

## The Duality of Place

Deep in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado's Park County lies a valley teeming with beauty. Tarryall Creek meanders through woodlands and lush grasslands – the valley itself owes its existence to the creek's sculpting powers. In some places, beavers have blocked the creek, creating massive ponds where fish swim aplenty. Wind tugs at tufts of grass and sways the tallest trees. The wind can be heard long before it arrives thanks to the resounding *whoosh* it makes as it rips through the forest. Gnarled pine trees watch over the wandering current of water below. A castle-like rim of snow-capped peaks surrounds the valley – a constant looming presence. It looks straight out of a Jack London novel. The valley itself sits perched at 10,000 feet; the crisp, thin air almost burns the lungs. Some afternoons, storm clouds invade the small valley. One can stand out on the road and marvel at the churning and boiling of the dark clouds. At this altitude, thunder crashes with intense ferocity, and lightning strikes close to home. This place has always had a special feel to it. But beneath the beauty lies a bitter juxtaposition. Fond family memories contradict a shadowy and callused past.

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Across from Tarryall Creek rests a small cabin. A single room comprises the entire building. Inside sits a small wood burning stove, a corner bed, and a table for eating dinner on cold autumn nights. On most evenings, logs around the fire replace a dinner table. Sometimes flakes will fly seemingly out of nowhere, forcing those eating to retreat indoors. Outside on the

porch, a small swing built for two sways in the breeze. The scarred logs on the walls of the cabin reveal its past; one log in particular features a set of claw marks where a black bear foolishly tried to gain entry. It's a quaint cabin, most would call it rustic. It's a (LAST NAME) sanctuary.

The (LAST NAME) clan started building the cabin in 1979, after purchasing the land a few years prior. By '81, construction on the cabin finished, after strong winters delayed building efforts. Surprisingly, all workers' limbs remained intact and un-mangled, despite most construction being done with chainsaws – the worst injury, a mere sunburn. Since the assembly of the cabin, Tarryall has served as a perfect mountain get-away where one can spend time fishing, hiking, or gold panning in the nearby creek. The place oozes tranquility. One can sit out on the road in the morning and watch the beavers revel in their aquatic playground. Or if luck is on one's side, they might even spot a moose, stomping around in the undergrowth with its massive hooves. Tarryall teems with life and beauty – a constant bustle.

The area surrounding Tarryall Creek once shone with gold. Prospectors flocked to the area in herds; a great migration of hopeful men trying to strike it rich. The surrounding area thrived. Towns and mining camps turned up left and right. When the gold finally ran out, the “Tarryall Diggings” as they were called, had yielded two million dollars in gold – a tremendous sum of money for the time<sup>1</sup>. The two principle towns of the area went by the names of “Hamilton” and “Tarryall.” They sat just across the creek from each other, and as it so often happens when gold is involved, bad blood ran thick between the two towns.

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<sup>1</sup> “Colorado Ghost Town Photography - Tarryall Diggings, Colorado.” *Colorado Past*. Accessed October 18, 2017.

<http://www.coloradopast.com/index.php?category=ghosttowns&subcategory=central&selection=Tarryall%20Diggings>

Newcomers to Tarryall arrived to disappointing prospects. Nearly all promising claims near Tarryall Creek had already been staked. Newcomers argued that most claims could sustain two men instead of just one. They nicknamed Tarryall “Grab-All” in reference to their greed; these new arrivals moved a few miles south-west and called their new settlement “Fairplay” which, unlike Tarryall or Hamilton, survives to this day. According to local lore, gun battles repeatedly erupted across the creek between Hamilton and Tarryall townspeople. Eventually, the promise of Tarryall and Hamilton dwindled until everyone left the two towns for greener pastures. After the towns’ heyday, dredges made their way through the valley and buried the entirety of the settlements under the tailings. Today, they lay buried under a mountain of gravel and dirt, with the occasional pine tree growing beyond the rubble – so much violence hidden under tons of rock<sup>2</sup>. This violence and destruction, however, marks just the beginning of the tumultuous history that plagued Tarryall Creek.

There were murders, and a lot of them. Como, the next town downstream on Tarryall Creek, had a terribly bloody history throughout the years. It had its beginnings as a railroad town. It served as the end of the line on the Denver South Park & Pacific Railroad, complete with a giant red roundhouse, used to turn the trains around. Entrepreneurs flooded this small town - restaurants, bars, and hotels popped up everywhere. Despite all the excitement, a cloud of tragedy followed this town until its dying days.

The raucous, railroad folk of the town frequented the saloon, and once drink got into their bloodstream, trouble always followed. Countless fights broke out in the building, often ending by means of deadly force. The first murder happened on December 9, 1879, when one J.W.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Robert. *Ghost Towns of the Colorado Rockies*. Caldwell; The Caxton Printers, 2006. p. 352-353.

Laughlin shot and killed his cabin-mate Augustus Cornog<sup>3</sup>. The chaos in Como, however, went far beyond simple bar disputes; tragedies of greater magnitude happened regularly as well. Take, for example, the case of Benjamin Ratcliff. Ratcliff resided in the Tarryall Creek valley, where he lived as a homesteader. The man had a series of grievances with the Jefferson County School Board. On May 6, 1895, he acted on those grievances. He marched over to the local schoolhouse and used his Winchester rifle to kill the three board members in cold blood<sup>4</sup>. The town hung him a year later.

Maybe the greatest tragedy to curse this beautiful, stricken area, was the King Coal mining disaster of 1893. On January 10<sup>th</sup> of that year, a powerful explosion killed 24 miners<sup>5</sup>. Catastrophes of this magnitude were few and far between for a community as small and rural as Como. The town buried 17 of the 24 miners in an unmarked mass grave in the local cemetery<sup>6</sup> - a quiet and anonymous end to 17 lives.

The Como cemetery itself has a certain eeriness to it. Rarely do people visit this small graveyard; it is no tourist attraction. Almost 500 graves sit nestled among a trove of looming aspen trees. One can peer over the cemetery's dilapidated fence and gaze upon the vast ranchland that lies beyond. Day and night, a deafening silence consumes the quaint burial

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<sup>3</sup> *The Chaffee County Times*. January 3, 2016.

[http://www.chaffeecountytimes.com/free\\_content/parked-in-the-past-early-days-in-como-bespoke-a/article\\_26592d04-92b3-11e4-a3e1-7f39120557da.html](http://www.chaffeecountytimes.com/free_content/parked-in-the-past-early-days-in-como-bespoke-a/article_26592d04-92b3-11e4-a3e1-7f39120557da.html)

<sup>4</sup> Barth, Richard. *Pioneers of the Colorado Parks*. Caldwell; The Caxton Printers, 1997. p. 249-254.

<sup>5</sup> "Coal Mining Disasters: 1839 to Present." *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*. Accessed October 10, 2017.

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/mining/statistics/content/coaldisasters.html>

<sup>6</sup> *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. Como Cemetery. United States Department of the Interior. OMB No. 1024-0018. p. 13.

grounds. Children's graves litter the yard – evidence of life cut far too short. Even in this quiet cemetery, animosity runs deep. One disgruntled townsman went to the trouble of creating small tile plaques to place on headstones. The headstone of a man named McCurdy, the tile reads, “McCurdy spread immoral lies about a handicapped girl.” A bad-mannered approach to social commentary. Another, on a different headstone, states, “Wyatt shouldn't have been shot. Sorry.” These tiles, and the cemetery itself, are evidence of the violent and tragic tumult that makes up Como's past.

This place, so full of beauty and family history, can make anyone's head spin. So special, but at the same time, staggeringly brutal. It's easy to stand out on the silent dirt road after dark and gaze into the night sky. The crisp air overwhelms the body, the nebulous, dark, oblivion overhead is dizzying. If one isn't careful, their mind might drift to days past. Not only of fond family memories, but also savage tales of murder and greed. It's all too simple to wonder. Right where one stands in this beautifully enigmatic valley, *could someone have died here?* Herein lies the rapturous duality that is Tarryall.