

Gilpin County Chronicle

RUSSELL PORTER

Originally written for a concert drama performance in Central City, Gilpin County, Colorado, on the occasion of Colorado Day, August 1, 1957. Russell Porter is Professor of Radio-Television, The University of Denver.

THE PROLOGUE:

Less than a hundred years have tumbled down
The riverbeds of time since pioneers
Built on this spot, beneath these peaks, this town
And bet their lives against the coming years.

Here where the creek and gulches meet they came
With picks and pans and shovels, wagons, wives,
To search the shining mountains; and their names
Are largely lost, as were their fortunes, lives.

Submerged beneath the grandeur of the few
Whose names now fill the books, stand carved in stone,
Are those who, living, no one ever knew,
And dying, filled forgotten graves, unknown.

But these the dead, like lost and scattered ashes
That mark the moments of extinguished fires
Are those who tore the sod, who left the gashes
In granite cliffs, who built these towers and spires.

No giants these, no peaks that tear the sky.
These are the dust, the pebbles, grains of sand.
Priceless and petty, numberless they lie.
They are the very earth. They are this land.

On this the day when ancient deeds are sung
They too would speak, they too would tell their story;
Listen, from nameless graves each ghostlike tongue
Whispers its tale of thin, pathetic glory.
Listen, the grains of dust will tell their story.

THE VOICES:

You have heard our song in the silver sighing
Of aspen leaves; in the wild geese crying;
In water, in wind, in the liquid whistle
Of mountain birds; from the sharp-tongued thistle.

You have heard our voices, grave and gay;
You have never asked what we had to say—
The searchers, the seekers, the weak, the brave—

THE BOY:

Has anyone ever found my grave?
I knew, deep in my bones,
I would find the gold
For I went, not for myself, but for others.

When my father froze to death
In an Iowa blizzard,
Dead drunk in his wagon,
Leaving me at fourteen
To take care of my mother,
Three brothers and two sisters,
I did what I could.
Hired out,
Worked from morning to night.
Saved a little,
But none of it was enough.

Then, out of the West
Came the hoarse cries of men
Shouting "Gold."
I knelt that night in our family circle,
Asking what I should do;
Stay with my family,
Grubbing the ground,
Making do, or
Leave them here
Balanced on the thin edge of starvation
While I searched the mountains
For gold.
When I rose from my knees I knew
I would go to the West,
Find there in the earth
Comfort for my mother,
Opportunity for brothers and sisters
And a new life for me,
Finding gold.

We started too early,
Our caravan.
Spring storms snarled at us
And we bedded more nights than not
On ground as soggy as our spirits,
Miserable, weary, afraid.
Four men died on the way
And the ten who were left
Came to the Platte
Hungry and sick and hopeless.

All but me.
Of the ten of us, I at sixteen
Was the oldest in spirit.
When the others asked to turn back.
I pressed us on.
For I knew, I had been promised
We would find gold.

In Auraria the town was alive
With the story
Of gold in a place called Gregory's Gulch.
But how could we get there,
Penniless,
Hungry?
Where would we find the picks and the pans,
The lumber for sluices,
The flour, the beans and the bacon?

Once more I knelt
And once more rose from my knees,
Went straight to the streets
And before night fell
Had found—had been led?—
To a man who would grubstake our party.
Once more, the sign.
I knew we would find gold.
We started one morning
And for two days followed the trail
Of the others,
Over the peaks and down through the valleys,
Coming at last to the camp.
There was the smell of gold in the air.
We moved through it, upward,
Searching about for a place.

The next day as we plodded
I saw a small gulch drop down from a vast overhanging
Off to the right.
To the others I said
"Go along, I'll explore this an hour,
Then catch you."
I turned up the trickle of water
Working my way
(Was I led?)
Higher and higher
Till I came to a place
Where the stream broke sharp round a boulder,
Ran for a moment
Quiet
And deep
And cold.

There, beneath the shadow
Of the jutting rock
I scooped up the sand
And swirled it as I had been shown.
The gravel slipped from the pan,
Swirled, and slipped, and swirled
Till, suddenly, mixed with the pebbles
I saw it.

The glitter!
The gold!
I had found it,
As I knew I would find it,
The gold!

Then, without warning
The mountain erupted,
The pan vomited gravel,
The sun cascaded,
The trees and the grass turning crimson.
And as I fell
I saw him standing behind me,
The muzzle of his pistol
Still smoking.

I lie here now in the earth,
My bones and my flesh united
With the gravel, the granite, the gold.

THE CHINESE:

You know my name?
You betcha I make mark on this small town.
They bring me shirts
And call me "you Chinees"
And laugh
And call me heathen.
You do not know my name
But allee same
You sure remember me.

One night
I say my prayers
As I have say them now for many years,
Burning my josses
When, no warning,
Poof!
One sudden catch
The rafters of my roof
And start to blaze.
I run out in the street
Like crazy man
Hollering fire.
Then everybody run
And first they laugh.
Then they all get afraid
And ring the bells
And form a line
Of men with buckets
Down into the draw.
And then they find
(An' no one laugh)
No water,
None at all.

And then they swear
And run in circles round
My laundry shack.
I sneak from town
You bet,
But as I run
I look behind and see
The hills on fire.

Where I now lie
You no one ever know
And I forgot.
But still I smile.
I may be heathen, yes,
And old Chineese.
But you remember me.
Remember, please, as well—
And maybe frown—
That prayers to Chinese god
Burn up your whole damn town.

THE VOICES:

You have heard our song in the quiet crying
Of rain in the trees; in the silver sighing
Of aspen leaves; from the earnest sound
Of the patient roots that stir the ground.

You have heard us whisper, we who died,
Swarming the slopes for gold.

THE MERCHANT:

I tried.
I wanted the worst way
To mine the gold.
My journey west was more than just a lark.
Fever was in my blood.
The wagon trail
Was one long pilgrimage,
The gold, the Grail.

In Denver city I needed more supplies
Than I had cash,
And so I hired myself for a few days
To a mustached lump who ran a general store.
Oh, he was nice enough as it turned out,
But there he stood,
Measuring cloth and spuds and lengths of wood
When just beyond the hills,
Beneath the ground
The gold lay buried,
Waiting to be found.

I loaded wagons headed for the gulch
With flour, lumber, beans and picks and pans,
And watched them lurch away
To new Jerusalem.

Each one I hated.
Each, it seemed to me,
A threat to that small square of ground
Reserved for me,
Uncovering the gold
I should have found.

Then I was sent
(And still I needed cash—that's why I went)
Back to St. Louis to bring a wagon train
Across the plain with more supplies,
Back to the general store.
And when, some eight weeks later
I pulled up at his door,
I found my boss was dead, and, what was more
Found, nice enough, he'd left it all to me.

And so I waited once again
Until I'd sold the stuff I'd bought.
By then, no matter how I shut my eyes
And cursed myself,
I knew the stuff piled high in bin and shelf,
With prices soaring, brought more money in
Than I could walk away from,
Found
That money grew in more convenient places
Than in streams or underground.
Once more
I stocked the store.

I postponed for a year or two
The gold.
My fortune grew.
Another year.
Another.
Then I wed.
Then fathered children.
On some holidays
Went with the children on the narrow gauge
Up to the tired out camps
I never found.
Then came old age—
And then at last,
I died.

But now, long dead,
My bones still ache, remembering gold and glory,
While overhead
The men, the many, who still bear my name,
Still run their stores,
Their inspiration, so they say, grandfather's story.

THE WOMAN:

The best time of all
Is late on a summer evening.
I see it now
Where I lie here,
High on the hill.

I used to watch it
From the small slab of porch
John finally built to the cabin,
The street,
Dropping away,
The long shadows of rocks,
And houses,
The mining towers,
The mills,
Stretching eastward.
It is quieter now.
Only the scars remain.

I remember them now,
My husband and my six sons
Climbing the hill each evening,
The sun in their faces;
Three from the mines,
One from the stores,
Three from the mills.

I remember the neighbors
Climbing the hill, the sun in their faces,
The day the news came
From the mine.
I remember the men
Climbing the hill,
The sun in their faces,
Carrying something between them,
My six sons following close,
Silent.

I remember the years that followed.
Sons, one by one,
Walking up other streets
To other doors;
Silent, steady,
The sun in their faces
As before.

They are none of them known,
Even now.
Two of them live
Here in the hills with their families.
Three of them have long gone out to the prairies.
One of them into the earth—
Strange, it should be the youngest.

But all of them—
I can see them each night as I lie here—
All of them still
With the sun in their faces,
Climbing the hill.

THE SOUTHERNER: I followed along
With William Russell,
One-third wise
And two-thirds hustle,
One of the hundred
Men or more
Blister footed
And saddle sore,
Who stumbled one day
In sixty-nine
Into Gregory's Diggins,
End of the line!

Two long years
With shovel and pick,
Diggin' and sluicin'
Can make ya sick
Of minin' for gold
With only a flash
Of yellow to turn
Into ready cash,
Slavin' summers
And winters holed
In a chinkless cabin,
Dirty and cold.

Then I met Sarah,
Clean as a breeze
That blows in June
Through the hemlock trees.
Love as warm
And love as snug
As an open fire
And a bearskin rug.
Love as free
As a mountain crick,
Love as sweet
As a "lasses" stick
Back in Georgia.
(Hear that song?—
"Way down south
Where I belong.")

I got to my feet
And I said, "I'm leavin',
Goin' home.

Now don't be grievin',
It won't be long
Until I've found
A little patch
Of Georgia ground,
Land that can grow
A crop at least."
Then I kissed her tears
And started east.

Sarah I never
Saw no more.
I didn't count
On no mangy war,
Or stoppin' a ball
From a Yankee gun.
So I never knew
About my son
Till the news came driftin'
In on the breeze,
The talkin' tongues
Of the hemlock trees
Reachin' my ears
With a gentle sound
Where I lay deep
In Georgia ground.

I wonder still
About that scamp,
A woodscolt raised
In a minin' camp,
With his mama's "stay"
And his daddy's "travel,"
A mixed up soil
Of clay and gravel.
Did he grow like a weed,
Go rollin' round?
Or a tall pine rooted
Deep in the ground?
Guess he stayed with his ma.
Maybe found a claim.
Bet he struck it rich.
Bet he made a name.

He's buried now
As deep as me
Under some pine
Or hemlock tree,
While time and the rain
And the wind unravel
The Georgia clay
And the mountain gravel.

THE VOICES:

You have heard our song in the silken sighing
Of grass in the wind; in the quiet crying
Of birds in the night; the hollow mutter
Of wind in the pines; the sudden stutter
Of distant thunder. You know our song,
We, who were once here.

SHE:

Was it wrong?
I gave them what they wanted,
Kinder than were the hills
To most of them who came.
Cold with the wind
I warmed them
For a price.
Wet from the freezing rain
They found my arms.
Hungry,
I fed them.
They cursed me,
Called me names,
Just as they cursed the hills,
But crept back
To us both,
Panting
And sighing,
Desperate.
Lonely.
Afraid.

I married one of them,
One of the lonely ones,
As lonely, myself,
In every way as he.

We got along.
Who would have thought we wouldn't?
He with a steady job,
"No mining for a family man," he said,
Too busy, both of us, for memories.
I gave birth to four sons,
Three of whom died,
(Was it a payment on the past,
I wondered?)
Lived to old age
Beyond my husband
And was lowered to his side
On this high hill,
My son and grandchildren
Weeping.

Here, where it is quiet,
There drifts in on a breeze
The echo of a street,

Steep and winding,
Climbing a rocky hill,
Blazing with lamps,
Laughter too shrill.
And I remember now
With neither pride nor tears
Those early, empty,
Brash and lonely years;
Remember too, with neither tears nor pride
The man I found there,
Loved,
And lie beside.

GREGORY:

I knew what I was doing.
By God I knew.
Don't call it luck,
Don't call it accident.
I didn't stumble on the gold.
Not me.
Not John Gregory.
I'd read,
I'd talked,
I'd tramped the mountain country,
And when I found myself one early spring
Deep in the gulch that later bore my name
I looked around,
My eyes went open
And my shovel down.
I knew, I knew it cold
That here I'd find the gold.

This was the thrill,
The knowing and the finding,
Not the gold.
Once it was found
Its yellow turned to jaundice
And I sold my claim,
Prospected some for pay,
Then one warm day
When mountain freshets had begun
To run
Swung westward once again,
My shadow long before me
In the morning sun,
And westward stalking
Walked my life away.
Did I, I wonder,
Find the gold too soon,
Reaching my goal at midday
With an afternoon
Endless and empty
Stretching out of sight?

Perhaps discovery should be
The final moment of a searcher's life,
Under the flaming western sun
And then—the night.

But still I wonder
As, unknown, I lie,
About the others—
All the ones who came
To break their picks
And scour thin their pans,
Grow bitter, blasphemous
Only at last to die
Empty of hand,
Empty of poke and pan,
Empty of fortune, fame.

Which is the best at last, I wonder still,
To find the fame and feel it drain away—
Or futile, frightened, reach that final hour,
The final minutes, sixty seconds each,
Utterly sure
That all for which we've struggled, hoped and prayed
Is out of reach.

THE YOUNG BRIDE: Prairie smoke and columbine
Set your mountain bells to ringing.
Let my life be always filled
With singing.

Mountain torrents, mountain pools
Fed by mountain snows above,
I have known the warm release
Of love.

Mountain sun and mountain rain
Caressing seeds that lie in earth,
I shall know the miracle
Of birth.

Mountain willow, mountain pine
Fill your heavy hearts with sighing,
I have learned the bitterness
Of dying.

Sun and rain and winter snows,
Seeds and flowers, mountain trees,
I shall learn the quiet ways
Of these.

I, who lived with love and laughter
From the moment of my birth
Died, before I learned the patience
Of the earth.

THE CHORUS:

You have seen our lives for a moment only
Flicker like flames. You have heard our song.
We, the formless, the faceless, lonely,
Return to the dust where we belong.
Remembering gold, remembering glory,
Remember us, remember our story.

EPILOGUE:

This is the story that the nameless speak
With tongues of resignation, hope, despair;
The wise, the bold, the foolish and the weak,
Their murmur lifting on the ageless air.

No chieftains these, no names to conjure with,
No deeds that shift the current of the stream;
Their lives a distant, half-forgotten myth,
Heard now as in a half-remembered dream.

These are the dust, and this their gentle story;
Remember them, their weakness and their worth.
The great possess the pageantry and glory,
The meek it is who still possess the earth!

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