

# Revisiting History: Colorado’s Remarkable Mineral Palace

By Ken Kucera

## What ever happened to the world’s largest collection of Colorado minerals and ores?

In the late 1880’s, the future for Pueblo, Colorado, was bright and optimistic. The steel and mining industry had brought wealth to a rapidly growing state and city. The city had become a thriving steel smelting center featuring three smelters and one steel mill whose furnaces could color the night-time sky orange. Pueblo believed it would develop into a major urban center. Fulfilling this belief included creating a tourist attraction that would confirm both Colorado’s and Pueblo’s status as world-class centers of culture and mining industry. The attraction was built as an opulent exposition hall to showcase and promote Colorado’s mineral wealth and industry on a stunning scale. It would house the world’s largest collection of minerals and ores at the time, including the personal collection of industrialist J. P. Morgan. The attraction was located on 27 acres north of the Pueblo business district and was called the Mineral Palace. Almost 130 years after industrialists and businessmen poured capital into the palatial structure, nothing remains but the name “Mineral Palace Park”.

In July of 1889, a group of prominent businessmen met in Manitou Springs and formed a corporation. The corporation’s goal was to build a stunning exposition hall worthy of competition with London’s Crystal Palace to display treasures from Colorado – namely minerals from its mines. Music to the ears of investors. The original shareholders in the Colorado Mineral Palace Company were well-known businessmen, including prominent national figures, including: Benjamin Guggenheim (son of wealthy mining magnate Meyer Guggenheim) who died aboard the RMS Titanic in 1912; William Palmer, the founder of the Rio Grande Railroad and the City of Colorado Springs; and, Henry Brown, the original owner of Denver’s Brown Palace Hotel.



Figure 1 (above) : Opening day of the Mineral Palace in 1891.  
(Credit: Pueblo City/County Library Archives)

In November 1889, the company’s secretary Thomas Nelson, sent out a “call” to Coloradoans soliciting comprehensive samples of ores and minerals from their geographic areas to help make the Mineral Palace’s displays and collections “as nearly exhaustive as possible” and “one of the wonders of the world”. (Nelson, T. 1889) Three general types of minerals were solicited: the first, minerals such as quartz, pyrite, and other “glittering” minerals, to be used in decorating the building itself; second, composed of ores and specimens with commercial value, representing Colorado economic resources; third, minerals of scientific value, including rare and crystallized specimens. (Kemple, S. 1937) Prominent industrialists, mining companies, and private citizens, were asked to donate specimens for the exhibition. (It has been reported that additional minerals may have been added to the Palace collection after the closing of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.) (Raines, E. 2017) Both the City of Trinidad and Aspen silver mines promised to fund statues honoring coal and silver, respectively. These statues – “King Coal” and “Silver Queen”– would later become focal points of the building.



Figure 2: Benjamin Guggenheim (1865 – 1912)  
Prominent shareholder in the Mineral Palace  
(Credit: History Web)

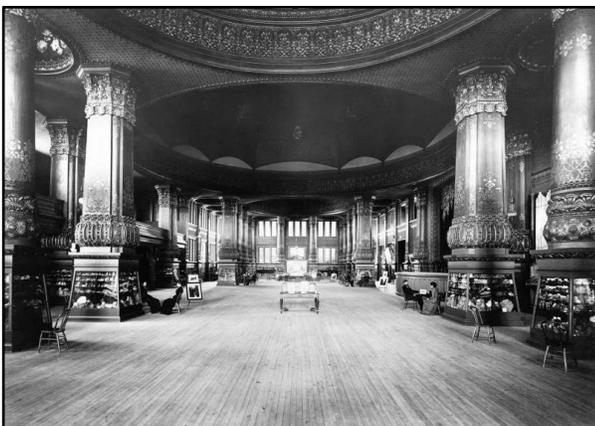
## An Impressive Building Was Needed To House The Collection

To house this world-class mineral and ore collection, an equally impressive building was needed. Considered one of the most ornate and magnificent buildings then in existence in the United States, the Mineral Palace was essentially designed in the style of the era's grand museums and libraries. Built at 18th and Main, on Pueblo's north side, the structure's "foot-print" was the size of a city block (126 feet deep and 238 feet long). (Nelson, T. 1889) Large amounts of Colorado stone were used in construction, including different shades of granite. The exterior was surrounded by a colonnade of four massive stone columns at the building's corners. These exterior columns were 28 feet high and 5 by 7 feet at the base. Between the four columns and the roof, each column held a stone globe that was ten feet in diameter. (Brandstatter, T. 2015)

The interior was equally palatial. The general color scheme was terra cotta and gold with a broad horizontal band of hand-painted silver dollars encircling the interior. A spacious entrance led to a block-long interior hall with enough formal space to squeeze in 3,500 persons for various grand balls, meetings, plays, and other events. (www.pueblo.us) The building boasted a huge dome at its center reportedly 72 feet high and 90 feet in diameter. The primary dome was surrounded by 27 smaller domes, each with hand-painted interiors. (Brandstatter, T. 2015) Although descriptions vary, the main dome was reportedly decorated with female figures, 16 feet high, representing various countries of the world, and/or painted figures looking like "angelic cherubs". Within this main dome were also large painted side-portraits done in cameo effect of "eight great Americans", although according to the City of Pueblo's written history of the building, no one remembers who the Americans were. (Dodds, J. 1982; Severance, R. 2020) Other smaller domes were adorned with paintings of Colorado wildflowers, by New York artist D.R. Fey. See figure 4. The interior space was illuminated in part by 2,200 electric lights in the centers of painted flowers. (www.pueblo.us) "Without a doubt, the Mineral Palace was the most interesting building ever constructed in Pueblo", says the city's documentation about the building's history. (Severance, R. 2020)

The main attractions of the building were its mineral and ore displays. The Mineral Palace contained what many considered to be the world's largest collection of ores and minerals at the time, plus numerous fossils and "petrifications" from all over the globe. Accounts say there were as many as 150,000 specimens in the collection. (Padilla, Y. 1989)

Mineral specimens were displayed in glass cases at the bases of the interior's fifty columns and along the side walls. See figures 2 and 3. The specimens displayed represented every major mining camp in Colorado and consisted predominantly of ores and crystallized minerals, grouped by counties and subdivided into localities and districts, or groups of mines. There were cases containing fine crystallized gold, silver, and base-metals, along with crystallized accessory minerals. A number of the fine minerals displayed were on loan from private collections.



**Figure 3 (above): Mineral specimens displayed in glass cases at bases of columns and side walls. Note Silver Queen and stage at right. (Credit: Denver Public Library, Western History Archives)**

**Figure 4 (left): Main interior gallery of the Mineral Palace, date unknown. Note the mineral display cases at the bottom of the columns. (Credit: Southern Colorado History)**

Major stars of the Mineral Palace were the 16 feet high statue of the “Silver Queen” and the 14 feet high statue “King Coal”, located on each side of the main stage or “grotto”. (www.pueblo.us) See figures 5 and 6. The Silver Queen was a lavishly embellished statue financed by Aspen silver mines, initially made for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, paying tribute to the town’s mining wealth and promoting the continued “free coinage” of silver by the federal government. (More on the Silver Queen later in this article.) After the Exposition closed, it was gifted to the Mineral Palace. The “King Coal” statue was reportedly made of coal, some diamond dust (probably glass), canvas, and papier-mache, and was seated on a pedestal with a glass display case below. (Lewis, S. 2020) The statue was a gift from the City of Trinidad to represent the coal industry around Trinidad and in southern Colorado.

**Figure 5 (right) : Smaller interior domes, each with hand-painted designs, surrounding the Palace’s primary dome. (Credit: Puebloup.com)**



**Figure 6: Statue of the Silver Queen with main stage (Credit: Denver Public Library, Western History Archives)**



**Figure 7: Statue of King Coal (Credit: Pueblo City/County Library Archives)**

Despite the presence of these two statues, the grotto-like main stage on which many dramatizations were presented, was a star in its own right. It was built to represent a cave or grotto, complete with real stalactites and stalagmites. The back of the stage had a replica of Pikes Peak with a bubbling mountain stream and waterfall. At timed intervals, a miniature burro pack train loaded with mining supplies would climb the mountain replica and a mechanical nymph would appear at the base of the waterfall to grasp gold nuggets. (www.pueblo.us) (Author’s note: You gotta be absolutely kidding me!)



**Figure 8 (left):** A stand-up dinner at the Mineral Palace, date unknown. Despite signs reading “No Spitting on The Floor”, sawdust was spread on the floor for “protection”. Note the “grotto” and Silver Queen and King Coal statues in background. (Credit: Pueblo City/County Library Archives)

From the get-go, the plans for building the Palace were plagued with financial, management, and structural problems. After an infusion of cash from the City of Pueblo and a reorganization of the Palace Board with Benjamin Guggenheim as its new president, cuts in the lavish design of the building were made, including: stone instead of brick, paint instead of decorative minerals. It was finally completed in 1891 at a reported cost of \$165,000 (Rosemeyer, T. 1991).

Even though the building was underfunded and difficult to complete, it opened with great fanfare on July 4, 1891. The Palace was considered by many as “one of the show places of the West in the 1890’s” and even “one of the wonders of the world”.



**Figures 9 - 10: Commemorative medal issued for the opening of the Colorado Mineral Palace (Author’s Collection)**

### The Trials and Tribulations Of The Silver Queen

A gift and “free-coinage” promotion from Aspen silver mines, created by Pueblo sculptor Hiram Johnson, the Silver Queen was reportedly modeled after Mollie Gibson of Aspen. (The famously rich Mollie Gibson Mine is her namesake.) The Silver Queen was sent to represent Colorado at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in March 1893. At the Exposition, a scroll in her lap read “Free Coinage”, demonstrating a financial position of Aspen mine owners whose wealth was threatened by the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. (The Act required the Federal Government to buy a certain amount of silver for coinage. Due to the economic Panic of 1893, the Act was repealed, marking the end of the silver mining boom.)

Although there is a lot of disagreement on what the statue was made from, it was undoubtedly opulent. According to one legend, parts of the Queen were made out of the largest silver “nugget” ever mined from Aspen’s Mollie Gibson Mine, which was made into her crown, her silver-dollar topped scepter, and her head (having hair made of white glass). It’s likely she was originally made mostly of bronze and tin. (Rosemeyer, T. 1991) It has been reported the Queens arms were silver, but they were probably tin-coated. Her gown was decorated with brilliant dark minerals and the scarf sparkled with blue crystals. (Brandstatter, T. 2015) Her scepter was topped with a 12-inch replica of a silver dollar. The Queen rode in a canopied, silver-trimmed chariot, whose front resembled the bow of a Viking ship, escorted by a “Plutus” on either side, one spilling silver coins and the other gold coins from cornucopias. See

Figure 5. (Plutus was the Greek god of wealth who Zeus blinded so as to give out wealth indiscriminately.) An article in the March 12, 1893, Pueblo Chieftain states the cost of the Silver Queen was about \$22,000. (Around \$600,000 in today's dollars.)

According to the late Dr. Paul Keating, professor of mineralogy at the Colorado School of Mines and curator of the Mineral Palace from 1937 – 1939, in a 1954 Rocky Mountain News story, the Silver Queen “was made of plaster of Paris painted silver”. What might explain descriptions of the Queen varying from bronze, silver and tin, to plaster of Paris?

A plausible explanation lies in a catastrophe at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Valuable parts of the statue may have vanished (stolen, vandalized, destroyed) at the Exposition, possibly during a fire at the Exposition that killed sixteen firefighters in July 1893. At some point, what was left of the Queen returned to Pueblo to either be refitted with non-valuable parts; or, sculptor Hiram Johnson had earlier made a plaster prototype during the Queen's fabrication before fashioning the final metal version of the Queen. This plaster prototype went on display in the Palace after the Exposition. (Cooney, T. 2016)

The Silver Queen's stay at the Mineral Palace was also a fateful one. It was reported that “souvenir seekers” were able to access the Palace during the Great Depression years “tearing apart” the statue.

### **An Inglorious End For The Palace And Its Collection**

The fate of the Mineral Palace and much of its fabulous collection of minerals was no better than that of the Silver Queen. By 1893, Colorado's silver mining industry was starting to collapse economically. The “silver panic” would crater the price of silver and close most of Colorado's silver mines. Less money was available to spend and invest. Even though at the turn of the century it still managed to attract around eighteen thousand visitors annually, the Mineral Palace was starting to die along with the industry it was built to promote.

For a time, the Palace still attracted infusions of minerals for its collection. About 1901, the complete collection of minerals and ores assembled by the Colorado State Board of Immigration and Statistics was loaned to the Mineral Palace. This collection had been on display at the St. Louis Exposition in the late 1890's. It was later returned to Denver and transferred to Colorado Bureau of Mines for display in the State Museum. (Rosemeyer, T. 1991) All or part of this collection, was transferred in 1965 to the curatorship at the Mines Museum of Earth Science in Golden, Colorado. (Raines, E. 2017)

With additional economic problems caused by the flood of 1921 and the start of the Great Depression, the Palace fell into major disrepair. The facility became too expensive to operate and maintain properly.

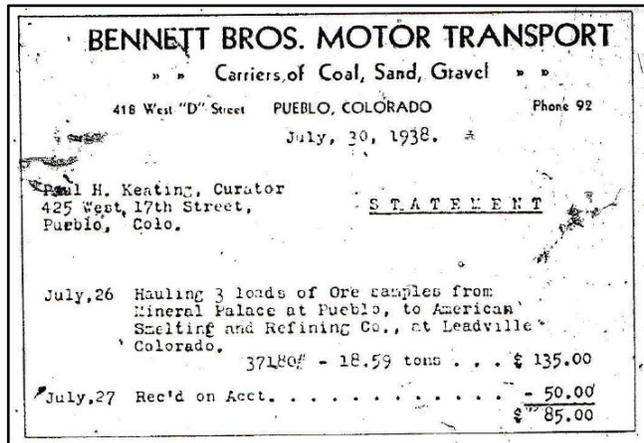
By the late 1920's, the building was described as “ramshackle”. It gets worse - during the Great Depression, “souvenir hunters” reportedly destroyed both King Coal and Queen Silver, and vandalized some of the remaining mineral collections. In 1935, the building was closed and condemned due to its dilapidated condition. By 1943 the City of Pueblo, now the owner of the building, decided to tear it down completely for public safety and to help feed “the war effort”. Building demolition was finished by the summer of 1943.



**Figure 11: The Mineral Palace's main hall in dilapidated condition, May 1938. Note mineral specimens still stored in cases. (Credit: Pueblo City/County Library Archives)**

What ever happened to the world-class mineral and ore collection displayed in the Palace? The collection was scattered, sold-off, stolen or lost. The details can be a bit complicated and hazy...

- In May 1938, the Pueblo Museum Project, under the auspices of the Work Projects Administration (WPA), began cleaning up the interior of the Palace and reclassifying the remaining mineral collections. The reclassifying was directed by Dr. Paul Keating of the Colorado School of Mines. Keating divided the collections into two groups: 1) specimens to be saved due to their mineralogical and/or scientific value, and 2) those deemed lacking these values. The unknown number of specimens to be saved, with apparently little inclination to keep the collection intact, were eventually either destroyed or dispersed to various individuals and organizations. Those deemed as lacking scientific value were shipped to a Leadville smelter on July 26, 1938, to recover their metal contents. According to a hauling receipt copy shown below, 18.59 tons of ore and mineral samples from the Palace were hauled for \$135 to the American Smelting and Refining Company at Leadville.



**Figure 12: Copy of the receipt for hauling 18.59 tons of mineral and ore samples from the Palace to the ASARCO Leadville Smelter, July 1938. (Credit: Pueblo City/County Library archive; Rosemeyer 1991)**

- Most privately-owned ore and mineral specimens on loan were reportedly returned to their owners.
- An unknown number of mineral specimens were reportedly transferred to the Colorado Bureau of Mines as early as 1901 and placed in the State Mineral Collection in Denver. In 1959, the State Mineral Collection was turned over to the Colorado State Historical Society. On October 25, 1965, an agreement was reached where the State Historical Society transferred the State Mineral Collection to the Colorado School of Mines. When completed, thousands of specimens from this historically important collection had been added to the curatorship of the Mines Museum of Earth Science. Yet, no evidence has been found confirming that any Palace mineral specimens currently reside at the Mines Museum. (Raines, E. 2017)
- The March 3, 1997 *Pueblo Chieftain* reported some specimens from the Mineral Palace were displayed in the 1960s and early 1970s in the lobby of the Pueblo County Courthouse, but the display was removed when the courthouse was renovated in the 1970s. The whereabouts of these specimens are unknown.
- In the July 4, 1991 edition of *The Pueblo Chieftain*, it was reported that citizens of Pueblo remembering the Mineral Palace have offered up other interesting stories concerning the disposition of specimens from the collection, including: portions of the display ended up at Knott's Berry Farm (an amusement park in California), with the Boy Scouts of America, and the Masonic Temple. Numerous specimens were reportedly stolen.

Visitors to Pueblo can still enjoy the attractive Mineral Palace Park, but no trace remains of the palace itself, nor its charge to be a repository of Colorado's mineral wealth and heritage.

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