

# Men in Clay: The George Parfets of Golden

By Rosemary Lewis



George Washington Parfet, 1858 – 1924

Our story begins with family founder George Parfet, 1821 – 1881, who emigrated from his native Wales about 1835 and settled in the anthracite coal region of central Pennsylvania for the next four decades. He was a coal miner, entering the mines at an early age. George married three times and fathered about 18 children, 12 of whom survived to adulthood. He served in a Pennsylvania regiment during the Civil War before relocating with his family to the Ralston Valley area in 1874 and then to Golden. He continued in coal mining until his health failed, about a year before his death.



George W Parfet Jr., 1889 – 1940

George Washington Parfet, 1858 – 1924, was the second son by his father's second wife, Lavina Matter. He was born in Pennsylvania and, like his father and brothers, started working in the local coal mines in his teens. In 1877, he turned his attention to the possibilities offered by the rich clay deposits near Golden. Parfet's faith and foresight in clay was well founded. The deposits were conveniently located in nearly vertical beds along the Hogback and contained several varieties of clay — plastic clays, kaolin, and fire clay used for ceramics to common clay used in bricks and pipes. According to an article by S. Geijsbeek in the industry periodical *The Clay-*

*Worker*, Golden was the center of Colorado's clay mining industry. As of 1901, this local industry employed about 150 men and produced 7,000 tons of clay per month. Parfet and his partner Jesse B. Gehman operated all the mines south of Golden.

In addition to operating mines on leased and purchased land, Parfet also invested in clay-related industries. He was an incorporator of the Geijsbeek Pottery Company in 1900 and the Rubey Clay Company in 1910. Clay from his mines was used by the Herold China and Pottery Co., which later became the foundation of the Coors Porcelain division. By 1921 the Colorado Bureau of Mines annual report listed 15 clay mines or pits in Colorado, 13 of which were in or near Golden. This included Apex mines that Parfet opened in 1879.

Clay from Jefferson County was shipped to brick and pipe manufacturers in Denver and throughout the Rocky Mountain region. Parfet also served as Golden alderman, as the general overseer of roads for Jefferson County, and was a member of many men's service groups. Shortly before his death, the George W. Parfet Estate, Inc. was incorporated so that each of his seven sons would inherit an equal portion of the Parfet empire. Parfet Park along Clear Creek in Golden

commemorates the Parfet family and George Parfet's many contributions to the city.

George W Parfet Jr., 1889 – 1940, was the third of the seven sons born to Mattie and George, Senior. The family had come a long way from the dark anonymity of the Welsh coal fields. In 1902, George Senior moved his family to an impressive house at the intersection of Ford and 19<sup>th</sup> streets in Golden. The house, of course, was built of buff col-





# HISTORIC QUARRYING IN THE JEFFCO FOOTHILLS

ored pressed brick. Where his father and grandfather learned mining literally from the ground up, George, Jr., was educated at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He married Carrie Jewett of Kentucky in 1912 and was a member of several fraternal orders. In his Masonic capacity as Worshipful Master of Golden City Lodge No. 1, he presided over the burial of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody on June 3, 1917, on Look-out Mountain.

Like his father, George, Jr. managed the Parfet clay mining empire. He also served as a Jefferson County Commissioner from 1938 until his death on March 21, 1940. His death was widely reported in newspapers across the country as he was the operator of one of the nation's largest clay mining companies and because of its sensational aspects. As he lay dying upon an operating table, he reportedly told his friend, Undersheriff Clarence B. Fugate — who himself died a few months later in a shootout in Arvada — that he was "in a jam" causing in his desperate act. In addition to his wife, he was survived by one child, William.

The Parfet family continued in the clay business for years under the business name of George W Parfet Estates Inc. Over the ensuing decades, Golden development crept ever closer to the old clay pits south of town. As the clay itself eventually played out, the mines were abandoned. In July 2003 the Fossil Trace Golf Club opened on the redeveloped historic Parfet mining pits. Featuring steam shovels and carts left over from the mining era, the golf course amenities also showcase dinosaur footprints, the traces of another significant feature of the hogback. At the course, one can see clay, limestone, sandstone, and coal that so characterize Jefferson County's unique geology. 🐾

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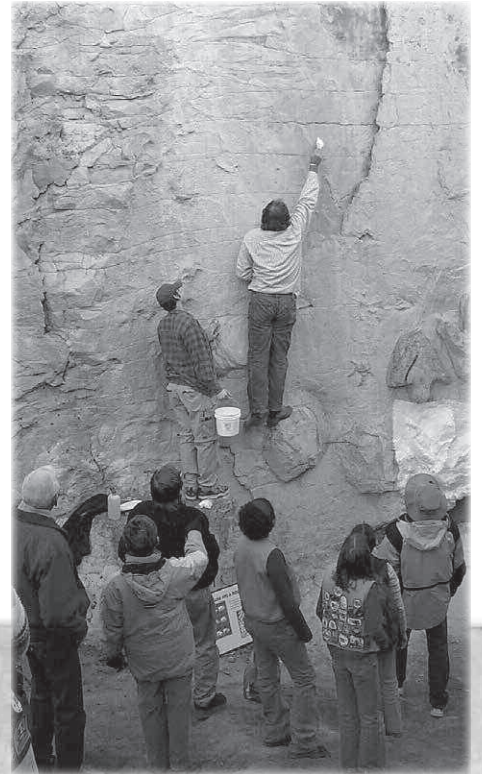
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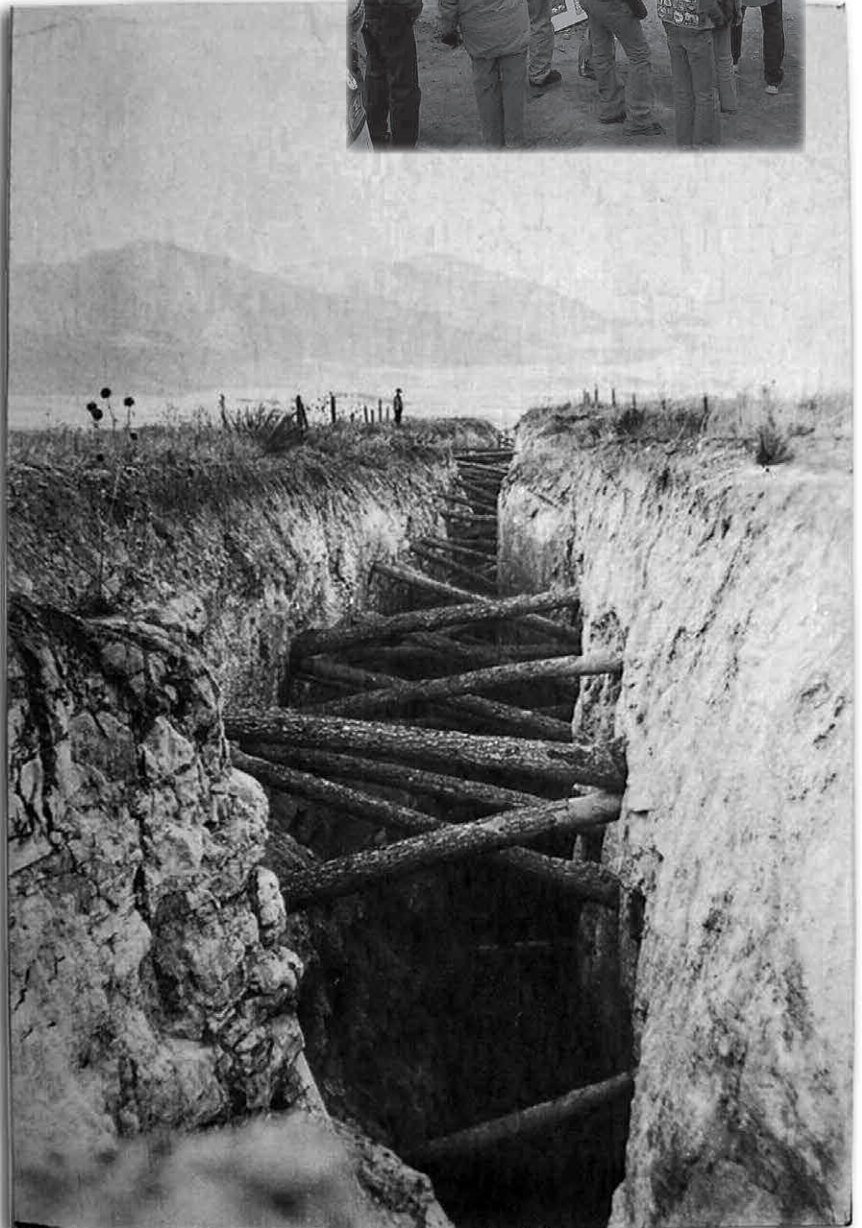
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In 2002, world renowned paleontologist Martin Lockley made casts of fossil footprints found in an old clay pit at Fossil Trace Golf course. Girl Scout Troop 357 watches the work.

Clare Marshall.



Clay pit with "singing" logs, circa 1914. Logs were placed horizontally in the clay pits for the safety of the miners. If the sandstone walls started to shift, the logs made an eerie singing sound under the stress, giving the miners time to exit before the walls collapsed.



Pit IX Looking North