

ECOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF LEADVILLE, COLORADO, AS TYPIFYING THE PURE SAXICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

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The author suggests that of the pioneer mining camps of the west which are still active down to the present day, Leadville, Colorado, perhaps better than any other, best typifies the characteristic sequence of cultural aspects of the pure saxicultural adjustment. In order to prove the validity of this suggestion, he presents a brief discussion of certain basic relationships and responses of diversified geographic kind discernible in the history of Leadville.

The location and site of Leadville are described and shown to be truly alpine. The city is located in the Upper Arkansas Valley, and situated on a pediment bench some miles east of that river and at an elevation of over 10,000 feet. It is surrounded on east, north, and west by the snow-covered summits of the Mosquito Mountains, Tennessee Pass, and the Sawatch Mountains respectively.

The Leadville fundament is described in some detail in such a way as to emphasize its economic barrenness to all profitable mass-endeavor except the mining of metalliferous ores. Leadville dominates population-distribution of its

alpine region, containing in 1930 some 77 per cent of the people of Lake County. According to county assessment figures for 1937, only 27 per cent of the area of the county was privately-owned land, and utilization of this land was solely for the purposes of grazing (transhumance) and metalliferous mining. Various economic bases leading to successful adjustments in mountains are described with application to Leadville: agriculture has never been possible; timbering was limited to the sawing of rough lumber for building and for fuel (cordwood and charcoal for smelters) during the early boom period; smelting was once an important industry but declined sharply by 1885; railroading has contributed little except to the mining industry; retail trade in Leadville has always been of local character despite strategic position because of the scant population-density of the alpine trade area.

The writer then divides the seventy-eight years of Leadville's existence into the three periods he believes inherently involved in the life of any saxicultural community; viz., periods of discovery of

minerals, development of mining (or other form of extraction), and decline of mining to final extinction. Opposite each of these periods he puts the discernible status of urban and cultural development in the Leadville settlement, thus deriving a sequence of cultural aspects. He then describes each of these cultural periods in some detail, with the exception of the last which must await field study in the Leadville region before he feels willing to make a report upon it.

The period of discovery was marked by what the author terms the "shantytown level of culture" of Oro City, the first settlement in the Leadville district. This sprung up in direct response to the basic physical needs of thousands of gold miners in California Gulch for shelter, food, and diversion. It was unorganized, impermanent, crude and ugly beyond description, yet adequate. By the end of the year, the Gulch was believed worked out, the population of Oro City largely departed, and the settlement quickly assumed the aspect of a ghost town.

The period of development came about as a response to the discovery of rich

silver-lead ores in 1875. A second rush slowly got under way to overflow the Gulch by 1878. A new city was laid out some miles away from old Oro: this was Leadville. Within a year it had grown to a city of some 15,000 people and modern aspect: a list of adjuncts by which its relatively high plane of municipal and cultural achievement may be judged is given. The early smelting industry, because it is an interesting historical instance of conjunctive industrial symbiosis, is considered in some detail; that it had withdrawn almost entirely from Leadville by 1885 was in response to the cumulative effect of several factors which rendered it uneconomic to remain in Leadville.

Attention is drawn to the fact that no one year naturally marks the beginning of the period of decline at Leadville: arbitrary choice must be exercised because of the overlap of years depending upon one's particular point of view. Certain general evidences of municipal and cultural decline are noted, as is the inevitable conclusion that Leadville is fast approaching the ghost town stage.
