Cornish Heritage Buried on the American Frontier

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"Remember friends as you pass by
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now so you must be.
Prepare for death and follow me."

Over a century ago, high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, was a silver mining town called Caribou. Little is left to mark its location today, but the once thriving camp was home to Cornish miners whose hardrock mining skills were in high demand in America.

Wives and children accompanied their men, even though it meant leaving behind all that was familiar. In 1879, far from her native Cornwall, 33-year-old Mary Webster died and was buried in a small wooded cemetery near the town. Someone, perhaps her husband Joseph, engraved her stone with the above epitaph. The verse reflects more than her life alone, it reaches out to us to remember a life and time that is gone forever.

Only ten years before, in 1869, a lone prospector had hunted for elk rather than gold. He found neither, but stumbled across a rock outcrop that he couldn't identify. When it proved rich in silver, the word got out and the boom was on. It was Colorado's first major silver rush.

The town of Caribou was laid out in September 1870, but couldn't grow quickly enough. A city of tents clung to the mountainside while carpenters feverishly built boarding houses, stores, and saloons. Soon the town had hotels, billiard and dance halls, blacksmith shops, a stable, a photographic gallery, a church, a school, and its own newspaper. The *Caribou* and *Poor Man* mines had started a stampede.

Other mines included the *Trojan, Boulder County, Sovereign People, No Name, Spencer*; and the *Seven Thirty*. The mining world's attention focused on Caribou when a magnificent collection of silver ore was displayed at the nation's Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1876. Specimens of Caribou's ores even found their way to the British Museum in London.

Americans filled the jobs of carpenter, teamster, and common laborer, but Caribou owed its success to experienced Cornish miners who blasted tunnels, timbered drifts, and removed underground water. The two groups mixed freely; neither lived in their own section of town. In Caribou's early days, sixty per cent of the population was estimated to have come from Cornwall.

Everyone seemed to have a brother back home, and new arrivals stayed with friends or relatives. If there wasn't enough room, they lived in one of the boarding houses run by Cornish women, who often loaned a miner money to pay for his ship passage. When a married miner couldn't afford to bring his family, his employer deducted part of his wages and sent them directly to his wife to cover the costs of their long journey.

Miners and their families spent two weeks or more on the open seas. Then they traveled overland two thousand miles by rail or by wagon to Denver, in Colorado Territory. Finally, after covering fairly level terrain, they began a two-day

stagecoach ride into the dizzying heights of the Rocky Mountains.

Besides bringing their families, the miners brought their Methodist religion and silver cornet bands, along with a love of singing and fondness for beer. All were welcomed in the new community.

The miners, however, had an easier time assimilating to their new home than did their wives and children. Arthur Cecil Todd, in *The Cornish Miner in America* wrote, "A mine is much the same the world over as a harbor is to the homing fisherman. The Cornish were both miners and fisherman; and indeed they used the same terminology for both pursuits, for a mine was under a captain and its depth was measured in fathoms."

Silver mines in Caribou may not have been much different from the copper and tin mines of Cornwall, but above ground, the Cornish families had entered another world. Instead of the lush green countryside and blue seas of their homeland, the new residents and their families found themselves living at ten thousand feet, near the top of the Continental Divide whose rocky spine separates the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The scenery was spectacular, but the harshness of the climate had already become legendary. Caribou has rightly been called "the place where the winds are born." Instead of the snug stone cottages or row houses the new immigrants had been used to in Cornwall, they lived in quickly constructed log and frame buildings braced against the relentless westerly winds.

So much snow fell in Caribou that for many months the color of the Landscape was white. Supposedly a newcomer once asked, "Just how long are the winters around here?" and was answered, "Don't know. I've only been here three years." Another story recalls a resident who said, "Gawd, I hope when summer does come, both days is nice." Although wild raspberries and currants managed to ripen by late August, the growing season was too short for garden crops other than hardy plants such as lettuce, rhubarb, and peas.

Besides the wind and snow, disease took a tragic toll. Epidemics of scarlet fever and diphtheria stole the lives of many children. One Cornish woman, Elizabeth Stephens, bore twenty children, of whom only five lived to adulthood. Bedrock was so close to the surface that graves

Figure 1. *These early Caribou residents most likely were from Cornwall. Author's Collection*

***Figure 2**. Snow practically buried this cabin when a man posed with his children in the 1890s. Whoever took the photograph (perhaps the wife and mother) labelled it "Our Happy Home." Author's Collection.*

had to be blasted instead of dug. Some were never marked. Often, when death occurred it the winter, the bodies had to wait until spring even to be buried at all.

But neither snow nor wind nor illness were as destructive as the fire that swept through the town in 1879, the year that Joseph Webster buried his young wife. Hoist men hurriedly brought their miners to the surface. Men, women, and children joined together and formed bucket brigades and managed to save some of the buildings in the business district while their own homes went up in smoke.

A number of discouraged families moved away, but others remained as mining continued through a slow decline in the 1880s. The federal census in 1880 showed Caribou with a population of 549, of which 215 were from the British Isles, predominantly Cornwall. After a sharp decline in the price of silver in 1893 ended Caribou's initial period of mining activity, only a few old timers remained. Two more fires, in 1899 and 1905, burned most of Caribou's remaining buildings.

By then, the Cornish miners and their families had moved to lower elevations with warmer climates and had blended invisibly into the American culture. Their impact on mining in Caribou and other mining camps of Colorado was significant, but their identity as a group had disappeared.

In recent years, a few of Caribou's mines have been reopened, but all that remains of the old town is part of one log cabin and a few stone walls. Mine dumps and the stone foundation of an old mill are silent reminders of past glory. Every spring, melting snows give way to a brilliant array of colorful wild flowers that blanket the mountain meadows. Today, this scenery is enjoyed by hikers. Most have never heard of the Cornish miners or the area's mining heritage.

Nor have many of the passers-by seen the Caribou cemetery, hidden in the trees and now crumbled and decayed. Wooden fences around illegible markers have fallen to the ground. Iron fences are rusted and twisted. Gravestones have broken and fallen, and, tragically, most of the few that once survived have been vandalized. Some graves are merely sunken depressions.