

CHAPTER III
THE GILMAN YEARS 1923 - 1971

Early History of Gilman and Its Neighbors ¹

Discovery of a treasure of lead carbonates at Leadville brought prospectors from that mining area to the Battle Mountain area to search the surrounding country for similar ores. This occasioned the biggest rush to any camp in the history of Colorado. Evidence of iron oxide, as found in the Leadville area, was discovered here in the Eagle River area. Two veteran prospectors, Kelly and Patton, were grubstaked by a group of men who were interested in this early discovery of ore in 1878. They returned that year after staking out a claim in the Little Ollie on Battle Mountain, and with samples of ore showing the presence of lead carbonates carrying silver.

The next year in March, Kelly and Patton, wearing snowshoes and pushing supplies ahead of them on handsleds, slowly worked their way over Tennessee Pass and down the Eagle River. In 1879 they set up a permanent camp near Turkey Creek at the foot of Battle Mountain, and the town of Redcliff was begun, a distance of 24 miles from Leadville. The trek had taken four days. They were followed by two brothers. One of them, Helmer, later moved up the hill and started Helmer's Camp (later Bell's Camp). Two claims besides the Little Ollie - the Iron Mask and the Little Chief - turned out to be big producers. Other claims, the Eagle Bird, Crown Point, and the Keystone, later renamed Belden, also became good producers.

Claims became so prolific that the owners of these claims set up a mining district to be the basis for law. Ore already mined had to wait for the spring of 1880 to be hauled to Leadville smelters. Later a smelter at Redcliff was built. The Ground Hog and the Ben Butler were continuous producers. In 1900 the first zinc was shipped from Battle Mountain. This district was to become the largest zinc producing area in the state.

Gilman, elevation: 9,000 ft., found its beginnings in the mines on Battle Mountain. Many of the miners stayed in Redcliff, but a 3 mile walk or ride from there led many to build houses all the way from Rock Creek to Bell's Camp wherever space could be found. A community called Rock Creek was begun and was named from the little stream which empties into the Eagle River. A John Cleaver built a pipe line from Rock Creek to furnish water for the miners and population.

Gilman began officially a few years later when the community was given a post office under the name of Clinton, from the Clinton mines whose tunnels and inclines were under the town site. The name change was made because of confusion with another Clinton in California. The new name, Gilman, was given as a tribute

¹ Acknowledgements are given to : O.W. Daggett, Holy Cross Trail, Redcliff; McDonald Knight and L.A. Hammond, Early Days on the Eagle, pp. 27-29; On the Job at Gilman, New Jersey Zinc Company Publication; Rocky Mountain News, Denver; Herald Democrat, Leadville; Eagle Valley Enterprise, Eagle (many articles over the years); Vail Trail, "Vail", by Jon Van Hausen; Jean Maloit Bisschoff, Yakima, WA (Remembrances of her life in Gilman in her Journal of January 13, 1981; Mrs. J. Thomson (Remembrances told to me 1923-1930); Personal remembrances by family members, friends, and interested people I have been in touch with over the years - all of their contributions I shall try to weave into the story.

to Henry Gilman, a superintendent of the Iron Mask Mine.

At the same time of the Battle Mountain strike, ore containing gold was found in the Holy Cross and Gold Park districts, but twelve miles of road had to be built over difficult terrain to bring the ore from Holy Cross City to Redcliff for smelting. The venture ceased when it was found that most of the ore was at a lower depth than that which had been found on the surface. By 1884 the Director of the U.S. Mint in Denver reported only \$6,000 had been produced by the entire district. This ore had been in the form of bullion. Other mining companies and prospectors came into the district, but they, too, left disillusioned.

Meanwhile, at the Battle Mountain district, the Newhouse Tunnel, which would go into the canyon above the railroad, was started in 1900, and in 1901 it had reached 1300 ft. About the same time the Wilkesbarre shaft almost inside the town of Gilman was being sunk. The tunnel and shaft were later used by the Empire Zinc Company, whose parent company was the New Jersey Zinc Company, and later, by the Gulf and Western Company.

The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad reached Redcliff in November, 1881, 26 miles from Malta, west of Leadville, and was continued west to Belden, then to Minturn, where a round house had been established. This made freight and passenger service possible for the three towns which became closely related.

Redcliff became the county seat of the new county, Eagle, and for a few years had a bank until the Panic of 1893, and the closing of many mines. The population decreased from 383 in 1890, to 156, as shown by the census of 1900. Because of Redcliff's geographic location, far from the center of the new county, Eagle was to become the County Seat of Eagle County in 1921.

Bell's Camp

This settlement was first called Cleveland after Grover Cleveland, U.S. President, and it included two sections, one a portion of a shoulder of Battle Mountain and christened Poverty Flats, and the other on a steep slope where the Black Iron Mine was located. A Dr. W.M. Belt, part owner of the mine in the early 1880's, gave his name to the settlement. In 1890 there were 100 people living there - today only mine dumps and heaps of rusting cans mark its site. The Dismant and Collins families of Redcliff were early residents of Bell's Camp.

Rock Creek and Gilman

These two settlements seemed to have merged as one after the Wilkes Barre Shaft was started and a road into the center of Gilman was built. Water from Rock Creek was piped into a huge storage tank above Gilman to service the newer community.

"By January 1, 1887 Gilman could boast a saloon; a general store including mine supplies, hay and grain; a large building containing a club room, billiard hall, and sampling room; even a newspaper, the Enterprise was published, but failed to survive.

"In 1899 the town lost half its business district in a disastrous fire. The Iron Mask Hotel, the schoolhouse, the shaft house of the Little Bell Mine, some small stores and homes were consumed. But the men who worked the solid treasure of Battle Mountain soon rebuilt the town which was to continue to be one of the most vital and important communities in the Eagle area in the Twentieth Century."²

Bolt's Lake and later, Rex

Three miles west of Gilman, H.P. Marston, owner of the Moniger Lakes, built a resort which would equal Twin Lakes of Lake County in popularity. He had built a road house with furnished rooms, a parlor, dining room, and a warm stable. The venture did not survive, and the name Bolt's Lake was given to the area.

Astor City and Holy Cross Mountain

This was established by John Jacob Astor as the first trading post in Colorado, approximately 1780 to 1820. It was below Battle Mountain on the northwestern slope, where Bolt's Lake and Rex now stand. John Jacob Astor came from Germany to New York and began a fur tracking enterprise to Astoria in the Oregon Territory. The post in Colorado consisted of three cabins within a stockade of boulders and a huge main building. All seemed to have been destroyed by fire.

The legend of Evangeline as told by Longfellow was part of Astor City history. In her search for her lover, Gabriel, Evangeline came to this post only to find he had already gone further into the Western wilderness. A missionary Father sent to restore her faith in God persuaded Evangeline to make the journey to Mount Holy Cross (elevation: 14,000 ft.). On horseback next morning the party set off to Notch Mountain (elevation: 10,000 ft.) from where the Cross might be viewed. According to the legend, the mountain was enshrouded by fog, but when it lifted, Evangeline was to behold the Cross on the mountains, and to its right the Supplicating Virgin. Evangeline now had her faith in Gabriel restored.³

A quotation from Longfellow's Evangeline:

"There is a mountain in the distant west
That sun defying in its deep ravine
Displays a cross of snow upon its side."

Battle Mountain

Battle Mountain too had a legend. Its name was from an Indian battle which was fought there. According to the legend, the Eagle River Valley was once the hunting ground of the Ute Indians.

² Knight and Hammock's Early Days on the Eagle.

³ O.W. Daggett, Holy Cross Trail.

"A tribe of Arapahos crossed Tennessee Pass to the South and West and invaded the Ute territories. The tribes met at Two Elk Creek and a furious battle raged for a week on the other side of the mountain and took place in 1868. The Arapahos were driven back, but an Arapaho buck had won the hand of a daughter of the chief of the Utes. Although his tribe was in retreat, he decided not to leave without her.

"With great bravado he dashed back into the Ute camps, swung the maiden to the back of his horse, and galloped off, pursued by the Utes.

"The added weight was too much for his horse, and the Utes were gaining, forcing the runaways toward the river. The Arapaho, finding his escape impossible, rode onto a rocky promontory rising five hundred feet above the Eagle River. He dug his heels into his pony's ribs and leaped off. His pursuers fired a volley of shots and shouted as the horse and the lovers plunged over the cliff to their deaths."

The promontory was called "Lovers' Leap", the high point of Battle Mountain just above Redcliff on Highway 24. Erosion and weather conditions later destroyed the site in the 1940's, but the legend still remains.

Between 1912 - 1915 the Empire Zinc Company, a subsidiary of New Jersey Zinc Company, had purchased all of the properties on Battle Mountain. Mr. Jess Boyd was the first mining superintendent of this company at Gilman, and while he was superintendent, the hospital, two rooming houses, and 85 residences were constructed, 50 of which were modern cottages, and 35 were cabins. Good water and sewage systems were also installed. In addition, two store buildings were constructed, an office structure and necessary industrial buildings added. A clubhouse provided facilities for the use of the employees. 495 employees were on the plant payroll; the majority lived in Gilman, Redcliff, Minturn, and a few lived in towns along the Eagle River as far west as Gypsum. More of this history and descriptions of the functions of the mine buildings we will attempt to tell as life in Gilman from 1923 to 1971 unfolds for me.

I left you abruptly at the close of Chapter II. The episode of Socorro, New Mexico had occurred before the writer had left Leadville for her future life in Gilman, but it was the interlude which led up to Adam's preceding her to the Gilman community in 1921. This was the change in the lives of all the immediate Houck family members whose futures would also be in this new community.

If you have persevered in reading what may be a boring early history and are saying "When is she going to get on with her story?" - well, here goes!!