

The Rise and Fall Of Elizabethtown

By ALICE BULLOCK

Over a century ago (1866), a steep road snaked up McElvoy Hill out of Cimarron Canyon and dropped down into Moreno Valley. It crossed Willow Creek, angled out at the far end and climbed over Palo Flechado Pass and found its way to Taos. There was no lake, for the dam wasn't built, and of course no town of Therma (to be renamed Eagle Nest) nor did Elizabethtown exist across the narrowing valley from majestic old Baldy Mountain.

Down at Holes in the Prairie (Fort Union), an Indian friend gave Capt. William Moore some pretty rocks from Old Baldy. Moore recognized copper ore at once. He and a friend, William Kroenig, sent three men to the Valley to take out claims in October. The blue gentians in the marshy area along Willow Creek had been frostbitten, but aspen and scrub oak on the mountains made a Persian carpet of color. The bare peak of Baldy had wrapped a white serape around itself like a congealed cloud.

While Bronson and Kinsinger, two of the men, unpacked camp equipment and began cooking supper, the third, Kelly, took an old batea (gold pan) and idly began panning along Willow Creek. There, all at once, were shining flecks of gold!! GOLD! His triumphant yell brought the two men running, and supper undoubtedly scorched, then burned completely, while they all began panning. Copper was forgotten, and they frantically panned gold, broke off bits of outcrop until a snow storm warned them they had to get out. Before leaving, they peeled a section of bark on a great pine tree and chiseled out the words "Discovery Tree". They planned to be very quiet about their find.

A gold strike is, however, about as easy to keep secret as a hurricane. Before the snow melted in early spring hordes of men were waiting in Cimarron, and 300 men had left Fort Union to stake claims in Moreno Valley.

Soon those claims were staked out — Michigan Gulch, Nigger Gulch, Pine Tree Ravine, Humbug Gulch (the richest of them all) and many, many others. Capt. Moore had not only staked claims but opened a grocery store. All these miners had to eat! A lumber mill was set up, and miners bought lumber at \$50 per thousand. Cabins sprung up and more and more people found their way into the beautiful valley, pock marking the earth with "glory holes" and being rewarded with the precious yellow metal. A town grew by fits and starts and was named Elizabethtown, honoring Moore's infant daughter. Soon it was unofficially shortened to E'town.

All of this was happening on land owned by Lucien B. Maxwell on the famed Maxwell Land Grant acres. Maxwell staked claims along with the lowliest miner. He also collected fees for placer and gulch claims, setting up toll

gates at both ends of the valley. One drift mine of Maxwell's struck a ten-foot vein heavily imbedded with gold.

By 1869, the town held 3,000 residents and a host of cabins, saloons, stores, and finally a hotel. In another year, E'town became the first

incorporated town in New Mexico and the county seat of a new county, sliced off of Mora County. The county was named after the then U.S. Vice President Schuyler Colfax.

All was not peace, light and gold, of course. Men fought, gambled, killed, jumped

claims and stole, got liquored up and ran berserk. Vigilantes came into existence, and justice was swift, leaving men sprawled dead in the dirt or idly swinging from a handy tree.

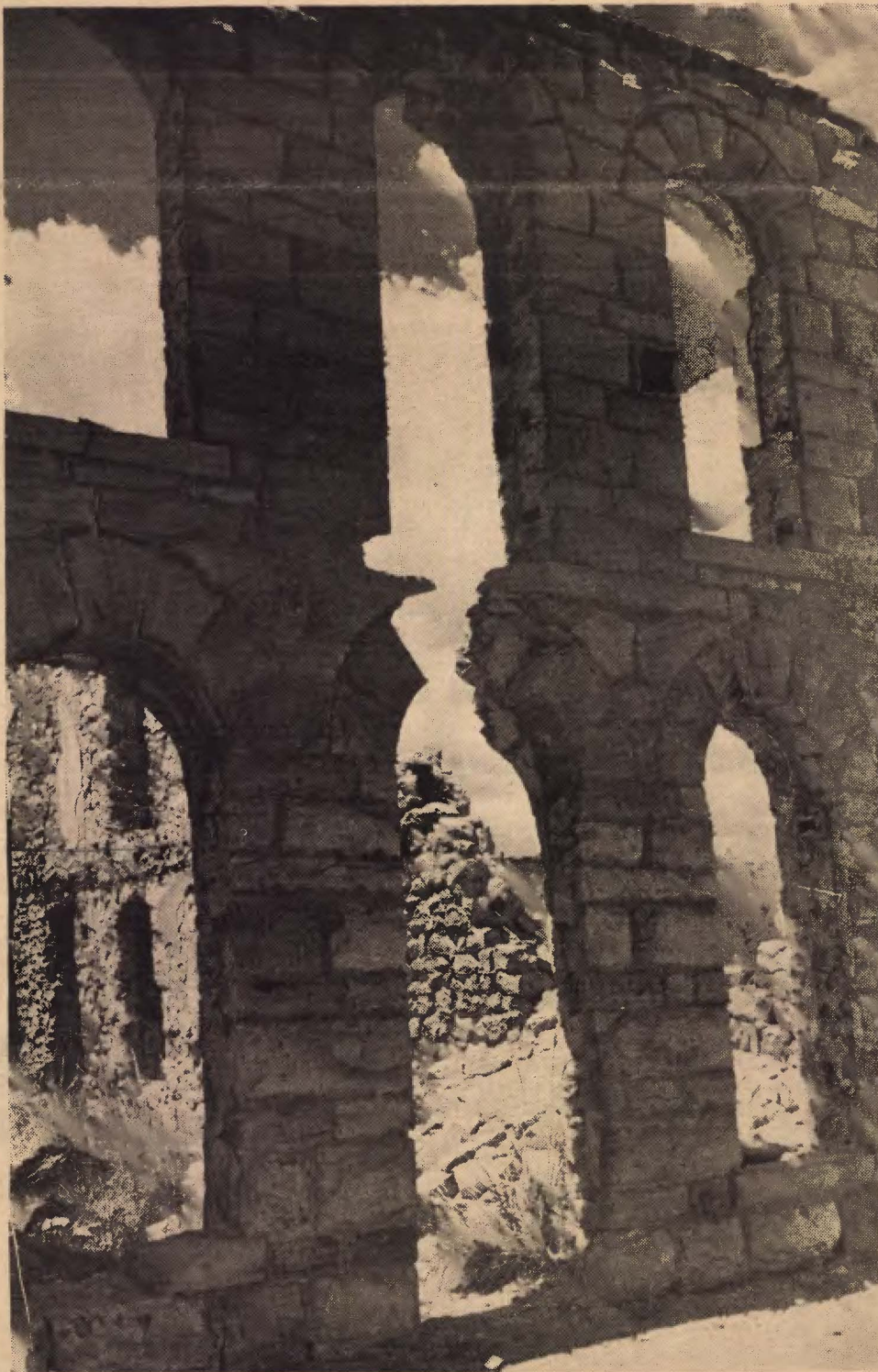
A bizarre case was that of one Charles Kennedy, living at the foot of the mountain below Palo Flechado. Willa Cather used this case in her book "Death Comes for the Archbishop." Late in September of 1870, Kennedy's wife staggered into an E'town saloon, and her story was a shocking one. Kennedy had been housing travelers, particularly single horsemen, for the night. He murdered them, stealing their goods, money, anything of value. Mrs. Kennedy was deathly afraid of her husband, but when their son inadvertently warned a traveler, Kennedy killed not only the traveler but the boy as well then drank himself into a stupor after pitching the bodies into a cellar below the kitchen floor. During the night, Mrs. Kennedy escaped by crawling up the wide chimney and ran as fast as she could make it to the saloon in E'town.

A posse was quickly assembled to investigate the story, and they found it to be true. The bodies were there. The posse lynched Kennedy. Clay Allison, visiting in E'Town, is said to have chopped off Kennedy's head and carried it back to Cimarron. He mounted it on a corral post where it shriveled and stank for several weeks before finally disappearing.

E'town flourished as long as the gold held out and then the decline began. A long flume was built to bring water in, only it was never successful. A gold dredge, The Eleanor, utilized the diminishing water from Willow Creek until finally there was no longer paying quantities of gold to be scooped up. The dredge was left to disintegrate, and it sank into the sandy bottom and finally disappeared in the 1920's. Men went up on Old Baldy hunting the mother lode and gold was found. The ghosts of the gold camps of Baldy Town and French Henry still are visible. A pair of brothers tunneled all the way through Baldy Mountain, sure that they would find the initial source. They didn't! Remains of their "Deep Tunnel" still exist.

Finally, a dam was built that backed up Willow Creek and mountain run off water and formed Eagle Nest Lake. A small town, Therma, sprang up on the upper shore and the lake became a popular fishing resort with a big fish fry held annually. E'town continued to diminish until only a few houses were left. The school house (I was the last teacher at E'town) was torn out. Finally, transients nested briefly in cabins, and the walls of the old Mutz Hotel mark the place today where once a raw, violent, town ran its course. Valley people mined the majority of the old houses for timber, window glass and metal fittings.

The town of E'town is no more.



All that remains of E'Town is part of the wall of the old Mutz Hotel.