

I am three-quarters of the way through the second draft of the book. It will then be edited professionally. I expect it to be finished in one to two years, in time for the 150th anniversary of Colorado statehood.

Rocky Road to Riches

— CHAPTER ONE —

A Gathering Tempest

Seventeen-year-old Felix Gandy started later than many of his fellow Pike's Peak Gold Rushers. Setting off in July 1859 from Council Bluffs, Iowa, he carried his provisions on his back, walking from the banks of the Missouri River to the mountains of present-day Colorado.

For the 600-mile march, he had the clothes he wore, an iron skillet, blanket, homemade knife, and five dollars. Provisions included a bag of cornmeal, a little ham, a side of bacon, salt, and an empty whiskey bottle as a canteen. He traveled at night to avoid Indians, slept in tall grass during the day with his hat pulled over his eyes to shield them from the burning sun, and ate corn pone, along with a bit of meat cooked over a fire of dried grass and buffalo chips. At the end of the night of walking, he would drop to the ground exhausted.

Gandy's prized possession was a pair of new boots. To save the boots for the diggings, he largely walked barefoot across the prairie. Traveling light and conditioned by hard work, he reached Denver in a remarkable nineteen days.

In contrast, well-outfitted Horace Tabor had two milk cows and several young steers tethered to his ox-drawn wagon. His wife, Augusta, their infant son, and two friends started their trek from eastern Kansas Territory. Like most, the start of their journey coincided with the warmth of spring replenishing the winter-withered grasses along the trails. To start too early would put the animals in danger of starvation, placing all those dependent upon the strength of their oxen, mules, or horses at risk.

Felix Gandy and the Tabors are but four of the Pike's Peak immigrants who made a grand wager with luck and joined a growing wave of gold seekers heading to the Rocky Mountains. Almost from the beginning, those in the cavalcade going west were told by others returning east that it was a hoax. "Turn back," they said.

Of the hundred thousand people who started for the gold diggings in 1859, only fifty thousand reached the Rocky Mountains. For many, disillusion quickly descended upon them. They soon learned that gold nuggets did not cover the ground like watermelons in a field and that wealth would not be gathered like apples in the fall. Perhaps half of those who made it to the foot of the Rockies went back soon after arriving.

Yet twenty-five thousand stayed despite no overnight fortunes being found. They were the ones who had a reservoir of hope and stayed long enough to begin

searching for the golden treasure.

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The civilization of the East ended at the banks of the muddy Missouri River. Settlements and farms extended west from the water's edge only a short distance. Beyond was the domain of the Indian—a wild people mostly feared and loathed.

Pioneer immigrants faced an arduous journey. It would be but the first of many obstacles standing between them and their dreams.

The stampeders were a motley sight. There were the footmen, like Gandy, and the handcart men pushing cumbersome wheelbarrows and pulling their two-wheeled carts, jostled together with those, like Tabor, with wagons of every description from light rigs to sturdy prairie schooners.

Hard traveling through the Great American Desert, as it was then called, wore down man and beast. Men greatly outnumbered women going west, yet those women who did make the journey often worked harder than the men, who expected them to find fuel for a fire, do the cooking, and much of the work around camp. Six hundred miles of harsh trails left people thin and weary and their animals footsore and lean.

Large numbers of the gold seekers, or argonauts as they were often called, chose to travel along the Platte River through Nebraska on a portion of the old Mormon Trail.¹ The route, less a trail than a series of rutted tracks spanning a width of several miles, grew in breadth as teams ventured farther afield in search of grazing for their livestock. Wagons were heavily loaded with supplies, so men walked alongside. Others were too poor with no alternative but to walk the entire distance.

Great clouds of dust rose from the wagons and animals, coating all that followed. The patina of brown and gray clung to clothing, hands, and hair. Mouths felt like they were full of sand and grit. Breathing became hard, eyes irritated.

Rain brought a short reprieve from the choking dust but extracted its own toll upon the weary. The journals of the stampeders are rich with descriptions of the sky turning black, with winds lashing at man and beast. Men and animals stopped in their tracks as torrents of rain pounded downward while thunder roared and fierce streaks of lightning struck the ground. Hailstones the size of quail eggs prompted boxes and buckets to be used as shields. With each storm's passing, wheels sank into thick mud while hooves and feet wallowed in the ooze.

One argonaut recalled being roused from sleep as his tent blew over and that later in the day, the "wind [was] a perfect gale mixed with a cold rain. [We] drove [the teams] pretty lively until 11 when the wind had increased to such violence that it was impossible to travel. The gravel was thrown on us like snow, filling our eyes and ears full."² He added that gnats on one stretch of trail had been fierce

¹ Argonaut is a widely used term dating from the California Gold Rush of 1849. It derives from Greek mythology and refers to a band of heroes who accompanied Jason as he searched for the "golden fleece."

² R.E. Leach, "The Journal of George T. Clark," *The Trail*, June 1913, 9.

and that days later, they were still covered with painful red bites, their faces swollen.

The lush grass of the eastern prairie turned to scrubby grass and cactus as the procession traveled west on a treeless plain. In Nebraska Territory, water became precious once the wagons turned away from the Platte River. Even buffalo chips for fire became scarce. Augusta Tabor recalled: “We were obliged to gather buffalo chips, sometimes traveling for miles to find enough to cook a meal with. This weary work fell to the women, for the men had enough to do in taking care of the teams, and in ‘making’ and ‘breaking’ the camp.”³ Augusta, who was ill during much of the journey and weighed only ninety pounds, was not unique in the hardship she suffered crossing the prairie. She cooked, mended and washed the linen clothing, and cared for her infant son who was feverish, teething, and suffering from ague during the trip.

Those who traversed the Smoky Hill Route through Kansas Territory during the dry season suffered greatly—some died on the trail when their water ran out. One party noted, “when you leave one river you are absolutely without water until you reach another. A few miles more and we literally ‘ran the river into the ground.’”⁴ It had dwindled to wet sand and then turned into an endless stretch of dry, hot sand. When they did find water, the strongest men, weak from thirst and exertion, did their best to restrain the oxen, still attached to the wagons, from stampeding into the small stream. They were not successful. The animals drank so much that it was feared the cattle would die. One man in the group was in dire shape: “His tongue was so swollen he could neither speak nor swallow, and we had to press his tongue down with a spoon and literally drench him to relieve him.”⁵

Many cast the memory of their journey across the Plains as a never-to-be-forgotten adventure. Some formed into large companies of over a hundred men with twenty-five to thirty well-provisioned wagons. At night they often played cards and dreamed of wealth. They quickly tired of the vittles and the endless routine of breaking camp and the yoking of oxen in the early dawn hours. At the end of a long, punishing day, the hot sun turned skin scarlet and leathery, and the tiring chore of unyoking and finding grazing for their animals remained, along with setting up camp, finding fuel for a fire, and cooking.

Food on the trail for many fifty-niners was often the ever-present, detestable, and indigestible flapjack—likely made without eggs or milk. Many traveled for weeks with three meals a day of pork belly, flapjacks (or griddlecakes as they were often called), and coffee. The monotonous meals wore the people down. On

³ Augusta Tabor quoted by Alice Polk Hill, *Tales of the Colorado Pioneers* (Denver: Pierson & Gardner, 1884), 221.

⁴ Jesse L. Pritchard, “To Pike’s Peak in Search of Gold in 1859,” *The Trail*, October, 1911, 5.

⁵ Jesse L. Pritchard, “To Pike’s Peak in Search of Gold in 1859,” *The Trail*, October, 1911, 7

Sunday, most Pike's Peakers rested their animals while they mended pants and shirts, washed clothes if water was near, and hunted game. A pot of beans frequently simmered over a campfire on layover days. Many pioneers started on the trails light on provisions and with little money. For them, hunting game was important and provided a welcome change from flapjacks and bacon three times a day, week after week. If a hard-to-stalk antelope was shot, it might be fried for breakfast, which argonauts assessed as first-rate eating, and later simmered in a potpie for supper.

Virtually all parties encountered Indians, which were seldom hostile during the first years of the migration. Indians often wanted to trade for trinkets or goods, sometimes as a toll for passage through their lands. They frequently approached camps to beg for food, and if given the opportunity, they stole livestock, food, or possessions. Augusta Tabor recalled that "Indians followed us all the time, and though friendly, were continually begging and stealing." She was in constant fear of Indians as well as rattlesnakes. Sundays were dreadful for her because the party halted to rest the animals, and the men left her alone to guard the camp and livestock. While the men hunted game, Augusta stayed with the wagon. "Quite frequently the Indians gathered around my camp, so that I could do nothing all day. They wallowed in the water-sources from which our supplies were obtained, and were generally very filthy."⁶

Sentries were always posted at night to guard their livestock and possessions, with tensions rising to anxiety when Indians were near. Frequently, the fifty-niners bartered with the Indians to secure souvenirs of their encounters with the roving bands of Indian hunters. One group from Missouri traded cups of sugar for buffalo robes. They settled on five cups for one robe. The whites chose the man with the largest thumb to measure the cups, he being careful to leave his thumb in the cup when filling it. Both parties were pleased with the trade. The whites figured they saved one cup of sugar for each robe, and the Indians had the sugar they desired and had palmed off their poorest robes.

Crossing the prairie and encounters with Indians became events deeply etched in the memories of the argonauts. Many of the wayfarers likely believed the journey across the plains would be their greatest challenge—their great saga and a defining moment in their lives. Yet for most Pike Peakers, the test, the point at which failure truly lurked, lay not on the trail but when they arrived at the Front Range of the Rockies.

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In the span of only a few months during 1859, the Pike's Peak Gold Rush became the second greatest gold rush in American history—second only to the epic California Gold Rush. The spark that ignited the Pike's Peak Gold Rush began quietly and without fanfare in the fall of 1858. It smoldered and flickered as men, one by one and in small groups, trekked into the wilderness in what was then western Kansas Territory and a small portion of Nebraska Territory. With the

⁶ Augusta Tabor quoted by Alice Polk Hill, *Tales of the Colorado Pioneers* (Denver: Pierson & Gardner, 1884), 221, 222.

arrival of spring, all changed. Tens of thousands of people headed to the rumored discoveries as the snows receded in the spring of 1859. Most were young men. Many were decent and good, some were riffraff and ne' do-wells, others were gamblers, thieves, and scoundrels. All had their reason for risking so much upon an outcome seemingly ordained by an unpredictable god of chance.

The chapter continues and will be posted at a later time.