

# Gunnison Country - Mining Boom and Bust

## 1879 -1893

- Historic Points 1879-1893**
- Camp
  - Mine
  - Railroad Stop
  - Resort
  - Stagecoach Stop
- Railroad Companies**
- Colorado Midland
  - Denver & Rio Grande
  - Denver, South Park, & Pacific
  - Rio Grande Southern
  - Silverton Railroad
  - Wagon Roads
- Early Main Trails

**Ute Indians**

In 1879, soldiers arrived in Ute lands in northwestern Colorado due to rising tensions with the Utes in the White River area. Viewing this as an act of war, the Utes killed 11 civilians at the Indian Agency near Meeker and many of the soldiers. Fear of a general Ute uprising quickly spread throughout Colorado, undoubtedly spurred along by those interested in opening up the area to mining. Chief Ouray and a Ute delegation spent 60 days on a trip to Washington DC, quickly learning the extent of the white man's power. The Utes were pressured into signing a treaty and were forced out in August 1881. Otto Mears helped seal the deal by paying each Ute \$2 to sign the treaty. The 1400 plus Tabeguache Utes left their native Gunnison Country homeland with 8,000 ponies, joining the White River and Unita Utes on a 4.5 million acre reservation in northeastern Utah.



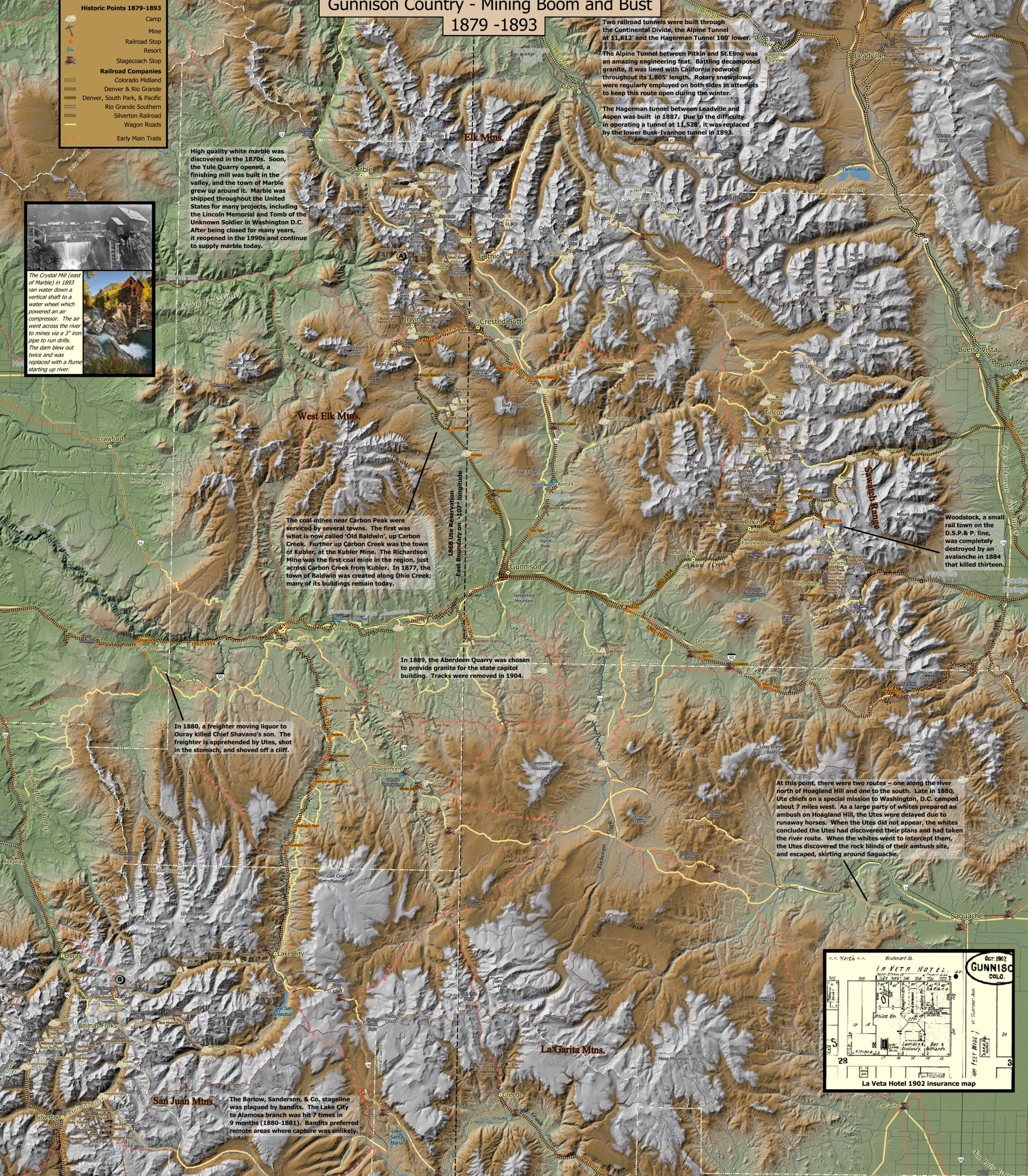
Irwin commercial district, 1879

**Transportation**

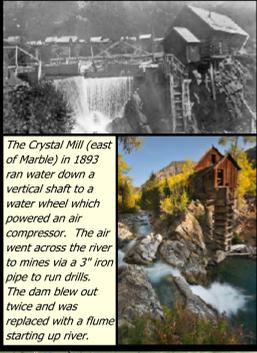
Before arrival of the railroad in 1881, toll roads provided the critical routes needed for bringing in supplies and exporting ore. Roads were generally in horrible condition due to topography, the traffic, and remoteness. Often only burros tied together to form jack trains could work. The Dark Canyon mining area located west of Pittsburgh required crossing the very steep Angel Pass (12,200 ft) and is a spectacular example of the burro's ability. During the winter of 1879, it was reported a burro was trained to wear leather snowshoes and successfully crossed Engineer Pass! In 1881, Dave Wood ran the largest freighter business in the area. With a warehouse in Gunnison and 500 beasts of burden, his company moved in a single day an astonishing 400,000 lbs of ore out of the area and 100,000 lbs of supplies in. Mail carriers became famous as they endured many hardships while bringing welcome news to camps. They routinely traveled places like Pearl Pass and East Maroon Pass between Crested Butte and Aspen. Travel wasn't always so hard though - one company offered sleigh rides over East Maroon Pass to Aspen and provided plenty of robes!

**Railroads**

To much excitement, the railroad arrived in August of 1881. This changed everything - no longer did people have to travel over steep and dangerous toll roads in an uncomfortable stage coach. Even more importantly, freight could be shipped quickly and reliably to supply the many needs of the miners and ranchers. Two railroads were competing for the Gunnison market - the Denver & Rio Grande (D&RG), and the Denver South Park and Pacific (DSP&P). Both of these were narrow gauge (3 feet between rails) to negotiate the tight turns required in the mountains of Colorado. The D&RG acquired the existing toll road and built their railroad over Marshall Pass. The DSP&P chose the route up Chalk Creek and built a tunnel through the Continental Divide. A large engine house, section house, boarding house, and station were constructed on the west side. As it turned out, the DSP&P ran into many difficulties constructing a tunnel at 11,612', which delayed their arrival in Gunnison for a year, arriving in September of 1882. The Alpine Tunnel was (and still is) the highest railroad tunnel in North America.



High quality white marble was discovered in the 1870s. Soon, the Yule Quarry opened, a finishing mill was built in the valley, and the town of Marble grew up around it. Marble was shipped throughout the United States for many projects, including the Lincoln Memorial and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington D.C. After being closed for many years, it reopened in the 1990s and continues to supply marble today.



The Crystal Mill (east of Marble) in 1893 ran water down a vertical shaft to a water wheel which powered an air compressor. The air went across the river to mines via a 3" iron pipe to run drills. The dam blew out twice and was replaced with a flume starting up river.

The coal mines near Carbon Peak were serviced by several towns. The first was what is now called 'Old Baldwin', up Carbon Creek. Further up Carbon Creek was the town of Kubler, at the Kubler Mine. The Richardson Mine was the first coal mine in the region, just across Carbon Creek from Kubler. In 1877, the town of Baldwin was created along Ohio Creek; many of its buildings remain today.

In 1889, the Aberdeen Quarry was chosen to provide granite for the state capitol building. Tracks were removed in 1904.

In 1880, a freighter moving liquor to Ouray killed Chief Shavano's son. The freighter is apprehended by Utes, shot in the stomach, and shoved off a cliff.

At this point, there were two routes - one along the river north of Hoagland Hill and one to the south. Late in 1880, Ute chiefs on a special mission to Washington, D.C. camped about 7 miles west. As a large party of whites prepared an ambush on Hoagland Hill, the Utes were delayed due to runaway horses. When the Utes did not appear, the whites concluded the Utes had discovered their plans and had taken the river route. When the whites went to intercept them, the Utes discovered the rock blinds of their ambush site, and escaped, skirting around Saguache.

The Barlow, Sanderson, & Co. stageline was plagued by bandits. The Lake City to Alamosa branch was hit 7 times in 9 months (1880-1881). Bandits preferred remote areas where capture was unlikely.

Two railroad tunnels were built through the Continental Divide, the Alpine Tunnel at 11,612' and the Hagerman Tunnel 100' lower.

The Alpine Tunnel between Pitkin and St. Elmo was an amazing engineering feat. Battling decomposed granite, it was lined with California redwood throughout its 1,805' length. Rotary snowplows were regularly employed on both sides in attempts to keep this route open during the winter.

The Hagerman tunnel between Leadville and Aspen was built in 1887. Due to the difficulty in operating a tunnel at 11,528', it was replaced by the lower Busk-Ivanhoe tunnel in 1893.

**City of Gunnison**

Due to its location at the crossroads of the mining areas, the town of Gunnison grew quickly in 1879. Wild speculation filled merchant stores and sparked real estate sales. In 1880, a bank secretly shipped \$30,000 to Gunnison to help fuel the frenzy. The population rose to 3,500 in 1881 and to 5,000 in 1882. Ben Lewis, a St. Louis millionaire, had plans to turn Gunnison into the "Pittsburg of the West" based on nearby coal and iron ores. He started a Water and Gas Works Co. to supply a city of 30,000 people. He financed building the grandest hotel on the Western Slope, the La Veta ("Vein") Hotel. The four story hotel boasted a 56 foot rotunda with hammered glass skylights, 107 rooms, and the largest plate glass mirror in Colorado behind the bar. Construction started in 1881 and it was finished in 1884, after the bust. It was one of the many buildings located in what was then called West Gunnison, a result of an early real estate dispute which created competing commercial areas within several blocks of each other. Its location on Boulevard St. weakened its long-term prospects. Instead of grandeur it became the poster child of the boom's wild speculation. Between 1909 and 1925, the La Veta offered a free meal to each guest on any day that the sun didn't shine, only paying off a few times. The top three floors were removed in the 1940s and its elegant furnishings sold.



La Veta Hotel

**Town of Crested Butte**

In 1877, coal was discovered in the banks of Coal Creek, but it was the construction of a sawmill in 1879 that spurred the town. A basic smelter was soon built allowing miners in the area to partially process their ores. By 1880, the population had grown to 400 and excitement grew as the coal was found to make excellent coke (used in smelting ores and making steel). This attracted the Rio Grande Railroad, which arrived in late 1881 and began shipping coke to the Pueblo steel mills. Roads were built over East Maroon Pass and Pearl Pass to link the rich silver town of Aspen to the railroad, but they could not be kept open year-round. Coal provided stability to the town while surrounding mining camps experienced fluctuation and ultimately demise. The population quickly grew to 1500 and various coal mines were opened, the largest being the Jokerville located on Coal Creek. The Jokerville was considered a very dangerous place to work due to high gas content in the coal. In early 1884, a miner's lantern set off an explosion killing 60 in one of the worst mining accidents in Colorado history. The mine was reopened with a new entrance and fortunately experienced no more explosions before the famed Big Mine replaced it in 1894.

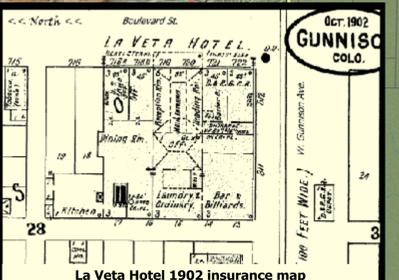
**The Bust**

The bust began in 1883 and the downturn lasted until the mid-1890s. The boom was based largely on speculation about the long-term quality of ore deposits, which turned out to be disappointing. Additionally, lode ore mining requires smelting to extract base metals from their chemical bond with other elements. Many smelters were built in Gunnison but were not financially viable for long. The primary cause was a lack of consistent ore supply due to mining operation interruptions in the winter. It seems they underestimated the impact of weather and topography on year-round mining operations. On the other hand, the smelters in Denver operated year round pulling from larger areas and thus could keep costs down despite the high shipping costs. Over production of silver in the west contributed to the Silver Panic of 1893 which closed marginal silver mines. The economic bust eventually subsided with the rise of the coal and cattle industries, with some help from new gold mines in the Powderhorn area.

**Why So Cold?**

The infamous cold temperatures in the Gunnison Valley has sapped the strength of travelers and workers over the years. It has played a major role in shaping the community. At first glance this region looks like other high altitude areas. The difference lies in how the Gunnison valley's topography encourages strong cold air inversions at ground level where normally it is warmer. As dry cold air sinks, it finds an outlet to the west through the narrow Gunnison River canyon. Here it is protected from prevailing westerly winds by adjacent hills. The flow is strong enough to resist the normal inversion breaking forces: sun heating the surface and winds mixing the air layers. The Taylor Park area, known for bitter cold, has the same topography on a smaller scale.

Mapping sources include a variety of historic maps, expedition journals, and written accounts, relying heavily on Government Land Office maps and surveys by Hayden and Wheeler. Mapping and historical research provided by Mike Pelletier & David Primus.



La Veta Hotel 1902 insurance map