

Rocky Mountain High and Denver Delights

by Jeff Clark
Sun Seed, Bowling Green, OH

It was in 1977 that I first visited the “mile high city.” Aside from the natural beauty, my first impression of the city was the cleanliness and a feeling of safety that I had not experienced in any other big city. We were in town for a convention being held right downtown, and felt secure walking around even at night. This was a unique experience for someone born and raised in Detroit where walking around downtown was practically a suicidal act.

Since that first trip I have had the pleasure of visiting Denver on business at least a half a dozen times. Each subsequent visit renewed that initial impression of a pleasant, clean, and fairly safe city. Denver has become one of my favorite cities in the U. S. When I found out that AFA has scheduled the 25th anniversary convention there I decided to use some vacation time to take my wife Janis there for a pre-convention visit. I was anxious to see if the city was as inviting as it had been in years past. We certainly were not disappointed: Denver was Great.

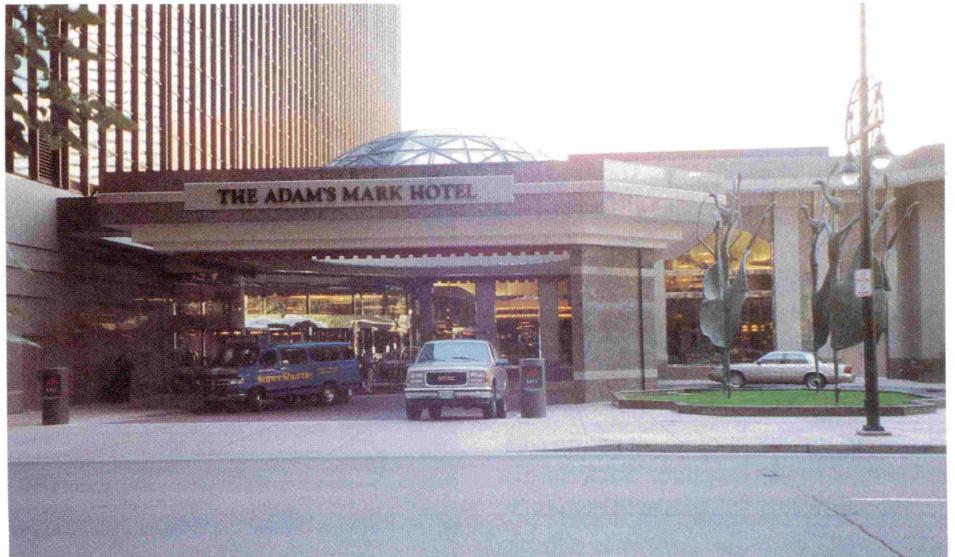
Whether you're seeking adventure, natural beauty, or history, Denver is the place to go. However, if your tastes lean more towards exotic gourmet foods, fine dining, shopping and nightlife, Denver is still the place to go. There truly is something for everyone in this dynamic mountainside city.

Mountainside is a good description because Denver is not in the Rockies as some folks believe, but sits east of the Rockies on the verge of the Great Plains. The relatively mild winters, and low humidity resulting from the shelter of the Rockies, made it the ideal winter camp for the Arapahoe Tribe. The Arapahoe were displaced when gold was discovered in 1850 at the junction of the Platte River and Cherry Creek. The City of Denver was born.

The entire area surrounding Denver

is rich in history. From the ancient Anasazi tribe through the golden age of the plains tribes to the fur trapping/mountain man era to the gold rush days, man has left his impact. In just a short drive from Denver you can visit a

900 year old cliff dwelling, the site of the mountain mens' *rendezvous* the epicenter of the gold rush (at one time the richest square mile on Earth), and Pike's Peak named after one of our nation's earliest explorers.



The Adams Mark Hotel in Denver will be the home of the AFA's 25th anniversary convention.



The botanical gardens in Denver have birds also. It is a must-visit site.

One of the most interesting sites we visited was the cliff dwelling at Manitou Springs just outside of Colorado Springs. The cliff dwelling was built and occupied between 1100 and 1300 AD and has been preserved in excellent condition. It is not the largest nor best-known such site, but is unique in that it has been preserved in such a way as to allow visitors a "hands on" experience. This is one of the few historic sites that I've ever visited where one can actually touch and feel the exhibits. You get a real feeling for how life must have been for the "Ancient Ones" who originally inhabited the dwelling.

The structure itself is made of slabs of square cut stones stacked like bricks. These were then chinked with mud to create wind proof walls. Logs were used as floor joist supports for the upper stories. That's right, I said upper stories. Some sections are three stories high and provided small apartments for up to three families. The entire structure was built into a wide mouthed cave with an over hanging roof. This overhang provides shelter and is responsible for preserving the condition of the building. Ladders that could be withdrawn in the event of an attack provided access to the dwelling. Sealed food storage bins kept rations safe from vermin and allowed the people to survive a long siege if necessary.

There is a nice little cafe and a great gift shop at the site. These modern facilities have been constructed so as to retain the "flavor" of the historic site. The three-story gift shop is of adobe and was built by Native Americans from the Taos Pueblo. It abuts the original dwelling and uses the raw cliff wall for its back interior wall. It blends with the rest of the site so the visual impact of the dwelling is not affected.

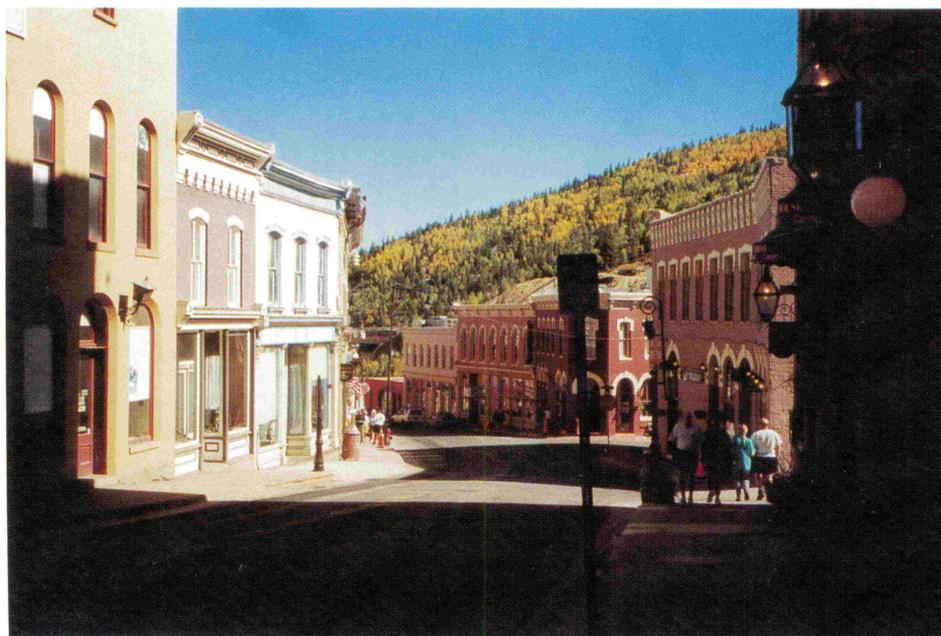
Beyond the visual impact there is an emotional one as well. Wandering through a village built by an ancient and mysterious people who seem to have just vanished leaves you somewhat awed. You can feel their presence upon you as you touch these rough stone walls. Imagining life as it once was is easy; just touch the stone, close your eyes and dream. Maybe the "Ancient Ones" aren't really gone, but still exist within these walls.

Another historic site of a more recent

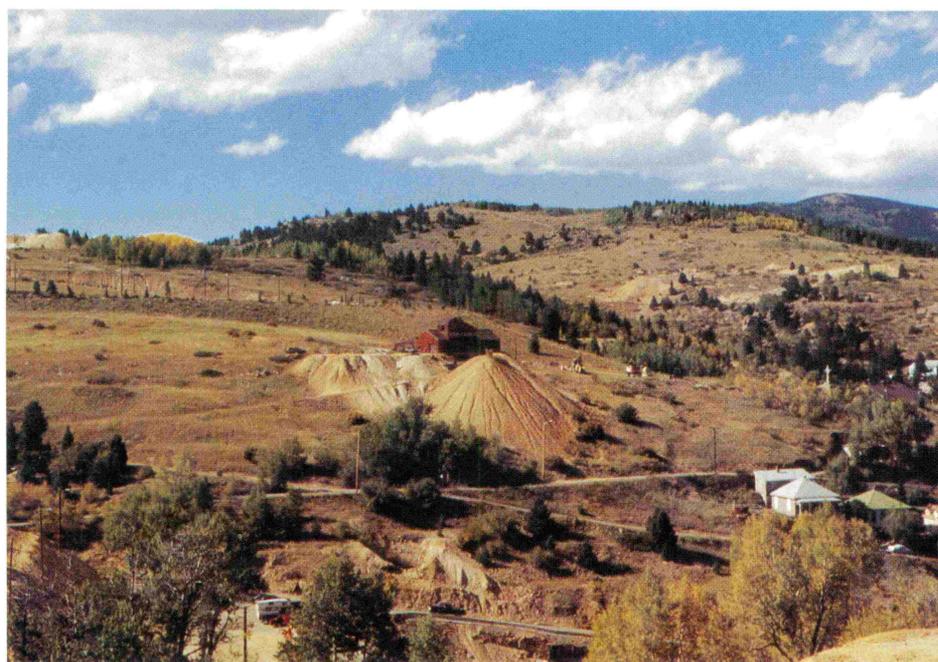
vintage lies just about 35 miles west of Denver in the Rocky Mountains. The adjoining towns of Blackhawk and Central City were the heart of the gold rush. They went through a period of Boom-Bust-Ghost Town-Boom again, Bust again and are once again booming. In their heyday they represented the richest square mile on the face of the Earth. When Ulysses S. Grant visited Central City, they literally paved the main street in gold bullion. When the gold mines played out, both locations

were virtually deserted until the 1960s when free spirits moved into town and revitalized Central City as a renovated historical site. Interest waned and once again the area suffered population loss.

1991 Marked yet another rebirth when limited wager gambling became legal. If you enjoy slot machines, or Blackjack, it can be fun to spend some time "feeding the House" in an historical setting. Don't let the fact that these locations are up in the mountains deter you from a fun-filled visit. The roads in



Central city, just a few miles west of Denver, is a boom-bust ghost town that is booming again.



Gold mines such as this one are what made Central city in the gold rush days.

Photos by Jeff Clark

and out are wide, well marked and fairly easy to drive even for novice mountain drivers. I've driven there even in the winter with no trouble at all in about 45 minutes.

If you do have an interest in history, a great place to start your visit to Denver is the Colorado Historical Museum. The museum is housed in a very modern building downtown just a short ride, or pleasant stroll from the Adams Mark Hotel (site of the 1999 AFA Convention.) Inside is a step back in time to Colorado's beginnings. During the Great Depression a number of artisans were put to work by the WPA making dioramas of life in early Colorado. These beautiful dioramas are doubly interesting because not only do they portray historical events, but are in a sense artifacts in their own right.

Beyond the dioramas are displays of Colorado's past. The Museum is divided into very open free standing rooms dedicated to the various ethnic groups and cultures that have contributed to the State's growth. Plan on spending a few hours here if you plan to see it all. There's a lot to absorb.

Another "must see" in Denver is the Denver Botanic Garden. If you are a gardener this is a wonderful place to stroll for planting and design ideas. Wide walkways, modern sculptures, unique barrier walls, ponds, and reflecting pools all enhance the experience. The Garden creates a tranquil green oasis amidst the surrounding apartment buildings, offices, and private homes. A great way to ease the tension of modern day city life.

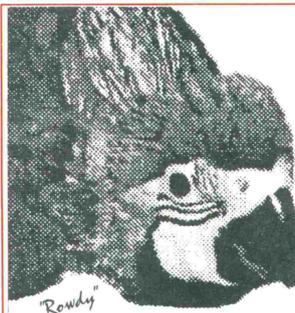
As an AFA member you without doubt have an interest in animals. A trip to the Denver Zoo is therefore an essential part of your Denver experience. Over the years I have travelled extensively across the U.S. visiting zoos along the way. The Denver zoo is without a doubt one of the best. The entire animal collection is fabulous, but one of the highlights for us was the bird building. The displays are breathtaking and the collection diverse and well maintained. You are going to love this. In addition to the birds, the zoo has a great new primate display area that is second to none.

One feature of the zoo that I found particularly intriguing was "Bear

Mountain." This display was built in the early 1900s and was years ahead of its time. In an era of block buildings and stark cages for the animals, Bear Mountain was the very first natural display built in a zoo. The mountain is a cast molding of an actual rock formation found in the mountains west of the City. Horse drawn wagons were used to haul giant plaster casts of the rock formation down from the Rockies. They were reassembled and concrete casts were made and assembled as "Bear

Mountain." The display still is unique and looks great 80 years later.

The sights of Denver and its surrounding area are beautiful, and unique. It's going to be a great place for AFA's 25th anniversary convention. I can hardly wait for next August so that we can once again have an excuse to visit this wonderful city. I'm already thinking about another buffalo dinner at the Buckhorn Exchange – but that's another story that I'll share in a future issue of the Watchbird. 



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