

## ***Canyonlands, September 2017***

***We are at the end of our first week of a trip through the Western States with particular emphasis on the canyons of Utah and Arizona. This trip (a total of three weeks) is with two good friends from England, Keith and Zena. They flew from England, arriving in Salt Lake City on Saturday afternoon about 4 hours after Molly and I had arrived from Ohio.***

After meeting our friends at the airport we did very little for the rest of Saturday except have a nice Italian meal sitting outside in a tree-covered courtyard on a beautiful balmy evening.

On Sunday we were up early to drive to Temple Square where we went to the broadcast of “Music and the Spoken Word” by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra. Actually, the broadcast today was not in the Tabernacle on the Square but across the road at the magnificent, 21000 seat LDS Conference Center. The 30 minute broadcast has been running without interruption for 89 years and the format (sacred and secular music and a short spoken monologue) has not changed since I remember listening in England as a child. What has changed is the distribution – from radio initially, to television, to cable and now via web streaming.



Following the broadcast we walked across to Temple Square and spent a very pleasant two hours strolling through the gardens and water features in this beautiful oasis in the middle of a large city. The temperature approached 90F towards lunchtime but it generally felt comfortable in the shade.



Later, after a light lunch, we walked back to Temple Square, past the old Utah Hotel (now the LDS offices) and the Beehive House (Brigham Young's home) and eventually to the Tabernacle for a 30 minute organ recital. Again, the program was a mix of sacred and secular but the emphasis was on showing off the capabilities of this 11,623 pipes instrument, one of the largest in the world.



So, our first day was spent almost entirely within a few blocks around Temple Square and we were exposed to several aspects of the Mormon (Latter Day Saints) Church and its programs.

On Monday (Labor Day) we had a complete change of pace and drove about 1 1/2 hours north of Salt Lake to the Golden Spike National Monument. We arrived in time to catch the introductory movie and then watched the Re-enactment. This is a 20 minutes or so presentation by volunteers who represent (and dress as) a number of the dignitaries who were there for the joining of the Central Pacific (eastbound from Sacramento) and the Union Pacific (westbound from Omaha) Railroad lines to form the first Transcontinental Railroad.



The two companies had been surveying, grading and laying track in opposite directions and were being paid under an Act of Congress. Unfortunately, Congress

couldn't agree on a point where the "joint" should be and consequently the two crews worked essentially alongside each other for a total of about 250 miles before Promontory Point was settled on. The good news is that only grading had taken place along this length and no rails had been laid, but it still provides a great demonstration of the mysterious ways in which Government can work.

The re-enactment involved quite a bit of audience participation and the volunteers were enthusiastic and amusing so the rather large Labor Day audience saw an interesting show and learned a little more about that significant day – May 10, 1869.

We went through the exhibit area and then drove to the engine house to view the replicas of the two en-



gines used in the ceremony. They are magnificent engines with brass work fittings and decoration typical of Victorian times and are kept in immaculate condition. Why they were not actually used in today's presentation (as we have seen in the past) was not mentioned. On the way back to I-15 we took a short detour which allowed us to travel along the eastbound "track" and see the westbound grade only a few dozen feet away.

As we approached the expressway for our return to Salt Lake we saw the site of a rodeo that was still in progress. We had noticed it on the way out and promised ourselves a visit if it was still in progress on our return, so we were happy to see that events were still taking place. We spent about 45 minutes under the blazing sun watching a few of the events (bronco and calf riding by kids less than 12 were featured) and enjoying a pulled pork sandwich. It was very hot in the open ground and we were glad to get back in the air-conditioned car but also pleased to have seen a slice of Americana on this Holiday weekend.



On Tuesday we left Salt Lake City to travel east towards Denver. From Salt Lake City Interstate 80 climbed steeply to Park City where we turned on to US 40 and shortly thereafter crossed a pass at 8020 feet, our high point for the day. From there all the way to our destination (Steamboat Springs) we were traveling between 6500 and 7000 feet elevation but the scenery seemed to change significantly quite frequently.

Much of the terrain was high desert with little to break the sagebrush and ground cover picture except the very occasional tree or patch of greenery. The underlying rocky ground, however, provided many variations in color from sand to gray to pink and white. The area to both sides of the road was often part of a wide, almost flat valley, but would quite suddenly change to steep cliff sides or peculiarly eroded columns and pipes, often with a distant backdrop of mountains. Although it was quite hazy much of the way and the high peaks were not visible, the map indicated many elevations up to 12,000 feet along our route.

On a number of occasions we would round a bend and the scene would change dramatically from desert to well-irrigated and lush farmland, with corn and other crops still growing. In addition there were many large fields which had obviously recently been harvested of their hay, and huge bales were piled along the roadside.

We passed through a number of small towns and villages, some of which looked quite prosperous, with large homes and landscaped gardens, while others clearly had passed their prime and were in various states of decay and abandonment. The differences prompted questions as to why people had settled in these remote areas and, more specifically, why some had thrived and continued as pleasant places to live while relatively near neighbors had all but abandoned their lots. Clearly, farming was the major industry and amal-

gamation into larger holdings had allowed some to prosper while others were obviously eking a meager living from the almost barren land.

Once over the Colorado border we saw a number of huge coal fired power generation plants which not only created major changes to the landscape but which also must be providing jobs for many in the area and presumably had helped create or maintain many of the towns.

So, the overall impression of the day was of a vast high desert but one that was interrupted – and enhanced – by some lush farmland, a few wide rivers, fewer tree-covered areas and several large industrial complexes.



Steamboat Springs is centered on US 40 with only a couple of streets on either side of its perhaps five mile length. The central area is lined with shops, boutiques, cafes, souvenir and “cowboy” stores and a number of ski shops. Obviously there are slopes in the area but at this time of year (and with the haze of nearby forest fires) the evidence of resorts was limited. There is a lot of new construction in town so obviously the winter ski season and the summer driving traffic is fueling the economy.

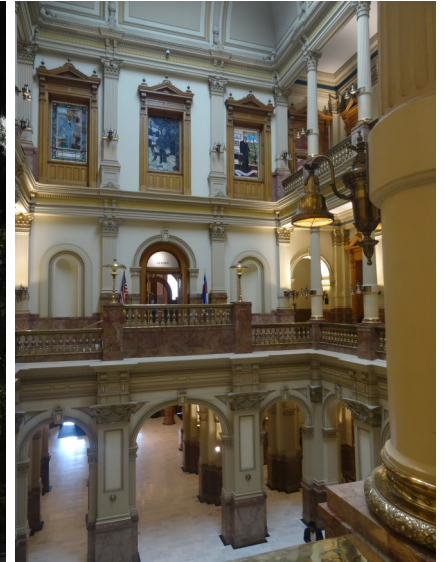
It was only about 40F when we ventured out first thing on Wednesday morning, which was quite a change from the 80s and 90s we have experienced so far. However, after breakfast at the hotel and checking out, we drove back into Steamboat Springs for a stroll along the main street. We spent most time in a store that has existed (in the same family for over 110 years and sells anything “cowboy” and a lot more.

The scenery today (as we drove to our next stop in Denver) was not quite as varied as yesterday. We started the climb from Steamboat Springs to the first pass at 900 feet+ in dense pine forest but this changed to grain farmland as we levelled off and then descended. The route south had a continuous backdrop of high mountains, although the haze detracted some from the view. It was, however, a very pleasant drive and, even after we were on Interstate 70, we were on the western slope of the first range of Rockies and eventually climbed to just over 11,000 feet before going through a long tunnel and starting the long descent towards Golden and our hotel.

Thursday was our day to spend in the city of Denver. Keith specifically wanted to visit the US Mint so we first went to get tickets for the 2pm tour. Entrance is free but there are only a handful of tours each day and often get booked up completely so we were quite fortunate to get four.



Since we had almost four hours before the tour we walked through the main civic park area to the Capitol. Here we sat on the steps at the “Mile High” marker and then went on a self-guided tour inside the building.



We spent a little over an hour on the three main floors and admired the House and Senate chambers as well as the rotunda and high dome (capped with gold leaf outside)

We then walked through the central business district for a Starbucks lunch before walking back to the Mint to begin our tour. Security was tight (not surprisingly) so it took about 30 minutes for the 30 or so visitors to get screened and assembled. Once on the upper floor we got a bird's eye view of the manufacturing process in which 40 million coins are made per day – 70% of which are pennies. Supposedly this merely replaces the coins taken out of circulation through loss, “piggy banks” and small change receptacles.



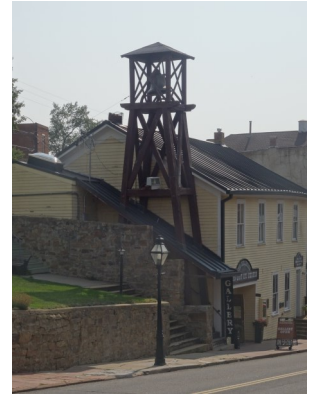
The tour guide was well-informed and quite amusing, which made for a very pleasant and interesting visit.

Today (Friday) we went looking for “gold in them thar hills”. We drove out of town in a westerly direction for almost 20 miles and then took a 10 mile drive north to Black Hawk and Central City. Today, both towns are the gambling centers for Colorado and almost every building is a casino. Many (particularly in Black Hawk) are brand new but a good number have been converted from originally Victorian buildings of the gold rush era. The old frontage has been maintained in general but inside there is the usual maze of slot ma-



chines and depressed-looking punters vainly trying to win the lottery.

We walked up a couple of the main streets and admired the buildings which ranged from private homes to hotels, churches, fire houses, an opera house, and fraternal order headquarters of every stripe. Most were well kept-up (at least on the outside) and presumably it is largely due to the influx of gambling revenues. It's conceivable that without these funds the two towns would have fallen into decay and become ghost towns once the height of the gold rush was over – as have so many in the entire West.



Evidence of gold mines was clear on the hillsides, in large part due to the large areas of spoil cascading down but, in many areas, the mine entrances were still clearly visible. It must have been quite a sight in the late 1850s when hundreds of prospectors came to make their fortune. As with most gold rushes, this one was essentially over in about 3 years, although this was later followed by the silver boom. It appeared from our vantage point on the return journey that some are still trying to find the mother lode (or at least remnants of same) and, indeed, our guide at the Denver Mint yesterday had said that he spends weekends doing just that in these hills.

After a coffee in town (during which there was a brief shower – our first rain of the trip) we made our way back down the hill towards Idaho Springs but this time we followed an unpaved grade locally known as the “OMG Road”. We quickly found out why it had been thus christened as the unpaved but relatively smooth road near town gave way to loose gravel which at times was deeply rutted. There was a two mile stretch in which we had to straddle ruts as much as a foot deep and cross others in which we were in danger of “bottoming out” but somehow we managed to negotiate all obstacles with no damage to vehicle or inhabit-

ants. There were at least 40 white knuckles by the time we reached civilization again but all agreed that the drive past many mine openings and abandoned equipment, sheds and tools had been both interesting and exciting!

It was still early afternoon so we decided to take the drive on the hillside opposite leading to Mt Evans. Mt Evans is 14,200 feet high and has a paved road to the 14,000 feet level, making it the highest in North America.



Our first stop, for lunch, was at the lodge at Echo Lake, a very scenic spot with a grand backdrop of the Rocky Mountains. Our server for the meal was a young lady just completing her summer stint here from her home in the Czech Republic; in fact a number of the staff seemed to be from outside the US. She had one more week of work to be followed by two more of sightseeing before returning home and attending university.

From Echo Lake we began the steep and at times hair-raising climb towards the summit. The road made many turns in which the sheer drop (several hundred feet?) was alternately on the left and right of the car, giving all occupants a turn at being nervous. Fortunately the road was very quiet so we were able to hug (or often straddle) the center line and avoid the drops or the rocky cliffs.



We reached Summit Lake, at over 12,000 feet elevation, to find that the road there was closed so we were thwarted in our attempt to climb Mt Evans in its entirety. However, the lack of oxygen and the temperature here (43F) were sufficient to avoid too much disappointment at not making it all the way. In fact we were somewhat relieved that we were forced to turn round here as, shortly after we started our descent, it began to rain. Then it turned to sleet, then small hailstones and finally there was a finite white covering on the road surface. All of this caused us to go very cautiously and

use almost all of the turnoffs to allow those less timed (more stupid?) to pass.

We made it safely to the lodge at Echo Lake at which point we made a right turn to return to Denver via an alternative route. By now the road was dry again, there was intermittent sunshine and the temperature gradually increased until it reached the mid-eighties as we drove into the hotel lot – after an interesting and unusual day out.

Tomorrow we head west to the other side of the Rockies to visit the Colorado National Monument and then spend a week in the canyons of Utah and Arizona. More later!