

FIRST DRAFT

Routt: Renaissance man

State's first governor never shied from a challenge

In February 1892, Colorado Gov. John Routt faced a hostile crowd of miners and prospectors in Creede, Colo., people upset that the State Land Board claimed land on the valley floor and planned to sell it at auction. Miners believed they already had the right to that land.

Routt, then 67 years old, recalled that the miners began shouting "Lynch him! Lynch him!" But the governor stood his ground, telling the miners they could hang him if they wanted, but they would lose any ability to acquire the lands they sought. Hot tempers cooled down, and the state auction proceeded.

Newspapers of the time didn't record the cries of "Lynch him!" But they did report the miners were frustrated and angry. State militia troops were on standby, and trouble was anticipated.

By then, Routt already had overcome many obstacles in his personal and political life.

Routt was the last governor of Colorado Territory and was elected the first governor of the state of Colorado in 1876. He was elected again in 1890.

Born in Kentucky in 1826, Routt's family moved to Bloomington, Ill., after his father died in 1835. Although his schooling was limited, Routt read constantly and became a self-taught machinist, builder and architect. He entered public service early, being elected as alderman for Bloomington, then sheriff of McClean County, Ill.

When the Civil War began, Routt became captain of an infantry regiment he raised. The regiment served in Missouri and Arkansas, then joined Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Vicksburg.

While at Vicksburg, Grant ordered his officers to send wagons through enemy lines to a Union depot and gather needed ammunition, then return to Vicksburg within 24 hours. Other officers said it was impossible, but Routt accomplished the task. Grant was impressed.

After the war, Routt served two terms as a county treasurer in Illinois, then was appointed U.S. marshal. On a trip to Washington in 1870, Routt met President Grant, who recalled Routt's war actions. He offered Routt the position of second assistant postmaster general, and Routt moved his family to Washington, D.C.

However, by 1875, the lure of Colorado's mineral wealth was calling. Routt told the president he wanted to leave. Grant said he would allow him to resign his postmaster job and move to Colorado only if he agreed to become territorial governor.

Routt accepted and soon established good relationships with Colorado miners, farmers and ranchers and business leaders. He helped draw up the Colorado State Constitution in 1876, and won women's support when he tried unsuccessfully to include a right to vote for women.

Colorado officially became a state on Aug. 1, 1876. In elections that November, Republican Routt was easily elected governor. Gov. Routt was noted for his defense of working people, his support of women's suffrage, his management skills, and his commitment



BOB SILBERNAGEL

John L. Routt was appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant as Colorado's last territorial governor. He was then elected as the first governor of the state, and was elected a second time more than a decade later. As a Union soldier in the Civil War, Routt served under, and was a favorite of, then Gen. Grant.

PUBLIC DOMAIN PHOTO



CREEDE AND MINERAL COUNTY VISITOR CENTER AND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Town of Creede as it appears today. The original town and much of the mining activity were in the canyon to the right.

to using common sense and compromise to solve problems," wrote one biographer.

Routt also invested in the booming mining industry. In 1877, he bought the Morning Star Mine near Leadville for \$10,000. He traveled often to Leadville to work in the mine himself.

In April, 1879, he struck a rich vein of silver and became a wealthy man. He and his wife, Eliza, bought a large mansion in Denver, and more mines, ranchland and livestock. In 1883, he sold the Morning Star for \$1 million, about \$30 million in today's dollars.

Initially, Colorado governors served only two-year terms, and Routt left office in 1879. In 1880, former President Grant came to tour Colorado. He asked his old friend to accompany him.

"They started from Salida in a spring wagon drawn by a team of mountain ponies," wrote Routt's friend, Albert Sanford, decades later. They traveled to the San Luis Valley, then north to Gunnison and Crested Butte, then on to Leadville and back to Denver.

"They were out two weeks, camping along the way or stopping at some ranch house overnight," Sanford added. Routt recalled it as one of the happiest trips of his life.

Grant left in August, and Routt settled back into private life. But not for long. In 1883, he was elected mayor of Denver. In 1890, he was elected governor again.

That same year, silver was discovered in a canyon 40 miles west of Del Norte, Colo. Creede Camp boomed. It was hailed as the next Leadville, and it attracted legions of fortune seekers.

Railroad tycoon David Moffat bought mine claims there and developed a rail line to the camp. Bob Ford, the man who assassinated Jesse James, tended bar in Creede until he was killed in June, 1892. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody visited the boomtown in 1892 to assess its potential. Former lawman Bat Masterson was there. So was well-known Denver criminal Soapy Smith.

The railroad continuously added trains to get silver seekers to the camp.

But there was a problem. A large part of the valley where people were staking claims, and where the Creede town site was proposed, was state school land.

A man named Wasson, who had leased the land from the state for grazing prior to the boom, tried to cash in by subleasing the land to prospectors and settlers. Hundreds of people acquired questionable title to the lands through him.

The State Land Board, headed by Routt, said it would not honor those subleases because they weren't allowed under Wasson's grazing lease. Wasson sued, but Colorado won. The Land Board scheduled an auction of roughly 600 acres for late February. Routt and other state officials arrived to oversee the auction.

A Rocky Mountain News story on Feb. 25 said "Settlers Declare That They Will Not Move." It predicted only armed militia could prevent problems.

But the next day, Routt spoke to hundreds of people and assured them he had no plans to call in the militia. He said everyone would be given a fair chance to bid on lots, and he established an arbitra-

tion panel to resolve title disputes. The first day of the auction transpired without violence.

On Feb. 27, a committee of 25 "squatters" — men who had acquired leases through Wasson — declared they would not allow anyone else to take possession of their lots. But, with law enforcement officers present, the auction again proceeded without incident.

The Creede crisis was averted. But when the Silver Panic of 1893 occurred, silver prices plummeted and mining towns like Creede were nearly abandoned.

By then, Routt had once again left the governor's office. However, he continued to support women's suffrage. When a state-wide referendum gave Colorado women the right to vote in November 1893, Eliza Routt became the first woman to register to vote.

Routt also was appointed to the state Capitol Building board, and he helped oversee construction of the new building with the Golden Dome.

Routt remained active in Republican politics the remainder of his life. He and Eliza died within a few months of each other in Denver in 1907.

Sources: "John L. Routt, First State Governor of Colorado," by Albert B. Sanford, The Colorado Magazine, August, 1926; "John L. Routt," by Elizabeth Duncan, Colorado Encyclopedia at www.coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/john-l-routt; "John Routt: Colorado's First governor," by Rhonda Rau; Colorado Historic Newspapers at www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org.

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