

THE LEGEND OF DEVIL'S GULCH

A FANTASTIC HISTORY



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by

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PROLOGUE -

Historical plays have been a staple of dramatic literature for centuries. The Greeks and Romans often used very loose interpretations of historical events for both settings and characters which they then manipulated at will. (Historical accuracy seems not to have been as important as the magnitude of a character's dilemma.¹)

William Shakespeare too was fond of using actual historic figures in his plays, but preferred plots of his own invention to the real events which had affected those characters. It is probable in fact that such invention was necessary, for the Bard of Avon was relatively uneducated and had only the sketchiest knowledge of British history.²

Unlike Shakespeare and the ancient classics, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" borrows a page from historical novels, using fictitious characters in situations and events which actually happened and are well-documented. The script chronicles a portion of Black Hills history, but the play in performance added a new chapter to the story. In its unprecedented 30 year run, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" made history of its own.

This then, is a study of two histories, both indigenous to the Black Hills and both exemplifying the traditional theme of triumph over adversity.

THE LEGEND OF DEVIL'S GULCH

A FANTASTIC HISTORY

In the early summer of 1948 Dr. Warren M. Lee climbed to the rim of the gently sloping hills surrounding old Camp Lodge in the central Black Hills and proceeded to write his masterpiece. The valley below held a cluster of "temporary" barracks which had once housed a division of CCC workers. Fifteen years before it had provided a haven for young men starting out life in the worst of economic conditions, and in 1946 after several years of vacancy, the camp had become a haven of another kind: home base for the newly formed Black Hills Playhouse.

Dr. Lee had founded the struggling summer theatre, and his continuing responsibilities left little opportunity to write, so he treasured the precious moments on the hillside. How he managed to complete the script at all is still a wonder, for he deliberately selected a perch in full view of both his cabin and the rehearsal hall. The smallest signal from his wife would send him scrambling down the slope to help with three-year-old Byron or four-month-old Milton.³ More demanding, however, were the other occupants of the valley: the troupe of 37 college students and faculty making up the company of the Black Hills Playhouse that summer.

The previous two summers of operation had been artistically successful but financially disastrous. The 1946 season had ended with a \$3,000 shortfall, and 1947 produced a deficit twice that size. As the one-man theatre department at the University of South Dakota, Doc was then earning a salary of only \$2,000 per year, but he shouldered the comparatively massive debt himself, confident that his dream of a

summer theatre in the wilderness could succeed.

Now that the Black Hills Playhouse was an established - if indebted - institution, Doc felt that a play indigenous to the region, using the 1876 gold rush for its theme, should be added to the repertory. The Black Hills gold rush had been glamorized for years in melodramas and dime novels but the real story of the Hills, without any Deadwood Dicks or Calamity Janes, had never really been told.

He called the play, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch", a metaphorical title he never satisfactorily explained, though the location is obviously Deadwood. This is not the first time, of course, that the term "devil" has been used in connection with early-day Deadwood. Doc may have wished to emphasize his subtitle of "an historical fantasy" by using a fictitious name, but he seems to have been ambivalent about carrying the theme through. In fact the term, "Devil's Gulch" is used only once, early in the play, and gives way to actual geographic names thereafter.

By writing the play himself, of course, Doc could eliminate the necessity of paying royalties, an important financial consideration in those lean years. He was also eager to showcase some of the exceptional talent in that 1948 company. "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" was therefore specifically tailored for the actors on hand that summer.⁶

Artistically Doc had some things to say in his new play. He felt very strongly that many so-called Indian deprivations which had been recorded as gospel in the history books, had actually been the work of opportunistic whites.⁷ One such episode is included in the play, and although he leaves the guilt up in the air, there is little doubt as to his own feelings. In addition to all of the above reasons for writing a historical drama, Doc had a very specific message to get across, which applies not only to the gold rush story but to all history. "Pipsqueak" Pribble, the story's main character, is a

little man, like Everyman in the medieval morality play, or Littlechap in the more recent "Stop the World - I Want to Get Off". It was Doc's premise that the Black Hills communities were not built by the gunslingers or other "colorful characters" but by the common, everyday workers whose names are recorded only in church baptismal records and cemetery plots. Doc's own credentials for creating such a play were outstanding. He had been writing and producing plays since high school and had earned a doctorate in playwriting from the University of Iowa in 1941.⁸ But the forty-odd plays in his portfolio, many of which were frequently produced, never came close to touching the number of lives that "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" would affect during its 33-year run.

Though "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" is no longer performed at the Black Hills Playhouse, its history is inextricably interwoven with that of its parent organization. When the Playhouse was still touring, the play was occasionally presented in various Hills communities, and it was once performed at the University of South Dakota⁹ but Doc eventually decided that this play was uniquely indigenous to the Black Hills and should only be performed by the theatre which spawned it.

The "Gulch", as it came to be known by players and audiences alike, would become far more than just a good play. It grew to be a touchstone for Playhouse regulars who enjoyed watching its evolution over the years with different players, different sets and costumes, and occasionally unexpected changes in dialogue. The story remained reassuringly consistent, though, and patrons could confidently bring friends and visiting relatives to re-live the thrills and smell the gunsmoke of the Black Hills gold rush.

The story of how Doc climbed the hill to write his epic became a part of Playhouse folklore and was retold each summer to the fresh and eager new theatre students. Dr. Lee had only a few weeks to write and stage the entire production, and pages of dialogue often came directly from his

perch on the hill to the rehearsing actors down in the valley. The first performance was presented July 21, 1948, in the little tent theatre near Legion Lake.¹⁰ The fact that Doc knew his history and based every episode in the play on actual events is often overshadowed by the dramatic success of the play itself. It would have been easy for him to hang a simple storyline on the sweeping events of the major migrations to Custer and then Deadwood in 1876, but Doc rarely took the easy road. Although most of the characters in the play are representational of the types of people who came to the Hills, many are startlingly close to identifiable personalities of the gold rush era.

In the character of Father DeVoss, Doc made little effort to disguise real-life missionary-to-the-Indians, Father Jean DeSmet. During his brief appearance early in the play, Father DeVoss expresses his distaste for the white man's insatiable thirst for land, defending the Indians' rightful ownership with a parable: "Because your neighbor is not using his ox, does that entitle you to steal it from him?"¹¹

Another character who appears briefly and then vanishes is Bill Mahan, a baker who leaves Custer headed for Cheyenne with his wife and family, and a poke full of gold dust. He is ambushed, just as the real-life Metz family was, in Red Canyon and the massacre unconvincingly blamed on Indians. The family's destination, the father's occupation and the fact that he had just sold his bakery for gold, the location of the ambush and its gory description - all match contemporary accounts of the incident.

One explanation for the singular appearances of a number of characters such as Father DeVoss and Bill Mahan is that there were so few people in the early Playhouse companies that actors were often called upon to play two or even three roles to fill out the cast list. For example, the actor playing Bill Mahan in the first act was sure to come back as a barroom rowdy in the second.

"The Legend of Devil's Gulch" relates the story of one man, Aaron Pribble, who is called

"Pipsqueak" because of his short stature, but his alleged smallness of character is the true subject of the play. One after another the incidents of the play reveal Pipsqueak to be a good man whose generosity is seen by others as a sign of weakness. Pribble's daughter defends him at one point, saying, "...we're the little people -- the little people that have had to do most of the work, and always will, I guess. He didn't get rich and he didn't get famous because he liked people too much."¹³

Pribble, a Sioux City dry grocer, joins the gold rush in 1875 to try to re-locate a strike he had made in the 1850's. His companions had all been killed and he, too, had been wounded but unlike Ezra Kind, his real-life counterpart, he is rescued by Father DeVoss and returns to civilization.¹⁴

Father DeVoss, however, expresses grave misgivings about helping the defenseless trespasser:

"He [the Indian] has been pushed back from the seaboard to the Appalachians – to the Mississippi – to the Missouri – to the Black Hills. Each time the government has said, 'We will take no more'. But each time the white man has encroached and found more than he wanted. And each time he has taken it. It was the red man's home. His hunting grounds. He has fought for it and many lives have been lost. When you and your story get back to the settlements, the slaughter is going to start all over again. Knowing that, have I the right to send you back?"¹⁵

Being a good Christian, of course, Father DeVoss cannot leave the injured man to die, and as he had predicted, a gold rush to the Black Hills ensues.

Pribble sets up shop in Custer and eventually follows the masses to Deadwood, which he belatedly recognizes as his hidden Golconda. In the meantime he and his wife, Lilly, have quarreled over his habit of grubstaking miners who then move on without clearing the debt. Lilly becomes enamored with John Lovring, a wealthy saloon owner, and as Pribble sees his wife's interests turning elsewhere he concocts a scheme to win her back by falsifying claim deeds entrusted to his care.

The climax of the play is set against the backdrop of Deadwood's disastrous fire of 1879.

Lilly realizes that she and the money-grubbing atmosphere of the gold camp have driven her virtuously honest husband to crime, and she shoves the deeds under the door of a burning building. The couple is re-united and Pribble's reputation remains intact.

Permanence then, rather than the thrill of the gold rush, is the theme of the finale, and the entire cast rings down the curtain with,

"Out of the fever of gold
Out of the furor of fear
Came a vision of beauty
A wealth more than gold ,
A home in these Black Hills."¹⁶

Al though the bare storyline sounds simple enough, the structure of the play is actually very complex, with sub- plots, dream sequences, a cast of seemingly thousands, and actual historical events constantly popping up.

Bob Casey in his book, The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters, made these comments on the plot:

"Its charm lay in the author's ability to compress time and contrast or oppose one event with another no matter when they had happened. Its startling effectiveness lay in his gift for presenting dream sequences within dream sequences within dream sequences and maintaining complete clarity.

"The net result of this technique was that the pageant of the gold rush didn't go by, as parades do. It remained with the beholder, as his impressions do ... by the time the curtain went down on Deadwood it wasn't something that you were looking at but something you were in, not something out of the past or out of the future but out of the right here, now ... "¹⁷

Darting in and out of the main storyline are recognizable gold rush characters, many of them humorous, who help re-create the gold fever of Custer and Deadwood.

There are the standard characters of a foul-mouthed bullwhacker, a down-and-out farmer, a

petty criminal who is tempted by higher stakes to commit capital crime, poor white trash, a layman preacher who totes a Bible in one hand and a jug of whiskey in the other.

There are also the essentially good characters. Cy Henry has come to the Hills to be a rancher and refuses to be swayed from his course by gold fever. Jud Dodson, a young greenhorn, comes to the Hills with his mother and continually insists on displaying his naivete. When he discovers a microscopic gold nugget, he inadvertantly broadcasts his find by slinking around corners and locking doors.

Doc was a master of re-creating the flavor of the times through dialogue. The following exchange takes place on the "apron" of the stage in front of the curtain, so the proximity of the actors to the audience and the rapid-fire exchange of dialogue conveys the thrill and urgency of the event. It also includes a pretty fair sample of the purple prose employed by journalists of the period.

BILL: "What's it say, John?"

JOHN: (reading from newspaper) "Greatest gold strike of century in Black Hills. Story from lips of prospector confirms rumors of untold riches."

BILL: "Where's the Black Hills?"

JOHN: " Indian Territory - - western Dakota. (reads) "Greatest gold strike of the century in the Black Hills. Story from lips of prospectors relate a story of incredible wealth in the mountains of Dakota. The prospector whose intrepid spirit led him through the hostile Indians of the plains and into the modern land of Croesus returned with a story of treasure unparalleled within the remembrance of man. Every stream, every rivulet, every mountainside glistens with gold."

BILL: "Is there anything to it, you suppose?"

JOHN: "Even though officials available for comment among the military declare that this territory is not open for settlement, unofficial reports persist that a caravan is being readied at or near Sioux City to carry prospectors and miners to this golden Mecca. The promoters say that the caravan will be ready to move within two weeks. Those hardy men of toil who spend their lives searching the face of Mother Earth for those glittering nuggets will find a well-provisioned, painstakingly planned expedition starting forth across the plains to the land of the setting sun."

BILL: "Must be genuine if they're going to all that trouble. I think I'll head up to Sioux City."

JOHN: "We can catch the stage at ten o'clock! Come on."¹⁸

Charles Collins would have been proud!¹⁹

The recent financial panic and droughts in the midwest are cited as contributors to the gold rush. Among those joining the caravan are a poor dirt farmer who leaves his wife and family to the "hail, grasshoppers and chinch bugs".²⁰

A politician enters to lend his silver tongue to the proceedings but his protestation that little actual gold had been found does little to quell the stampede. In his speech he refers to the Gordon Party being expelled from the Hills and the Newton-Jenney scientific expedition, but not specifically by name.²¹

The scenes in Custer accurately portray the situation there prior to the strike in Deadwood Gulch. Besides the Mahan (Metz) massacre and Jud Dodson's hapless efforts to conceal a nugget, there are references to the need for "more water for sluicing" and the subsequent slow-down in claims filed.²² It is apparent that the miners are ripe for a new discovery by the time word of the big strike arrives.

The description of the new find - a gulch with a stream and a great deal of fallen timber²³ - fits that of Pribble's strike back in the 1850's, but by the time he arrives in Deadwood Gulch the claims are all taken up.

There are also general references to life in a gold camp. Lilly bemoans the lack of a stockade around Custer City, particularly after the rush to the northern Hills depletes the population. The Pribbles live in a lean-to "no bigger than a closet"²⁵ attached to the store, but must give up even that bit of privacy when a prospector with a broken leg is brought in for Pipsqueak to care for. With no doctor in camp, setting bones has become a chore for the most willing - in this case our Everyman, Pipsqueak Pribble.²⁶

The Deadwood scenes convey the wildest moments of the gold rush. There are cattle

stampedes - a reference to the real-life herd which was grazed on Centennial Prairie - ²⁷ dance hall girls, assorted rough characters, and even adultery. But these later scenes also introduce the more virtuous element of society with the arrival of the Pribble's daughter, Annie, and the stabilizing influences she represents. Her boyfriend, Cy Henry, is a rancher rather than a miner, and together they make plans to build a schoolhouse, and eventually a ranch house for them to share.²⁸

There is no counterpart to Preacher Smith in "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" but there is a lay preacher who conducts services in a saloon, for which the nude over the bar is respectfully draped.²⁹

The fire, which symbolically destroys the evil and clears the way for a permanent settlement, is also accurately represented. The characters describe a lack of water, and explosions offstage right are correctly attributed to blasting powder in the hardware store.³⁰

Originally the cast of characters included all 37 company members. Various live animals who happened to be in camp - most notably Genny, the mule - were also used until sometime after 1956 when the theatre was moved into its new building, and live animals seemed somehow inappropriate in the new environment.

1956 was also the year that music was added to the "Gulch". Words and music were contributed by company members, Dick Lippke and Don Sundquist.³¹ From then on Cy and Annie had a love duet, the migrating miners had a theme song, and company members treated the "Gulch" finale as the swan song of the entire season. "Gulch" was the one show in which every person in camp appeared, from the cook's children to the mechanic from Custer who generously kept the diesel generator running, to students, faculty and musicians. A student not having much luck getting cast in the other shows could always count on a place in the "Gulch".

During the 1960's company rosters grew to sixty and sometimes seventy people, and the "Gulch" grew to accommodate them all. New characters were added to the cast list without altering

the dialogue. Two Pint Sal, a Calamity Jane-type character, enlivened musical scenes such as "the Trek" (the miners' jovial sojourn from Custer to Deadwood) and, of course, the barroom scenes. Without uttering a line of dialogue an enterprising actress could make Two Pint into a memorable character indeed.

The luxury of warm bodies also permitted a singing cowboy (later expanded to a mixed quartet) to help move along the action of the play.

Doc had always wanted to note the Chinese representation in Deadwood Gulch, and in later years Sing Fat and Foo Ling Lee (both products of the playwright's fertile imagination) became regular characters. In addition to involving every company member onstage, "the Gulch" required a Herculean backstage effort. A large "prop" wagon was built to accommodate the dozens of hand props for the show, and woe be it to anyone who dared to touch that wagon between weekly performances. Costumes had to be found or built for the huge cast list. There were special lighting and sound effects, including gunshots, explosions, fire and even real smoke blown onstage by a handful of dedicated cigarette smokers behind the barroom doors.

Because the play was repeated year after year, sets and costumes could be carried over for the most part. The barroom scene was a "drop " with a permanent place in the "flies" above the stage. Other set pieces, although simple and portable, took up space in the wings and backstage areas - space which frustrated technical directors often coveted for other plays. Set designers were obliged to design the five or six other productions around "the Gulch", for while the regular plays at the Playhouse were performed for two weeks in a row, "the Gulch" was staged every Monday night, necessitating sets which could be dismantled mid-way through the run, then re-assembled for the final week of performances.

All this took a prodigious amount of manpower for the ten or so performances spaced

throughout the summer. It is no wonder that "the Gulch" was remembered by company members long after other productions had faded from memory. When former Playhouse members meet, even from widely separated chronological seasons, they all have a common ground of brotherhood. "What did you play in 'the Gulch'?" can open up a warm and nostalgic conversation among strangers with very little else in common.

In the early years when the cast sometimes outnumbered the audience, the monumental effort hardly seemed worthwhile. But staff members with the temerity to mention dropping "the Gulch" from the schedule soon learned to hold their tongues, for Doc believed not only in the play but in its value to Black Hills audiences.

As was usually the case, Doc was proven right. Toward the end of its long run "Gulch" performances were sold out and the possibility of instituting reserved seating was seriously contemplated.

But then something happened. Doc retired in 1975 and the new managing director of the Playhouse lacked the playwright's enthusiasm for the play. He changed the performance schedule, cutting the number of "Gulch" performances and rehearsals, thus making the massive effort seem even more absurd. Attendance dropped, both because audiences weren't certain when performances would take place, and because, with less time to rehearse, the quality of the production suffered.

The lack of support from administration was soon reflected in the company's own attitude toward the play and it limped along until its final four performances in 1980, the summer following Doc's death.

It is sad to report the ignominious demise of a play which began with such promise and achieved such heights. But there is much more to "the Gulch's" rise and fall than just an

administrator's indifference. "The Gulch" mirrored what was happening in other areas of the Playhouse through the years.

When "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" premiered in 1948 the Playhouse was still very much struggling for its life. This indigenous play was seen as a way to attract tourist dollars as well as make a contribution artistically. The company members, already flattered by having roles written especially for them, all pulled together to make the thing a success.

Throughout the difficult years - and the Playhouse was not fiscally out of the woods for some twenty years - ³² company members knew it took a total effort from each and everyone of them to make a success of the place. There were no prima donnas at the Playhouse. When a student saw Doc Lee up on a dorm roof hammering shingles, or mowing grass or washing dishes, he knew that he could do no less.

There are some who say the Playhouse was never the same after it became successful,³³ and the same can be said for many institutions, including "the Gulch". Students in recent years have not been expected to work outside their chosen specialty. Today technicians never set foot onstage and leading roles are cast before the season even begins. But more important than a change in direction, the Playhouse has lost its sense of urgency. With financial security there is no longer the overwhelming necessity of pulling together for the common good. While not impossible, it would have been difficult for "the Gulch" to survive in such an atmosphere, for "the Gulch" is an ensemble play. "The Gulch's" message to its audience and its meaning to its performers was essentially the same: it is the little people - lots of them - who build towns, and organizations (and summer theatres). In truth, more of us are descended from the "Pipsqueak" Pribbles of the world than the Seth Bullocks or the Peter Norbecks. And as such, we sometimes feel obliged to defend our nameless and faceless ancestors, as Annie Pribble did:

"He worked. He laid the foundations. He and hundreds like him that history has forgotten - forgotten because they were the little people and didn't amount to anything. No, he didn't shoot down any gunmen. He didn't ride shotgun on any gold coaches. He didn't sacrifice any regiments. He did what wasn't spectacular. But he built. And you live by what he built." ³⁴

Though certainly heartfelt, Annie's assessment is not entirely correct. "Pipsqueak" Pribble may have been unknown, but he did amount to something. He amounted to everything the Black Hills and western South Dakota subsequently grew to be. In that sense we are all "Pipsqueak" Pribble's heirs.

ENDNOTES

All items not specifically footnoted are the personal knowledge of the author, who was a member of the Black Hills Playhouse company for eight years, and the daughter-in-law of Dr. Lee.

1. Francis Ferguson, Aristotle's Poetics (Hill and Wang, 1961) p. 61.
2. Lacey Baldwin Smith, This Realm of England 1399-1688 (D. C. Heath and Company, 1966) pp: 2, 4, 58.
Paul Murray Kendall, Richard III. The Great Debate (W. W. Norton & Co., 1965) pp. 6 -8, 15.
Robert Inglis, The Dramatic Works of Wm. Shakespeare with Copious Glossarial Notes and A Biographical Notice (Gall & Inglis, 1871) p iv.
3. Evelyn G. Lee, widow of Warren M. Lee. Interview: November 5, 1983. Vermillion, SD.
4. Marilyn Osborn Spicer, "The Black Hills Playhouse, 1946-1975: A Descriptive Analysis" (Masters Thesis, University of South Dakota, 1977) pp. 8, 13.
5. Evelyn G. Lee, Interview: November 5, 1983.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Nomination form, South Dakota Cowboy & Western Heritage Hall of Fame. December 29, 1975.
9. Evelyn G. Lee, Interview: March 21, 1984.
10. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" (Unpublished, © 1949) Title page.
11. Ibid., p , 9.
12. Watson Parker, Gold in the Black Hills (University of Oklahoma Press, 1966) pp. 135-136.
Watson Parker, Deadwood: The Golden Years (University of Nebraska Press, 1981) p. 52.
13. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch", p. 5.
14. Parker, Gold in the Black Hills, p. 11.
15. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil' s Gulch" p . 10.
16. Ibid., p , 110.
17. Robert J. Casey, The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters. (Bobbs-Merrill, 1949) p. 333.
18. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" p. 15.
19. Charles Collins was a Sioux City newspaper editor who, through similar articles, created enough interest to form a wagon train, later known as the Gordon Party. (see Parker, Gold. in the Black Hills, pp , 28-29)
20. Warren N. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" p. 16.
21. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
Watson Parker, Gold in the Black Hills, p. 63.
22. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil' s Gulch" p . 34.
23. Ibid., p. 33.
24. Ibid., pp. 41 & 23.
25. Ibid., p. 43.
26. Ibid., pp. 44-46.
27. Bob Lee, Gold, Gals, Guns, Guts (Deadwood-Lead '76 Centennial, Inc. 1976) p. 30.
28. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch" p. 100.

29. Ibid., p. 93
30. Ibid., p. 104
Watson Parker, Gold in the Black Hills. p. 197.
31. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch", Title page.
32. Spicer, "The Black Hills Playhouse, 1946-1975: A Descriptive Analysis", p. 110.
33. Ronald M. Reed, former technical director and director of plays at the Black Hills Playhouse.
Interview: November 9, 1983. Rapid City, SD.
34. Warren M. Lee, "The Legend of Devil's Gulch", p. 4.

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