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LIFE IN LA BELLE:  
A NEW MEXICO MINING TOWN

JIM B. PEARSON

By 1893 the extravagances of the Harrison administration and the high McKinley tariff of 1890 had seriously depleted the Treasury Department's gold reserve. Monetary, business, and farm problems all culminated in a panic that year, costing men throughout the country their investments and jobs. In hopes of relieving their own as well as the Treasury's distress, many of the unemployed desperately shouldered their packs and prospected the western mountain slopes.

Ira Wing and several companions were the first to make their way into the Vermejo country of northern New Mexico, just to the west of the Maxwell Land Grant. In January 1894 Wing and his party found placer gold at the point where Spring Creek empties into Comanche Creek. After washing gold here for several weeks, they worked on up Spring Creek and located gold-impregnated rock so near the surface that they were able to haul a great quantity of the nearby ground to their placer location for sluicing. By selling this gold they hoped to secure the funds necessary for developing their quartz claims.<sup>1</sup>

The Wing group's luck prompted a handful of other prospectors to join them. When they shipped their first load of gold to the banks in Trinidad, Colorado, news of the strike spread quickly and gold-hungry men from neighboring fields headed for the Vermejo. By April 1, 1894, enough men were prospecting the Spring Creek area to organize a mining district. By the end of the month cabins dotted the grassy slope above Comanche Creek, twelve miles south

of the Colorado-New Mexico border and twenty-three miles east of the Rio Grande. The beauty of the countryside inspired them to call their new camp La Belle.<sup>2</sup>

This new addition to New Mexico's mining communities was actually located on private property. Originally a Spanish land grant, the area was purchased in 1870 by a group of wealthy men incorporated as the United States Freehold Land and Emigration.<sup>3</sup> The new owners hoped to settle their lands with foreign immigrants but had little success in attracting them. A few prospectors drifted through, occasionally staking a claim, so the owners decided to open the grant for location in 1894.<sup>4</sup> Wing and his partners were the first to avail themselves of the opportunity to prospect this virtually unexplored region.

About twenty ledges running from four to sixty feet in width, containing \$10 to \$40 per ton in gold, were uncovered before the snows fell.<sup>5</sup> Ira Wing sold his share of the two original mines for \$30,000 to a prominent Cripple Creek mine owner and then located several new claims nearby.<sup>6</sup> Such reports were carried by newspapers and mining journals throughout the West. By mid-December more than one hundred claims were being worked in the district, mines were selling at prices up to \$30,000, and plans were being made to bring in drilling machinery and a milling plant.<sup>7</sup>

Over six hundred people crowded into La Belle scarcely three months after the town had been founded. More than one hundred houses had been erected. Although five to six foundations were laid daily, the contractors, their carpenters, and the camp's two sawmills could not keep up with the demand for building. One hotel and a rooming house and restaurant eased the burden somewhat, but more accommodations were needed immediately. Perhaps this is why three saloons were running day and night. Almost overnight there sprouted a blacksmith shop, a stable, two butcher shops, a grocery and hardware store, and a shop offering hay, feed, and gent's furnishings.<sup>8</sup>

La Belle's bid for the mining world's attention was considerably strengthened by the early establishment of a newspaper. Editor

E. W. Iliff distributed the first issue of his *La Belle Cresset* on December 13, 1894. In spite of having to publish his first issues in a building with a mud floor, a dirt roof, and without fire or lights, he gave the town a journal that sparkled with humor and the wonders of its mines.<sup>9</sup> During his first three weeks, Iliff's only complaint was that the Bible was a scarce article in his new home town, but he complimented its balls, which graciously displayed so much "beauty, wit, wisdom, good clothes and flow of soul."<sup>10</sup> If visitors were surprised to find a weekly paper already in print, as well as an active social life, what must have been their reaction on learning that the camp could boast of an eight-piece brass band!<sup>11</sup>

Despite the cold, people continued to flock into the mountains. In one week during January at least thirty people arrived. The Catskill and La Belle Stage Company, which had been making tri-weekly runs since the road had been opened to Catskill, a little lumber town twenty-two miles west of Raton, on the Red River in Colfax County, began making daily runs with six-horse coaches by the end of February.<sup>12</sup> The following month a tri-weekly stage line was operating from Fort Garland, Colorado, and in April a line began running from Raton to Catskill.<sup>13</sup>

The improved transportation facilities and rapid increase in visitors excited hotel men. The *Cresset* predicted that the population would be ten thousand by the end of the summer.<sup>14</sup> Even after the Perry Hotel opened in late February, people were still sleeping on the floors. A Trinidad saloon and restaurant proprietor relieved the situation somewhat by early summer with his two-story Exchange Hotel, complete with pool and billiard tables and a bar.<sup>15</sup> The most ambitious project, the moving of the \$30,000 four-story Southern Hotel from Catskill to La Belle, enabled the town to cater to most of the weary lodgers by the end of June.<sup>16</sup>

Other businessmen were also quick to take advantage of this influx of people and by May the price of town lots on the main streets had jumped from \$100 to \$500.<sup>17</sup> The district was now served by eight general stores, a book and stationery shop, a drug store, a shoe shop, and a new short-order house. The drug store also became the office of the town's physician, Dr. B. W. Rice.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of May ten more buildings were under construction, including two one-and-a-half story general stores, two barber shops, an ice house, an "opera" house, the Pels Street Laundry, and a jail.<sup>19</sup>

Optimism notwithstanding, La Belle reached its peak in July with over one thousand people settled on the grassy slopes overlooking Comanche Creek.<sup>20</sup> Despite the heavy investments, too little gold was being extracted. Money was still tight in the country at large and this hurt most mining camps. Even in the midst of the spring boom Iliff himself expressed concern over the number of people leaving town without paying their hotel and grocery bills. In fact, he found it impossible to collect the too many debts owed his paper and commented in the April 4, 1895, issue:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself has said,  
I'll pay, before I go to bed  
The debt I owe the printer?

Yes, there are some we know full well,  
Who never such a tale could tell,  
But they, we fear, will go to—well,  
The place where there's no winter.<sup>21</sup>

Within a few days Iliff sold the paper to a stock company. He resigned as editor and manager in August and was replaced by his assistant, Frank Staplin.<sup>22</sup> Although many people did leave for other mining fields at the end of the first summer, an upturn in the country's economy and sufficient water (for a change) brought in enough newcomers to keep the population at a level of six to seven hundred during 1896.

The few discouraging signs only spurred the businessmen and the United States Freehold Land Company to work harder to make the camp an attractive, permanent town. They had contributed funds for roads, encouraged the establishment of a newspaper, and promoted a gay social life. On January 26, 1896, a group of the district's founding fathers met in Jellison's store and

agreed that money collected from liquor licenses would be used to erect a school house.<sup>23</sup> The land grant company donated a lot; the building contract was let. The townspeople swelled with pride when the little frame school house was ready for their inspection the middle of July.<sup>24</sup> The sister of the town's sawmill man began classes the following month with fifteen to twenty pupils enrolled for the school's three-month term.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of La Belle's elevation of 9,600 feet above sea level, athletics were an important part of all special occasions. Foot races, boxing matches, and baseball games were common events. The baseball team organized even before the snows melted and treated the home folks to its first contest with an outside foe when the Pueblo nine visited the camp on July 4th.<sup>26</sup> The team arranged games with Catskill, Midnight, Elizabethtown, and Trinidad, and the La Belle boys won their share.

La Belle held its first horse race on April 11, 1896. Both Ponil Park and the Moreno Valley agreed to send entries, but when the owner of the Ponil Gray saw the rough track he announced that his horse would not run.<sup>27</sup> Although local horses were matched occasionally, it was a year before another inter-town race was promoted. The highlight of the 1897 Fourth of July celebration was the La Belle favorite's win by a nose over the Ponil Park bay. The crowd subsequently watched a 125-yard foot race and then cheered the La Belle baseball team to an 11 to 7 victory over Midnight. A fireworks display that evening was topped off by the discharge of fifty pounds of powder near the Midnight shaft house, which jarred the country for miles around. About fifty couples lined up for the grand ball at 8:30 P.M., and with only a break for a midnight supper, danced until sunrise.<sup>28</sup>

Dances and dinners were quite popular with the ladies and gentlemen of La Belle, as they were in most New Mexico mining camps around the turn of the century. The La Belle Social Club, organized in August 1895, sponsored dances, literary entertainments, and debates.<sup>29</sup> On September 4 the people of the little mining camps that had sprung up as offshoots of La Belle gathered in the dining room of the Southern Hotel to attend the club's first

annual ball. A five-piece orchestra struck the grand march and the couples danced until eleven o'clock to waltzes, quadrilles, schottisches, polkas, the Boston hop waltz, minuets, the Denver, the French minuet, and the Virginia reel. After a sumptuous midnight supper, they continued dancing until daylight.<sup>30</sup>

Saturday night dances were usual occurrences, and if the fiddle bands were not making merry in La Belle, the young people could always find an outlet for their energies in Red River City, Ponil Park, or Elizabethtown. They were at home in any of these communities and it did not seem unreasonable to joggle several miles over the mountains for a dance. If snow covered the ground, sleds replaced the wagons and parties of laughing boys and girls were on their way to meet old friends and dance their cares away.<sup>31</sup>

Most of the dances were "nice" affairs; the participants dressed in their most elegant clothes, the gentlemen on their best behavior. If a stranger appeared, the girls might have the floor manager introduce him so that all might enjoy the evening. In this way, a party of well-mannered young men, riding good horses and flashing plenty of money, were made part of La Belle's social life without anyone suspecting that they were members of "Black Jack" Ketchum's outlaw gang. Posing as cowboys, Black Jack and his men frequently rode into La Belle from their Valle Vidal camp and were popular with the girls. Not until their capture did the townspeople learn their identity.<sup>32</sup>

Dancing and athletic events were not the only amusements. For instance, the Colorado Tunnel Mining and Milling Company decided to celebrate the opening of its new boarding house with a stag party, to "allow a few rays of sunshine to fall among the many hardships of a prospector's career."<sup>33</sup> The men were invited to drink to the "health, wealth and welfare" of the Colorado with fresh bock beer and to enjoy an Old California style dinner. All men interested in debating and discussing politics and literature were invited to while away the long winter evenings with the Limekiln Club, organized in the fall of 1896 by a group of men in Midnight, the little camp two miles over the mountain.<sup>34</sup> In response to such amenities La Belle staged a festival of wild strawberries on

August 20, 1898, for its friends in Midnight, Elizabethtown, and Ponil Park, complete with music, games, and drinking.<sup>35</sup> However, picnics, fishing parties, and neighborly visits were the usual favorite relaxations.

If none of the more respectable pleasures suited the miners, there were others. It was not necessary to look for vice—it existed quite openly. True to the history of most mining camps, La Belle had its nights of revelry, orgies of inebriation, and the inevitable fights. Compared with other communities in northern New Mexico, however, moderation and sobriety were general virtues. The ladies of La Belle seemed determined to make all of La Belle's socials sparkling successes, perhaps in part to keep as many gentlemen as possible from being lured by other pleasures. The decorum of most of these ladies inspired former editor E. W. Iliff to write:

The Trinidad girl  
Is a haughty thing.  
If she kisses at all  
It's on the wing.

The Catskill girl  
Is the one to collar.  
She kisses you good  
For half a dollar.

The E'town girl  
Gives a kiss so sweet,  
The poets fall down  
At her feet.

There's the Red River girls,  
Ah, two for a song.  
Kissing for meal tickets  
All day long.

But don't forget  
The girls of La Belle—  
Won't kiss even mamma  
For fear she'll tell.<sup>36</sup>



The stages rolling into La Belle were often filled with young women unaccompanied by their "mamas," and their length of stay depended upon how well their kisses *were* advertised. Some plied their trade in cabins set aside for a red light district, while others lived in rooms connected with the saloons. Dumb-waiters usually carried drinks up to the girls and their guests on the second floors.<sup>37</sup> In July 1895, the Hagen Brothers opened what they called a first-class sporting house featuring a beautiful siren and her friends from Colorado Springs. The "sporting editor" found that the owners had "brought some high flown ideas and a piano; which after all is not much worse than some other semi-civilized dens of iniquity that pretend to border on the verge of respectability."<sup>38</sup>

La Belle's transgressions were not countered to any serious extent by organized religion. A Sunday school, first held in Dunlavy's store building on April 29, 1895, struggled heroically to meet the camp's spiritual needs, but few ministers found their way into these mountains.<sup>39</sup> Those who did were well received. The Reverend G. W. Ashman treated a most attentive audience to the first sermon preached in the camp, early in February 1895.<sup>40</sup> But it was six months before the next preacher challenged the town's sinners. Would-be church goers had to wait two years to hear a third sermon in La Belle. When the minister did hold this last service, on March 31, 1897, the paper commented laconically: "Last night a very strange thing took place—that is for La Belle."<sup>41</sup>

By 1897 the population had dropped to five hundred and several businessmen were moving away.<sup>42</sup> The charge was often repeated that the district had been boomed by an "injudicious use of printer's ink." Only three general merchandisers were left, but a new hotel, the Buckeye Log Cabin Home, opened in competition to the three in operation.<sup>43</sup> Two saloons, two hotel bars, the drug-store, a blacksmith shop, and the shoe shop remained.<sup>44</sup>

Mines continued to change hands and several well-financed companies showed their faith by keeping crews of miners throughout the summer. But assessment work was about all that was accomplished on most locations and by the end of the year the town

began to empty. The ladies of the Pioneer Society of Female Mountaineers tried to jack up the faithfuls' spirits, but most mining men knew that La Belle's best days were over.<sup>45</sup>

When the mines showed no more promise during the following summer the town's lifeblood continued to drain, and the once-proud beauty was on her knees by fall. The editor of the paper pointed up the desertion in describing the Fourth of July commemoration: "There was no great demonstration at La Belle the 4th. The pet pig and the flag pole remained ungreased, there was no old man's race, and the bunch of firecrackers was not tied to the patient burro's tail for the edification of the patriotic masses."<sup>46</sup> The people paid neighborly visits and then gathered for supper at the Exchange Hotel, where Chris Olson volunteered the music for a dance.

By fall many of the old-timers had departed. Frank Staplin moved his newspaper to Taos and on October 20, 1898, resumed publication there as the *Cresset*.<sup>47</sup> Only the annual assessment work kept a handful of people in La Belle during the winter of 1898-1899. A few drifted back during the next two years in hopes of salvaging something from their investments, but the only veins that were struck did not pay enough to warrant ore shipments. There were only forty-nine hangers-on during the summer of 1900, with six lonesome residents at Midnight.<sup>48</sup> On Thanksgiving day 1901 George Brown, still driving the Grand Central tunnel, brought back memories of the good days by inviting all of the people in the district to a big dinner, at his home in Anchor. After a banquet of wild turkey, venison, and bear with cranberry and strawberry dumplings, an orchestra imported for the occasion furnished music for dancing.<sup>49</sup> When Dr. L. L. Cahill purchased the La Belle drugstore and moved it to Elizabethtown in September 1901, the town no longer had a single business house open.<sup>50</sup> Nor did it need one. The last permanent resident left by the end of the year.<sup>51</sup> Gay La Belle, that had grown so quickly, glowed so brightly, and had lured so many men into bankruptcy, burned out like countless other western gold camps. Her end left no moral; men continued the old search for quick wealth, for El Dorado.

THE MINING CAMPS dotting the Rockies around the turn of the century were tame compared to those that had sprung up in the decade following the Civil War. The days of the vigilante had all but passed. While it was just as difficult to eke out an existence, life in these mountains was safer.

The mining camp nomads, who comprised most of the residents of La Belle and other New Mexico and Colorado camps, took great pleasure in small things. Like the folks who lived in the isolated farm communities of this era, they worked hard and their abilities and energies were heavily taxed. The gold seekers, however, were determined not to lose the arts of civilization. The community was important to them; it comprised their identity. And in this forging of relationships they were much more tolerant of their neighbors in these mountain worlds. We might ask half-enviously if indeed there was not more *real* communication in these instant towns than in our brittle, televised world of today.

Perhaps the major distinction between the close-knit, provincial folk who called the ephemeral mining camps home and those who lived in farming areas was the dream, a vision of Lady Luck that beckoned the miners on and would not let them rest—the hope that someday soon good fortune would strike. The mine owners and businessmen who invested their capital and efforts had a contagious kind of faith that permeated the entire social body of La Belle and in each mining town left its mark. The dream died slowly, for there was always a new camp and renewed faith. I dare say that for most who followed the mining camps the hope was quenched only by the grave.

## NOTES

1. *La Belle Cresset Supplement*, April 4, 1895.
2. *Ibid.*; *La Belle Cresset*, Dec. 13, 1894; Blanche C. Grant, *When Old Trails Were New: The Story of Taos* (New York, 1934), pp. 194-95.
3. The incorporators were William Gilpin, Ambrose E. Burnside, S. L. M. Barlow, Charles A. Lambard, William H. Reynolds, Hiram Hitchcock, Henry W. Gray, and Morton C. Fisher. William Blackmore Papers, No. 0103, "A Bill to incorporate the United States Freehold Land and Emigration Company and to confirm certain legislation in Colorado Territory. 1870 March 8," 41st Cong., 2d Sess., Report No. 89, Senate.
4. *Taos Cresset*, Jan. 12, 1899.
5. *La Belle Cresset*, Dec. 13, 1894.
6. *Ibid.*; *La Belle Cresset Supplement*, April 4, 1895.
7. *La Belle Cresset*, Dec. 13, 1894.
8. *Ibid.*, Dec. 13, 20, 1894, Feb. 14, 1895.
9. *Ibid.*, Dec. 20, 1894.
10. *Ibid.*, Jan. 3, 1895.
11. *Ibid.*, Dec. 13, 1894.
12. *Ibid.*, Feb. 28, 1895.
13. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1896.
14. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1895.
15. *Ibid.*, May 23.
16. *Ibid.*, June 6.
17. *Ibid.*, March 28, May 16.
18. *Ibid.*, May 2; Springer *Colfax County Stockman*, Apr. 27, 1895.
19. *La Belle Cresset*, May 30, June 6, 1895.
20. *Ibid.*, June 18.
21. *La Belle Cresset Supplement*, Apr. 4, 1895.
22. *Raton Range*, Apr. 4, 1895.
23. *La Belle Cresset*, Jan. 1, 1895.
24. *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, July 18.
25. *Ibid.*, Aug. 9.
26. *Ibid.*, July 13.
27. *Ibid.*, Apr. 11, 1896.
28. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1897.
29. *Ibid.*, Aug. 15, 1895.
30. *Ibid.*, Sept. 19.
31. Personal interview with Anna Nadoch Hudson, Raton, New Mexico, Sept. 3, 1953.

32. *Ibid.*; personal interview with Mary E. Lail, Cimarron, New Mexico, Sept. 3, 1953.
33. *La Belle Cresset*, May 14, 1896.
34. *Ibid.*, Oct. 29.
35. *Ibid.*, Aug. 27, 1898.
36. Elizabethtown *New Mexico Miner*, May 7, 1898.
37. Personal Interview with P. B. Albright, Taos, New Mexico, June 23, 1953.
38. *La Belle Cresset*, June 6, 1895.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, Feb. 7.
41. *La Belle Cresset Supplement*, Apr. 1, 1897.
42. J. A. Carruth, comp., *Business Directory of Arizona and New Mexico for 1897* (Las Vegas, N.M.: J. A. Carruth, 1897), p. 209.
43. *La Belle Cresset*, Mar. 11, 1897.
44. *Ibid.*, July 15.
45. *Ibid.*, Dec. 23.
46. *Ibid.*, July 7, 1898.
47. *Taos Cresset*, Oct. 20, 1898. Frank Staplin edited the *Taos Cresset* until June 25, 1902, when it was combined with *La Revista*, edited by Antonio J. Baca.
48. *Taos Cresset*, Aug. 9, 1900.
49. *Ibid.*, Dec. 5, 1901.
50. Elizabethtown *New Mexican Miner*, Sept. 6, 1901.
51. *Ibid.*, Dec. 6.