



Joseph Oliver Russell

By: Patrick Gerity, 2010



Photo taken in 1885

Photo from "History of Colorado, Vol. I"

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Joseph Oliver Russell- for whom Colorado SCV Camp 1492 is named- was a distinguished pioneer of the region that later became the Colorado Territory and eventually the State of Colorado. He and his brothers were the first to discover a sizable deposit of placer gold in the Denver area. Natives of Georgia, the Russell brothers were Southern Sympathizers when the War Between the States broke out. Because of their allegiance to the Confederacy they suffered many hardships imposed by the federal loyalists who controlled the areas politics and newspaper. The Russell brothers: William Green, Dr. Levi J., and Joseph Oliver were prospectors from the gold mining area of northern Georgia around Auraria, in Lumpkin County. This area experienced one of the first gold rushes within the United States dating to the 1830's. The Russell's journeyed to the California goldfields in the 1850's before setting their sights on the latest talk of easy riches in the Rocky Mountains. Green and Levi formed the Russell Company in 1857. The group numbered some 70 men, including a contingent of Cherokee Indians from Oklahoma. The party followed the Santa Fe Trail up the Arkansas River nearly to Fort Pueblo by the winter of 1858. From there the party followed the old Cherokee Trail north to Cherry Creek, and down the creek to its confluence with the South Platte River, by May.

At the confluence the Georgians were joined by some 35 Missourians and the party eagerly panned for gold in the rivers. Only trace amounts of gold were found and disenchanted many of the party left for home. William Green tried to convince the men to keep looking but in the end only a loyal dozen, including Levi and Joseph, remained to prospect south up the Platte River. On or about July 8, 1858 the group found a patch of gold bearing sand and gravel on Little Dry Creek (near the current intersection of Santa Fe Drive and Dartmouth Avenue in Englewood). The 13 men panned out a total of twenty ounces of gold worth around \$200, but as word spread to the east the story was exaggerated and soon the famous "Pike's Peak or Bust" gold rush was on. By Christmas of 1858 over 200 miners were in the area of Little Dry Creek, with an eventual 45,000 fortune seekers flooding into the Front Range and mountains of what would become Denver and Golden within the year.

The Russell brothers founded the township of Auraria on November 1, 1858 on the south/west bank of Cherry Creek, which had been a favorite campsite for the Arapaho and Cheyenne Indians previously. The township was named after their hometown back in Georgia, the name Auraria being originally derived from the Latin word for gold. Once the town was established the incoming settlers began building cabins for the winter. This made Auraria the first permanent settlement in what was to become Denver. As more people began to crowd into the area another township was established on the east/north side of Cherry Creek first names St. Charles City, but soon renamed Denver City in honor of Kansas Territory Governor James W. Denver of which the region was part of Arapaho County. In 1860 the two townships merged to become the supply hub for the new mines being worked in the mountains just to the west.

With the outbreak of the War Between the States the flow of settlers into the area began to slow in 1861. Gold fever gave way to war fever in the eastern part of the country. The U.S. Congress organized the Territory of Colorado on February 28, 1861 as a means to help solidify Union control over the mineral rich region and keep Southern Sympathizers from organizing a Southern leaning territory of their own. Much of the population was more concerned with the prospect of making money than the secession crisis back east; so many people paid little attention to the War and focused on mining and supplying the mines. Many men did return to their home states to join the ranks of the Confederate and Union armies. This further diluted the passions for either union or secession within the region, although pockets of extremists were present throughout the mining camps and townships.

During the early days of the War the Unionist government appointees to the Colorado Territory made life very hard for anyone expressing Southern sympathies. The use of propaganda and fear reigned over the area as eventually the Unionists began exiling or arresting anyone expressing even the slightest support for the Southern cause. The Russell brothers made an attempt to leave Colorado and return to Georgia but were stopped and made political prisoners for a period of time. Eventually they were released and by 1863 had permanently left the territory. Both William Green and Joseph Oliver joined the Confederate Army upon returning to Georgia.

Today there are only a few scattered memories of the Russell Brothers adventures in Colorado. There is a monument to their gold discovery on Little Dry Creek found in C.E. Cushing Park (just southeast of Santa Fe and Dartmouth in Englewood). The original site of Auraria is now

Denver's Confluence Park with Spear Blvd cutting through what was probably the heart of town. Nearby is Denver's Auraria Campus, named in memory of the little village that started Denver. There are also two towns named after the Russell's. Russellville is located in unincorporated Douglas County east of Highway 83 and south of Franktown; and Russell Gulch, an old mining town, near Central city in Gilpin County. Both were sites that the Russell's had either mined or resided in for a period of time.

Over 125 years after the Russell brothers left the Colorado Territory, a descendant of the Russell family set up the first modern Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp in Fort Collins. This Camp operated as the only SCV entity within Colorado for a decade as synergies built, membership grew, and Camps chartered in Denver and Colorado Springs. The Colorado Division of today owes its existence to the proud Southern pioneers of the gold rush days and the commemoration of those pioneers by descendants proud of their heritage in the 20th century.

