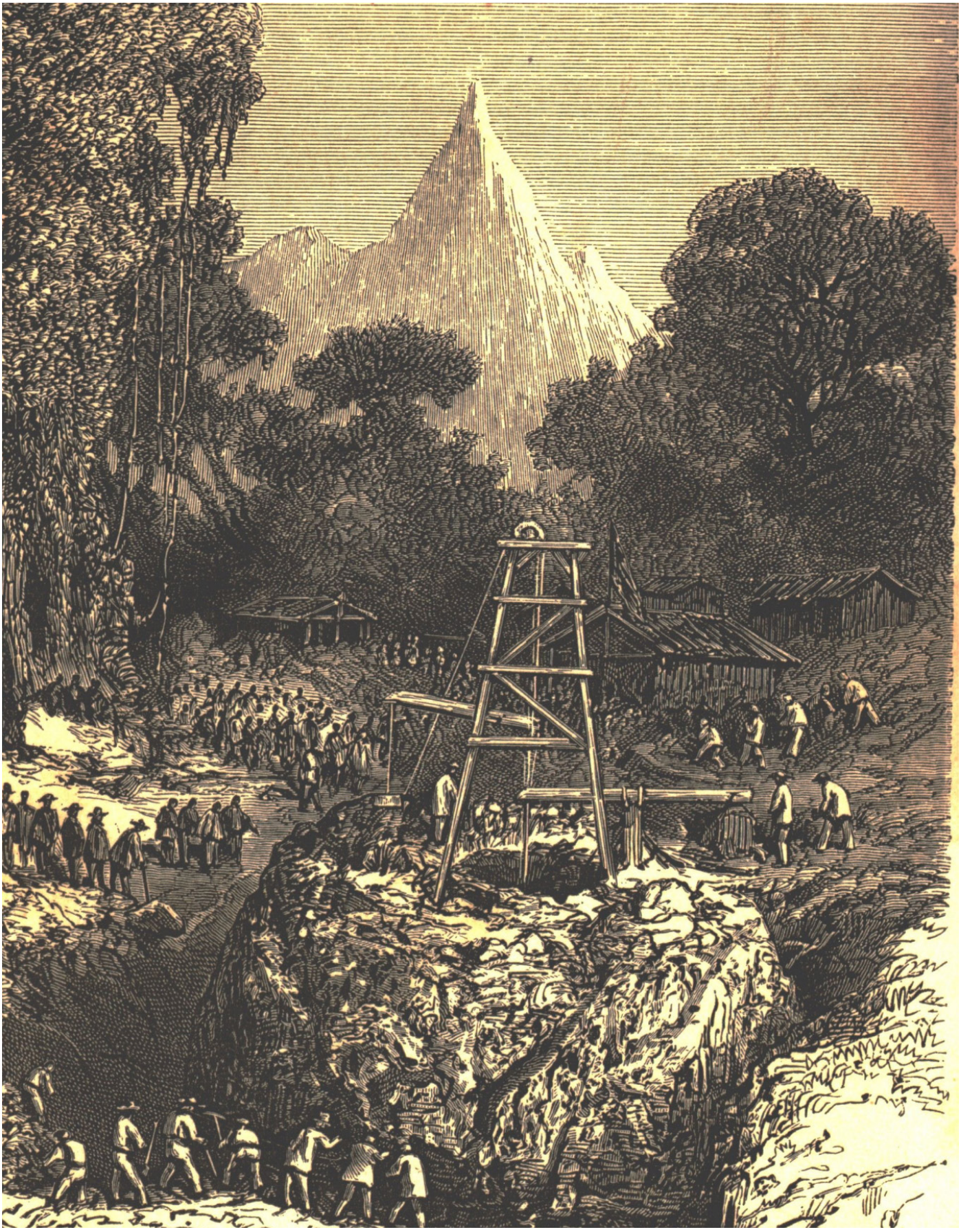
BACK DOWN TO EARTH

It was decided that the various elements of the stupendous discovery should be shared with the world and distributed to various museums, institutes, and universities for display and further study. In



The assumption that other planets—including Mars—must be inhabited by intelligent life was widespread in the 1800s, no matter how many "discoveries" were revealed as hoaxes. This atlas of Mars's surface depicting water-filled oceans and artificial canals was published in *Mars and its Conditions of Habitability* by Camille Flammarion, famed astronomer and ardent supporter of the existence of Martians. "Atlas of Mars" by Giovanni Schiaparelli, from *Le planète Mars et ses conditions d'habitabilité*, by Camille Flammarion, 1888. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

A cartoon satirizing the use of the "Great Moon Hoax" in 1835 by the *New York Sun* to increase sales. This earlier humbug claimed that flying "man-bats" had been seen on the Moon by a famous astronomer using a high-tech telescope. *The New York Sun*, January 1835. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



An illustration depicting the supposed excavation of the "aerolite" in Colorado.
Un Habitant de la Planète Mars by Henri de Parville, 1865

that distribution, France would receive the ultimate prize, the tomb and body of the alien. The timeline suggested that these artifacts would be shipped from America to Europe by no later than the end of December, 1864.

The world's scientists waited expectantly for the arrival of the many elements of the discovery. But January, February, and then half of March passed without their delivery. Then came a tragic twist, revealed in the postscript by Henri de Parville for his book. He quotes a previously unpublished fifteenth letter from America, this one dating to March 13, 1865, conveying an extraordinary plea directed to European scientists:

> Richmond, March 13
>
> "Are we forgotten, then? For two full months you have had the inhabitant of Mars in your hands, and not a word from you."

This implies that the remains should have reached their destinations by mid-January, but it was mid-March and no Martian specimens had been delivered to anyone. De Parville expresses his exasperated confusion about this turn of events and then drops a bombshell nearly as big as the original announcement of the extraterrestrial. At the end of the final letter from America there is a signature: Henri de Parville.

Read that again. If you are flabbergasted by this revelation you are in good company. Allegedly, so was de Parville.

According to the post script, it was Monsieur Henri de Parville, writing from Richmond, Virginia who was the source of information about the marvelous discoveries made in Colorado. His letters were sent to *Le Pays*, received in France, and handed to Monsieur Henri de Parville—the same person!

Huh? How could the same person be writing the letters in America and then virtually instantly receiving them in France? That makes no sense, as de Parville freely admits. Questioning his own sanity, de Parville wonders to his readers if he has somehow been unconsciously writing letters to himself about what must have been an entirely fictional archaeological discovery. That may sound bizarre to you, and that's because it is.

Plaintively, but I think actually sarcastically, de Parville reacts to the final communication from America with shock.

"My signature—my own signature!—no doubt about it! This letter…Have I, then, written it myself? The ink is still fresh. What about my American correspondent, though?… I must have been my own correspondent for six months; all the letters must be from me to myself. Unknown to myself, I must have written to myself by night what I read by day… Come on, that's impossible! I'm dreaming."

In truth, it was quite possible and he wasn't dreaming. The entire affair had been his hoax from the start, not a work of science but of science fiction. As a science writer de Parville knew enough about the machinations of science and the personalities of scientists to lend the story what the book's English translator, Robert Stableford, calls "superficial plausibility."

Questioning his own sanity, de Parville wonders to his readers if he has somehow been unconsciously writing letters to himself.

Finally, de Parville ends his postscript with a backhanded confession, quoting the Roman poet Virgil: Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas. "Fortunate is he who has been able to know the causes of things." De Parville knows because he was the cause of things.

Oh, and one more thing in case you needed a little more convincing that the entire affair had been a humbug. De Parville attached a date to the postscript he included in the book. He wrote it on "1st April 1865." That may qualify the Colorado Martian story as the most elaborate April Fools' Day joke ever played out on the pages of a newspaper. You really have to hand it to him—Monsieur Henri de Parville makes the writers of the fabrications that regularly appeared in the *Weekly World News* look like a bunch of amateurs.

Dr. Ken Feder is professor emeritus at Central Connecticut State University. Along with more than forty years of experience in field archaeology, he is the author of several books including *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology* (Oxford University Press, 11th edition) and *Native American Archaeology in the Parks: A Guide to Heritage Sites in our National Parks and Monuments* (Rowman & Littlefield). His most recent book is *Native America: The Story of the First Peoples* (2025, Princeton University Press).

All quotes from *An Inhabitant of the Planet Mars* are taken from Robert Stableford's English translation. A big thanks to UFO historian archivist Jeff Knox whose X thread on the Colorado Martian alerted me to this twisted story in the first place.

Los Mocochetes Talk History and Music

We caught up with three members of Denver-based Chicano funk band Los Mocochetes, Jozer Guerrero, Elias Garcia, and Jon Rubio, to talk about their music and how a Chicano view of history shapes their art.

What is Los Mocochetes, as a group?

Jozer: Los Mocochetes is a fusion of sound and culture. It's a movement, it's an effort to engage folks in political conversations through music. It's a musical revolution in a way. We're historians trying to capture what we're living through in song, and leave a trace of what we experience for future generations.

Elias: Even one of our first logos is using the three faces of the Chicano. It's like an amalgamation of all of us.

Jozer: We're doing the work, this is how we're living. It's not just our logo, it's our life.

Can you tell us about your childhoods? Did you grow up in the Chicano Movement?

Jozer: The music has always been such a central part of the Movement. Whether it's providing energy and more ganas, morale, for the folks out there protesting, but also capturing and spreading that

Members of Los Mocochetes, from left to right: Elias Garcia, Jozer Guerrero, Diego Florez, Jon Rubio, Joshua Randy Abeyta.
Photo courtesy of Los Mocochetes

message. I grew up listening to Chunky, such a powerful musician in the Chicano Movement. Every single place he played he was basically having a Chicano rally. We're just trying to follow that, and fill the shoes of musicians like Chunky who were doing that work.

What was the beginning of Los Mocochetes?

Jozer: We all knew each other. We were friends in the community. At some point, Diego and Joshua started jamming together. It became a communal thing.

Elias: Diego and I were longtime friends. We lived here in the Northside, we rode our bikes throughout this whole city. We connected with Johnny through MSU [Metropolitan State University of Denver], because I was going to school through the Auraria Campus. We wrote our first song in Diego's pop's garage right here in the Northside.

Your music doesn't just speak to society and activism today, it also very intentionally invokes Chicano history. Can you speak a bit more to that?

Jozer: The musician [is] not just playing the role of entertainer, but as a historian as well. We've always taken that pretty serious. For me as a writer, I've always seen it as a responsibility to write about the things my people are facing. I don't really have the ability to write other than that. Whether we're writing it down for now, so people can see it in the future, or we're reflecting.

Elias: We use our music to expand on the relationship of past and present. One of our songs is called "Chingona." In that song we draw a parallel between activists like Dolores Huerta and Jeanette Vizguerra. Because of the calls to action of Dolores Huerta, we have more of a history. And right now Vizguerra is in an ICE detainment facility. Our hope is that, in the future, another little mocoso (snotty) kid will learn about these incredible women.

Album art of *Mucho Gusto*, the most recent album by Los Mocochetes. Image courtesy of Los Mocochetes

Jozer: Oftentimes we don't hear about those narratives. We don't necessarily hear about Guadalupe Briseño, who led a huge protest against the Kitayama flower farm. These stories oftentimes will get brushed under the carpet if we don't discuss them and highlight and show love for them.

Can you tell me about your sound, and its roots?

Jon: All of us have a unique sound. When I met Elias I was studying jazz drum performance at Metro [MSU]. That's my background as a musician. The Latino style of music, I really wasn't used to playing at first. I'd see Elias on campus playing his guitar. He'd just be sitting in the field, playing rancheras and different traditional Latino American music. We all bring our own musical taste to the band, to create what we call Chicano funk.

Elias: We use the message and the lyrics to justify what the vibe is. When we write, we use the genre as a message. Each song to the next is going to have its own flavor, its own essence.

What occurs at that intersection of history and art?

Elias: Right now, the people are going to decide what our future is. Regardless of what happens, our people and our history will still be here. Right now we need a lot more unity. It's incredibly difficult, we all have to pay rent, pay bills. But we're going to keep writing songs.

Jozer: Ultimately we feel extremely privileged to do this, and hopefully at some point some of our work leaves a little bit of a trace that someone can tap into later on. Forget a Grammy, that's what I want!

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