

By Douglas C. Towne

High Plains Drifter

As commercial archeologists, we tend to focus on highways, but in our explorations it's a phrase from an earlier transportation corridor that perhaps best describes some of our unintended destinations. We're often drawn toward the proverbial wrong side of the tracks, the "challenging" parts of a city that locals advise tourists to avoid, or at least not venture to alone after dark, to discover overlooked elements of cultural landscapes. The objects of our attention are often erased by development pressures in more vital parts of the city, but survive in blighted urban neighborhoods where they are allowed to slowly decay. As a result, I'm often on the wrong side of the tracks (and more focused on the intentions of the person loitering nearby than selecting the proper camera setting) when I'm shooting vintage signs and buildings.

Over the years I've noticed that undesirable locations can apply not just to neighborhoods but entire cities, judging by reactions to my vacation plans. Many seem to have trouble wrapping their Sea World-Disneyland timeshare realities around why I would willingly head to backwaters such as Odessa, Texas, or Fresno, California, for holiday—and even moreso why my seemingly normal wife would willingly accompany me. But it's because these cities have limited appeal as travel destinations that their roadside treasures tend to survive.



ABOVE: Lakeside Motel sign along U.S. Highway 36 in eastern Colorado.

RIGHT: Wonder Tower along U.S. Highway 24 near Genoa, Colorado.

OPPOSITE: My parents, Robert and Erma Towne; Hotel West in Burlington, Colorado, and postcard back.

One such region rarely featured on the Travel Channel is Colorado—at least the High Plains swath which constitutes roughly the eastern third of the state. Although the Centennial State is a hotspot for tourists, visitors are focused on the urbanized Front Range and the "Rocky Mountain High" of points west. Few souls visit the short-grass prairie by design; not even towns with evocative names like Wild Horse, Last Chance and Kit Carson can entice them to venture toward the rising sun from the Denver airport. In many ways, the region remains what historian Walter Prescott Webb called in 1952, "the least-known, most fateful part of the United States."

Farming and ranching in the region, and thus its economy, have been in decline since the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s. Since then, thanks to NIMBYism, Colorado's eastern plains have mostly been the object of interest by those looking to base intercontinental ballistic missiles, power plants, landfills or, more recently, an extensive well and pipeline network designed to transport groundwater to the Front Range for urban use. Others envision a more romantic and sustainable future for the region in the form of a "buffalo commons" that would allow the ungulates large tracts of re-vegetated prairie to roam unimpeded.

Whatever the region's destiny, for most motorists, eastern Colorado remains a sea of grass devoid of interest;



a place to be traversed with cruise control at maximum interstate speed and drowned out with satellite radio. Yet for those who appreciate the prairie's subtle charms and historic elements, there's much to enjoy.

Although common franchises for food and lodging dominate the interchanges along Interstates 70 and 76, there's still vintage charm to be found along the back roads, including a unique edifice known as the Wonder Tower. Most structures that dramatically protrude from the region's undulating topography are grain silos and sugar beet plants that store and process the region's declining agricultural bounty. But the Wonder Tower is decidedly non-utilitarian. The soaring structure was built in 1926 along U.S. 24 on the plains at the highest point between New York and Denver. Located in Genoa, Colorado, passing motorists can still stop and, for a buck, climb the tower to "See Six States" on a clear day: Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and, of course, Colorado. With this convenient and folksy roadside attraction, who needs to climb one of Colorado's famous 14,000 foot plus mountains?

The High Plains has long intrigued me—for good reason. The lone road trip I took as a kid in 1969 with my parents, Robert and Erma Towne, found us journeying in a just-off-the-lot, maroon Ford Fairlane from Denver to the hamlet of Wray, Colorado, located near the Kansas border. It really wasn't much of a vacation; my father made a sales call in town while my mother and I explored a local park before we all headed back the same day. Nonetheless, it was an exhilarating indoctrination to the open road.

For many years, the High Plains was my father's turf as he recruited students to attend Barnes Business College located in the Mile High City. Looking through some of his papers after he passed away in 2005, I found lodging receipts from intriguing sounding places in Nebraska (the



Imperial Hotel in Imperial, Hotel Cody in North Platte, the New Emery Hotel in Scottsbluff, and the Hotel Keystone in McCook) and Colorado (the Queen Hotel in Fort Morgan and the Hotel West in Burlington). None of these hotels is in business today and many were probably on their last legs even back when my father stayed in them in the mid-1960s for rates that ranged from \$2.50 to \$3.60 per night.

Most often though, Dad's favorite accommodation was the Brown Hotel situated in Julesburg, a town that touts itself as the "Gateway to Colorado." Located along the South Platte River near the Nebraska state line, Julesburg is currently home to around 1,500 people. Through some fortunate SCA serendipity, I recently had the chance to correspond with a resident of the town, Fred Kofman, the former owner of the Brown Hotel. Fred commented on the hotel's clientele:

There were lots of traveling salesmen and some had standing reservations every other Tuesday or Thursday and would like a certain room. We did pick up some tourists, as they liked the leaning jug sign in front and we also got lots of hotel guests from Union Pacific Railroad. In those days, there was a demand for cheaper rooms without a bath. We had common restrooms on each floor.

The hotel was built in 1884 by the Brown family, who farmed and ranched in the area. A south wing was added to the hotel in 1908, increasing the number of rooms to 50, but only 7 rooms had private bathrooms. A lounge named the Little Brown Jug was incorporated into the hotel in 1948. Food service in the Jug started in 1954 and by 1970, the hotel featured a new dining room, kitchen, and banquet room.



“Guests liked us because knew they could have a good drink, good food, and meet with friendly people,” declares Fred, who ran the Brown Hotel from 1954-1970:

There was always pitch or some other card game going on in lobby.... Because of a new state law enacted around 1954, bars had to serve food so a little kitchen was added to the Little Brown Jug. At first we prepared the entrées in my apartment kitchen until the new one was built. We had a very limited menu with seven entrées including steaks, pan-fried chicken, lobster tails, and shrimp along with one appetizer, salad, and dressing. Food service was kept very simple until we found our way to do it right and expand the menu.

Over the years we had a reputation for great food and service; everyone who traveled this area knew the Jug. We also ran a great lounge; never once called police as I didn't let anything get started. I also had two other restaurants on Interstate 76 but the Little Brown Jug was my honey. It was a time when people went out to enjoy themselves and relax. They were not looking to complain about things but to just have fun. Everyone knew the Jug and it was truly a place where friends would meet—as it was printed on our napkins. I still have people asking me about it.

I guess that's why Fred didn't seem too surprised to be contacted by someone from Phoenix, Arizona, asking about his former hotel. Personally, I was flabbergasted to be communicating with the person who had actually signed several of my father's registration receipts for the Brown Hotel back in the 1960s.

Don't plan on booking a room at the Brown Hotel on your next trip across the High Plains, however. Shortly after Fred sold the hotel in 1970, it was destroyed in a fire. The loss of it and countless other small town hotels in the High Plains is only more tragic because of the corresponding demise in the sense of community such establishments produced in their public areas. I don't know about you, but after a long day on the road, I would welcome the opportunity to kvetch with some fellow travelers over a game of pitch and nosh on some of Fred's cooking. And I wouldn't mind the communal bathroom down the hall. ●



FROM TOP:

- Robert Towne's 1967 receipt from Brown Hotel, Julesburg, Colorado.
- Brown Hotel in Julesburg, CO
- Little Brown Jug napkin
- Fred Kofman
- Little Brown Jug sign in Julesburg.



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