Denver Law Review

Volume 10 | Issue 5 Article 4

January 1933

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THE BEST BELOVED MAN WHO EVER SAW THE ROCKIES

By William H. Robinson, Jr., of the Denver Bar

GOLD! The word was on the lips of everyone in this frontier town of St. Joseph, Missouri. Gold! The mad desire for the yellow metal could be read into everyone's actions. Gold! From half way across the continent they had come, and a like distance they had to go. Like some great magnet pulling to it thousands of particles of iron, the gold in California's hills was drawing to it men from all over the nation, from all over the world. Within three months after news of the discovery of gold had reached the East, between fifty and sixty thousand men had poured into St. Joseph, one of the main outlets for traffic across the barren plains. Of all types of men they were. Desperadoes, riffraff, men of culture and breeding. For instance, down in any of the numerous saloons which had mushroomed up overnight were men, perfect replicas of villains from a Hardy or Stevenson novel. And then over there, leaning against the door-jamb, bantering with the smithy, was a lean, tanned fellow with a quiet, friendly manner that won men to him. His name was Amos Steck, and like the rest of this mob, he was on his way to California.

By merely looking at him, one was aware that his life so far has been one of culture and of refinement. One is not particularly surprised to learn that he is the son of a Lutheran minister, Michael Steck, whose father before him, also a minister, had founded the Lutheran church in Western Pennsylvania; nor is one surprised to find Puritan strictness and sanctimoniousness conflicting with liberal and divergent philosophies in the makeup of the young man. The influence of his grandfather, who had emigrated from a small German town and who had embraced the ministry at an early age, and the domination of his father, who followed somewhat closely in the grandfather's mental paths, were continually struggling with the theories inbred by a wealthy and sophisticated uncle in whose home Amos had lived during the formative period of his life. These opposing forces hovered over the boy from the time of his birth, January 8, 1822, in a small

log cabin in Lancaster, Ohio, until the day of his death nearly eighty-seven years later. But whatever opposition there may have been in certain directions, there was a certain unity in others. The forbears had all been pioneers—the grandfather in establishing his church in the wilderness of a new land, the father in carrying forward the work on the untilled frontier, the uncle in building up a large and reputable mercantile business by the sheer force of his own personality.

Yes, of all types of men, these men assembled in St. Joe were. That tocsin cry of gold which sounded from the Pacific had brought these men together only to scatter them later like an autumn wind among the leaves. Among them there existed no sympathy nor understanding; their interests were identical in only one thing—the desire for gold. The scene presented this night of June 6, 1849, was one that has been duplicated on every new frontier in the rush for land, for precious metals, for oil, and for costly stones. Bustling, strained activity, rough manners and characters, lawlessness, lust, and greed. Every few days wagon trains of adventurers started out across the plains toward the coast, and on the morning of June 7, Amos Steck was driving an ox-cart in a caravan bound for California. His trip across half the continent differed little from those who traveled before and after under the curved bows and canvas top of the ox-cart. It is a tale oft told in many a book and in many a magazine. Perhaps it is only unusual in one particular; on a goodly share of the one hundred and forty-one days it took to make the trip, Steck drove with the reins in one hand and a book in the other.

He had always been a studious boy. The uncle, Caleb Cope, had taken the boy to his home in Philadelphia shortly after the father returned from Ohio to the Pennsylvania church the grandfather had founded. Amos received a liberal arts education far superior to the average one of that day. Books interested and fascinated him; consequently he proved a brilliant scholar. Upon the completion of his education, he entered the office of Richard Colter,[1] a prominent lawyer of the day, to study law. Within a year's time, Steck was admitted to the bar of the Court of Common Pleas in West-

[1]Colter was later made judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

moreland County, Pennsylvania,[2] and a short time later his name appeared on the rolls of the state supreme court. He had practiced law in Pennsylvania for about six years when he suddenly left his home and work to follow the cry of gold. But even its alluring summons was not sufficient to wean the man from the habits of his youth. Books were the mightiest factor in the life of Amos Steck, and forever he remained as true to the printed page as it did to him.

The call of gold was that of a false siren; for though Steck diligently followed it, he never found its source; and so when it became a question of abandoning the quest or starving, Amos Steck, like those thousands whose names will never be known, sought a job. He found it at the Armador Mines, situated about twenty-five miles from Sacramento.[3] Then the spirit of adventure was downed before the longing for a school-day sweetheart. Steck began the long trip back to Pennsylvania; and soon after his return in 1854, he married Sarah H. McLaughlin.

Chafing under the restraint of the routine of civilization, Steck took his bride to Wisconsin in the following year; but the memories of the western country with its rugged mountains and peaceful valleys made him dissatisfied. In the late spring of 1859, he set out once again for the West. In May he arrived in the little settlement then known as Auraria, but later to be called Denver. That night as he gazed from his lodgings on the bank of Cherry Creek in Kansas Territory to the foothills and the snowcaps beyond, a sense of peace and quiet, of grandeur and beauty, and of a robust life to be lived here was awakened within him. Suddenly Amos Steck knew that he had found the place for which he had been searching. This land was to be his home. Steck loved this land; much later, when Colorado was a state, he said, "Colorado is the greatest state in the Union, it's got to be that, you know. It's got to be a big state of big men. It can't be stopped. Nature is with us in that. The children and the women and the men breathe a larger, deeper breath up on those hills and they must think large thoughts. I've seen Denver rise and fall, go down and get up again, but every time it rose, it went

[2] May 24, 1843.
[3] 7 Dawson Scrapbook, 463.

on a notch higher, and even now it's only learning to climb." And Amos Steck believed those words.

Within a few days he secured employment as postal clerk for the Overland Express Company. Shortly afterward, when Denver was given a provisional post-office, Steck was appointed Provisional Postmaster for the United States mails.[4] In that day letters cost twenty-five cents to be delivered in Denver; and the receiver, not the sender, paid the postage. Steck retained the appointment until 1861, when William P. McClure succeeded him, and a regular post-office was established at Fifteenth and Larimer Streets.

In the spring of 1860, Mrs. Steck and her daughter, Isabella, arrived in Denver. The trip from Atkinson, Kansas, to Denver, a distance of six hundred miles, necessitated a journey of six days in the stage-coach. Perhaps the joy of seeing Mr. Steck was shared by mother and daughter equally with the joy of knowing that they would not have to face another day of biscuit (bright yellow because of the excessive use of soda), coffee, bacon, and canned fruit which had been the fare for every meal of every day at the stage-coach stations.[5]

Steck took his family to a one-story frame house he had rented near the present corner of Eighteenth and Curtis Streets. The house stood by itself on the bleak prairie. The closest house was several blocks away, and the nearest tree was six blocks south. Three fireplaces were built in the house, for coal was practically unknown in the region at this time; the only fuel was wood, and even it was very expensive.

The novelty of their surroundings must have been both trying and interesting to Mrs. Steck. Indians were frequent beggars at her door. Their children often were her daughter's only playmates. In place of gold and silver coins, Mrs. Steck had to use gold dust and privately minted gold coins for currency. She was forced to accustom herself to different people and different foods than she had known in Pennsylvania. But, like her husband, she soon grew to love the West.

As soon as McClure succeeded Steck as postmaster, the latter entered the practice of law in Colorado. Subscribed to the roll of the first session of the Supreme Court of the terri-

[4]Letter of Isabella Steck—4 Dawson Scrapbook, 71.
[5]Steck was paid $200 a month as postmaster.

tory is, among twenty-seven others, the name of Amos Steck. B. F. Hall was chief justice of the newly created court and his associate was S. Newton Pettus, whose only judicial service in the territory was this act of admitting attorneys to practice. Pettus returned to his erstwhile home in Pennsylvania shortly afterwards.

Hardly had Steck begun the active practice of law when he was elected the second mayor of Denver on April 1, 1863.[6] While he was mayor, Steck had the honor of sending the first telegraph message out of Denver. It was sent on October 10, to Mrs. Steck, who was visiting in the East.[7]

Serving only one term as mayor, Steck returned to the practice of law in 1864. When Lincoln was assassinated, Steck was chosen orator of the day, and the speech he gave on that occasion was said to be an eloquent and sincere tribute to the President. Shortly afterward, Steck was selected as Territorial Probate Judge for Denver. After his term as judge had expired, Steck turned his talents toward organizing a street railway company. His efforts were successful, and in the year 1871 he was elected its first president.[8] The track extended from Seventh Street to Sixteenth on Larimer, up Sixteenth to Champa, and out Champa to Twenty-seventh Street. About this time, Steck became interested in the Platte water canal. He worked hard on the project and his efforts were instrumental in securing this source of irrigation water for the city of Denver.

Along with this work, Steck assumed the duties of the Receiver of Public Money in the United States Land Office. This position he was forced to resign in 1874, because of a state-wide political upheaval which even affected the judges of the Territorial Supreme Court. Two years later, however, Steck was elected as a representative from Arapahoe County,[9] to the first general assembly of the newly admitted State of Colorado. He was re-elected to the House the following term. While in the House, he advocated equal suf-

[6]Charles Cook was elected as the first mayor in November, 1861, and re-elected April 1, 1862.

[7]Some accounts relate that this message was sent to the mayor of Omaha. The more reliable version seems to be it was sent to Mrs. Steck.

[8]Moses Hallet was also an officer. The first car was in operation December 17, 1871. (Rocky Mountain Herald, November 28, 1908.)

[9]W. F. Stone, History of Colorado (1918) Vol. 1.

frage for women. Judge M. DeFrance and Steck presented committee reports in favor of equal suffrage and made elaborate arguments in its favor. The measure, however, was defeated.[10]

Immediately after his term in the legislature was over, Steck was elected as County Judge for Arapahoe County. At this time the court house was situated at Fifteenth and Larimer Streets. In 1880 he ended his term as County Judge and entered the practice of law again. He opened his offices in the old Tabor Block at Sixteenth and Larimer Streets. Shortly thereafter, in 1888, he was pressed into public service. He was urged to run as Representative; his acceptance meant his election. When his second term was ended, he was selected as a delegate to the Republican National Convention which nominated Garfield. Hardly had he returned from the East when he was in the midst of a campaign for election as State Senator on the Republican ticket.[11] He served for two years as senator.

The last years of his life were spent in fighting litigation involving his home. In June, 1902, a suit was brought on the basis of a tax claim allegedly bought in 1893 (the time of the panic). The trial of the case was put off by various motions interposed by Steck. On May 29, 1905, the suit was tentatively set for trial. The indignation of the bar at this move to oust Steck from his home was widely and loudly expressed, so great was the respect of the lawyers for this old man. Offers were made by various lawyers to pay the tax claim. Due to one cause and another, the case was not tried until 1907, when Steck was forced to give up his home at the corner of Thirteenth and Glenarm Streets and move to a modest place at 143 South Logan Street.

Steck was also embroiled in the silver fight during his last years of life. A staunch advocate for bimetallism, he voted in 1900 for Bryan; and in 1904 he voluntarily entered his name on the rolls in favor of Parker for governor as against Peabody, the Republican candidate, calling upon the supporters of silver to do likewise.

At 7:45 o'clock on the evening of November 17, 1908, Amos Steck died in his home at 143 South Logan Street. He

[10]Denver at this time was part of Arapahoe County.
[11]Swords and Edwards—Sketches and Portraits of Ninth General Assembly.

was nearly eighty-seven years old. At his funeral on November 19 the Reverend Charles H. Marshall officiated. The remains were interred at Riverside Cemetery under the direction of the Colorado Pioneers, of which society Steck had been a member.

THE POLITICIAN

Steck was active in the political life of the state, but he was not a politician. True, he held the appointive offices of Postmaster, Receiver of Public Moneys, and delegate for Colorado to a Republican National Convention, that he was elected mayor of Denver, served as a representative in the first, second, seventh, and eighth general assemblies, and as a senator in the ninth and tenth, and that he was selected as county and probate judge; but he did not possess the cunning nor attributes of the politician. Perhaps no better summary of this fact exists than that to be found in the memoriam offered in the Supreme Court by Moses Hallet, E. T. Wells, and W. C. Kingsley:[12]

"Mr. Steck was versed in history as well as in laws, and he was of a philosophical turn of mind, of an ardent temperament, and of great colloquial powers; he was always ready to discuss all questions of the day. He was admirably fitted for public office, but seldom called on any important duty. The art of politics was entirely beyond his frank and open mind. Of majestic probity and unflinching courage, he was always ready to maintain the truth and beyond that high ensign he was utterly careless of results."

THE LAWYER AND JUDGE

Dating from that day in 1843 when he was admitted to the bar, Amos Steck's career was a long and honorable one, but it was not a spectacular or a great one. It is a career whose counterpart may be found in the life of the average successful lawyer. He was the attorney in a few big cases; he rarely appeared before the Supreme Court of the state, and seldom in the District Court. His work was chiefly that of a counselor. On the occasion of his death, his legal talents were thus summarized:[13]

"Always a lawyer, Mr. Steck was never active in the forum. We know that this was not from lack of ability or learning, and we are at

[12]Report of Committee on Death of Amos Steck, November 19, 1908—in files of Clerk of Supreme Court of Colorado.

[13]Field and Farm, February 21, 1920.

liberty to assign those reasons which appear on the surface. Perhaps the roving life of the plains and the excitement of the frontier in the states made him intolerant of the court room. Possibly he had no taste for the controversies of the forum. Whatever the reason, it is certain that through his diffidence or dislike, the courts were in a large measure deprived of the services of an able and honest lawyer."

The biographer wonders if the reason for the inactivity of Steck, as a lawyer, might not be attributed in part to a statement made by him shortly before his death. "Laws are framed," he said, "so that they will operate in favor of the capitalist and against the man of property. Legislatures are called for that purpose and the will of the monopolist is faithfully carried out by them." But then one remembers that this statement was made when Steck was involved in litigation concerning his home, and some of the bitterness engendered in that situation may have crept into his speech. Then again it was an era in which a "trust buster" was a hero and big business was a bogey. Whatever the reason, Steck's attitude in many respects is an enigma.

His services as a judge were highly successful. His decisions were uniformly sustained by the state Supreme Court. He brought to the bench a gracious charm and a ready wit. It is related that during a recess of court, Steck was telling some of the lawyers how he paid $125 a cord for wood when he first came to Denver. His listeners doubted his story, and the judge was highly provoked. Shortly after the trial of the case had been resumed, he noticed that George A. Crotfiel had entered the room. The judge suddenly stopped the trial and called Crotfiel before the bench. Interrogating Crotfiel as if he were a witness, Judge Steck proceeded to secure a confirmation of the story that wood cost $125 a cord in the early days. Then the judge whirled around to the doubters and said, "Now, you scamps, you see I wasn't such a damned liar as you thought I was. Proceed with the case."[14]

Another anecdote illustrates his broad-mindedness. Shortly after his term as county judge had ended, a friend overheard Steck vehemently asserting:

"The Supreme Court will reverse it, will reverse it, I tell you."

"A decision of yours?" a friend facetiously inquired.

[14]Denver Times, May 31, 1905.

"Yes, and a most damnably iniquitous decision it was, too," replied the judge.

It might be said that the bench was more suited for his abilities than the bar, but in neither position was he entirely happy. Strife irritated him, and the restraint demanded by his profession chafed his free nature.

THE MAN

"There's always work for a man, and life is always worth living."[15] That statement contains the philosophy of Amos Steck. He was a man of cheery and generous disposition which he attempted to hide behind a blunt exterior. This bluntness, like an apple ripening on the bough, wore away as Steck advanced in age. But the man was ever quick and impulsive; and when his compassion was touched, he was the most tender of all men.[16] A man of culture, he was well read in the classics and in history. His remarkable memory enabled him to quote pages from his favorite authors. He studied the Bible as though it were a history and his knowledge of the narration and characterization in the Book was encyclopedic. As a result of his wide reading and his varied experiences, he was an interesting raconteur. The vigor and health of his youth he retained in his old age; and not a day went by but that he visited his friends in the downtown offices.

His philosophy sustained him throughout the rise and fall of his fortunes. When he first came to Denver he rented his home; later he built a house where the Ernest and Cranmer Building now stands. Steck purchased that land for $37.50, and the seller was pleased with the bargain. In 1886 Steck sold this land for $62,500 and moved to a pretentious home at Thirteenth and Glenarm Streets. At the time of his death the Curtis Street property was worth $500,000.[17] The comfortable fortune that Steck had made was swept away in the panics of 1873 and 1893. He died a relatively poor man. In spite of the exit of his fortunes, he was ever cheerful. T. J. O'Donnell[18] was able to say truthfully that Steck knows

[15] 65 Dawson Scrapbook, 35.
[16] O. L. Baskins, History of Denver (1891) page 588.
[17] Denver Post, November 18, 1908.
[18] 65 Dawson Scrapbook, 37.

"more people than any other (man) in the Rocky Mountain region, and is the best beloved of any man who ever saw the Rockies."

So great was the love that the people of this region had for Steck that elaborate funeral arrangements were made and places of business were closed during his burial. In respect to his memory, all courts in Denver were closed for one hour on November 18, and all courts in the state recessed for his funeral on the following day. His gift of three lots to the Denver school board in 1872 stands as a physical monument to the memory of Amos Steck; but the undying monument he left was erected in these words:

"The record of Mr. Steck's achievements is not commensurate with his talents, but we do well to pause in commendation of his virtues which were largely conspicuous in his daily life. He was kind and affectionate, bluff and hearty, truthful and honest in all things. Such integrity as he lived and exemplified is worthy of a monument in these days."[19]

[19]Supra note—12.

A CLEVER TRIAL LAWYER

By F. L. Grant, of the Denver Bar

IN the early nineties, while attending law school, I spent my summer vacations in the offices of Simonson, Gillette, and Courtright, a firm prominent for many years in the legal profession at Bay City, Michigan. The firm had been together for about twenty years, and its senior member, John E. Simonson, familiarly known as "Johnnie" Simonson, was noted throughout the state as an astute trial lawyer. His work grew so laborious and he gave it such conscientious attention that his health broke under it, and he was compelled to seek the climate of Colorado, and practiced in Denver for a few years, but had lost his capacity for hard work, his pep and resourcefulness, and was finally obliged to quit and is now living in Bedford, Virginia.

Among the members of the Bay City bar, at the time I speak of, was Judge Maxwell, a brother of the Maxwell on Code Pleading. He was the opposite physically of Mr. Simon-