

# CHAPTER TWO

## COWS, POTATOES, AND GHOSTS: THE QUIET YEARS

**A**fter the silver bust, there was practically nothing. A couple of the mines near Aspen reopened briefly but even those closed in the '20s. The biggest thing to hit Aspen at that time was an influenza epidemic. It was called something politically incorrect under current standards: the Spanish Flu. We now know that name was probably epidemiologically and geographically incorrect as well—it likely originated in Kansas.

This “Kanish” Flu killed fifty to one hundred million people in a world with less than one-third of today’s population. It was as if COVID-19 were to kill a couple hundred million people rather than its actual toll of about seven million. Most died in a four-month period in late 1918. In cities, corpses were stacked in the streets like cordwood.

Of those fifty to one hundred million deaths, some were among the remaining residents of Aspen. Lockdowns did not happen in those days, though in the case of that particular flu,

they might have done some good. Unlike COVID-19, the flu hit young and healthy people as hard as the weak and elderly.

The prized trolley line on Main Street was torn out in this sleepy period, but several agricultural irrigation ditches were dug in the nearby hills. The fleeing population abandoned houses in town. Remodeled gems selling for \$15 million in today's swanky West End could be had then for practically nothing.

Aspen, during those years, became less urban and more agricultural. The main cash crop in the thin mountain soil was potatoes. Cattle ranches were also scattered here and there. Farming and ranching were not particularly profitable, though. Aspen sits at nearly eight thousand feet in elevation. Winters are long, cold, and snowy, and the growing season is short. The limited rail service made crop and livestock delivery outside the immediate valley impractical. Aspen was an isolated, barely alive outpost in the high Colorado Rockies. You'd have been foolish to bet on Aspen in those days.

Farmers, ranchers, and poor people are not and were never known as a cool, freaky, or fashionable crowd. Like the miners before them, they did not have time for festivals—except for an occasional rodeo. The farmers' market back then did not sell bad artwork or cheap souvenirs or arugula or free gawking at the best MILFs on the planet, as they do now. They sold—hold onto your hat!—potatoes.

There were no celebrities or billionaires or even millionaires. There is no record of any gays or transsexuals within one hundred miles. It is likely that many people were born, lived, and died without seeing a skier or a Black person, much less a Black skier who is encouraged to break the rules.

## HIGH ATTITUDE

That does not mean Aspenites were simple-minded or bigoted. In contrast to modern Colorado cities like über-woke Boulder, there is no record in Aspen of the Ku Klux Klan, for example. Missing was the racial, ethnic, and religious strife that plagued much of the country in the Jim Crow days. St. Mary's Catholic Church in downtown Aspen is surely more a target of the "tolerant" today than it was of the intolerant in the early twentieth century.

The absence of racial and ethnic conflict in Aspen was undoubtedly due, in part, to the forced relocation of the few remaining Utes two generations earlier. That relocation was probably inevitable. Like most indigenous people of the time, the Utes were a violent and warring society. Interaction between Ute and non-Ute tribes, and even between competing Ute tribes, often took the form of raids to enslave children, rape women, collect warrior scalps, and steal guns and horses—the Utes were masterful horsemen. Sometimes they raided to prove their manhood, sometimes for revenge against a tribe that had raided them, and sometimes just for fun. The word "Comanche" is Ute for "enemy."

These characteristics do not mean the Utes were "bad." It means they were typical nomads of the nineteenth century.

Today's local lefties in Aspen feel very badly that the Utes were carted off to Utah to be confined to reservations where raiding was rare and scalps were scarce. Part of that guilt is rooted in a Pollyannish belief that the Utes had been living in harmony with nature, whatever that means, until aggressive, racist, capitalistic whites invaded their traditional lands.

But these local lefties are not suggesting that the Utes' land be given back to them. That land is now worth trillions. Giving the land back to them would be too expensive.

So, the Aspen lefties instead do what lefties always do in such circumstances. They salve their guilt about things that people with white skin did hundreds of years ago to the ancestors of today's Utes, not by helping today's Utes but by ostentatiously feeling sorry for them. Feeling pity makes rich liberals feel noble, and it is very inexpensive. If only the stores on the Ute reservations over in Utah would take Aspenite pity in payment.

Back to 1918. Jerome Wheeler had declared bankruptcy decades earlier, and his finances never recovered. That year, he died at the height of the epidemic, and his Wheeler Opera House was seized by the city for \$18,000 in unpaid taxes.

The city still owns and operates the Wheeler as a theater. Like most government operations, it operates at a loss. Aspen subsidizes it with a 0.5 percent real estate transfer tax, which amounts to a lot at Aspen real estate prices. The city makes a show of throwing money at the theater—they are very good at throwing money—but even they are unable to spend the money as fast as it rolls in. The fund now has over \$40 million in reserve.

They do not have opera at the Wheeler Opera House anymore, and the theater tends to be politically correct Kabuki. You will not find Dave Chappelle performing there. But it is still a grand place to see a movie so long as you're not in the mood for something deemed deplorable and semi-fascist like J. R. R. Tolkien.

In fact, it may soon be the only place in town to see a movie. The city's ongoing and extravagant subsidizing of the Wheeler nearly drove the town's only private theater out of business in the



## HIGH ATTITUDE

early 2000s. Unable to compete effectively, they sold off a good portion of their building and halved their seating.

Jerome Wheeler's passing marked the loss of the biggest, baddest, best, and last business mogul of the early days. The other kind of mogul—the ski kind—had not yet appeared. But to a keen observer, there were signs.