

Standing for Salida: A Smokestack and its Town

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We gather at the foot of this impressive tower to acknowledge a moment in the life of a community. Historically, we are standing in Smeltonville, but I think we can consider we're a part of greater Salida. The old Ohio & Colorado smokestack dominates the view and realities and memories of its residents. This connection between flesh and blood and brick and mortar reaches a century this year. Maybe not a long time for a brick. However, reaching a hundred years is a moment for all of us to celebrate.

In fact, as a visitor that enjoys Salida for its architecture, its history, and its people. I'm honored to have been asked to talk about this monument that is so much a part of Salida's daily life. As a historian, it's my job to discover and relate why people did what they did or their motivations to build what they built. So, I'm going to save a little time at the end for anyone who wants to talk about the smokestack to go right ahead.

I want to thank Kay Krebs, the Salida Advisory Board, Susan Jesuroga and the Salida Museum, Dick Dixon, the SOS Committee, and the people of Salida for accomplishing something as difficult as walking up the side of a smokestack in your bare feet – saving a piece of our history. If you don't have Mr. Dixon's excellent monograph: "Smokestack: The Story of the Salida Smelter" please purchase a copy, or at the very least, check out a copy from the library.

Now, I'll allow dates on the calendar and measurements to help tell this story. The Smokestack was completed on November 14, 1917 and puffed its last puff in March 1920.

At 365 feet high, the smokestack stood taller than two better known buildings to the north -- the Daniels and Fisher Tower and State Capitol in Denver. It took nearly 70 years before a taller Colorado smokestack topped the Salida stack. A smokestack in Craig is 600 feet tall. I know you are wondering where the tallest smokestack in the United States is? It's in Homer City, PA. It is the main

component of a power plant. Other than height, there are two outstanding differences between the two smokestacks. Homer City's tower of concrete remains in operation. And because it remains in operation, you can't get close to it or even take a picture.

That perhaps is the most important element of this old tower. People from these parts feel a connection to this piece of architecture that was designed for only one purpose and was built – and shut down - before anybody here today was born.

The reasons to build a 365-foot high tower don't happen overnight. It took a number of events to bring the structure into operation. Construction of a smelter in Chaffee County was considered as early as 1880. Gold, silver, copper, and iron production teased locals of limitless economic promise.

A smelter is a place where mined ore is sent to mill to be crushed and transformed into concentrate. I will avoid a point-by-point break down of the entire process, but smelting uses reducing substances combined with oxidizing elements to free metal out of its ore. For those who worked at a smelter, they will tell you it can be dangerous, dirty, and hot. A good deal of the dangerous aspect of smelting is the roasting of concentrates to send arsenic, lead, and selenium into the air. For centuries, the best way to handle these pollutants was to build a smokestack to blow these poisons away from and over a wider area.

More than a hundred years ago, there was anticipation in the blue skies over Salida. An article in the November 24, 1901 *Denver Times* christened the town of 3,700 people as the "Jewel of the Arkansas." The feature covered two broadsheet pages and featured photographs of the town and many of the churches and buildings that still stand today. This new town on the move was "in the throes of excitement" according to the *Times* over the Ohio & Colorado Smelting and Refining company's decision to build a smelter and smokestack.

In 1902-03, the Ohio & Colorado built 150-foot and 85-foot towers at its mill. The firm's arrival in the Arkansas Valley appeared to be a good move initially. In 1903, Ohio & Colorado purchased and processed nearly 15,000 ounces of gold valued at \$338,034. The plant also processed copper, silver, and lead with a total value of a little over \$1.3 million. The Ohio and Colorado smelter provided steady

employment for local labor. The company employed an average of 300 men with a temporary peak employment numbering as high as 450.

A town quickly grew around the smelter. Officially platted as Kortz after Ohio & Colorado owner J.C. Kortz of Cleveland, Ohio, the name never stuck. A hundred years later, the name “Smelertown” is the designation most people continue to use. In the first two decades of the last century, Smelertown was active community. Approximately 50 houses – mostly for workers – surrounded the plant. County records counted at least three saloons, three boarding houses and three groceries in the company town’s early days. One break in the pattern of three of everything was a large residential building was home to “a colony of Greek bachelors.” Records do not indicate there if the colony comprised three or more bachelors.

In the early 20th century, factory owners and their employees equated smoke with money. In reality, the smoke from the stacks carried cyanide and other toxic materials. However, in Smelerville and Salida, it was quickly evident that the smelter was damaging the surrounding landscape. Dick Dixon in his monograph wrote:

“Fumes and gases belching from the Ohio and Colorado Smelter were creating an ecological disaster ... Trees died on the slopes of the low Mosquito Mountains downwind to the east of the smelter, including those on Tenderfoot Hill ... Ranchers who lived downwind found their crops didn’t do as well as they had in the past. Animals sickened and died.”

Because of early 20th century’s Salida’s isolation from the rest of the world, the immediate impact of the smelter on the surrounding area is a now forgotten story in nation’s environmental history. Please remember this was in the days before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, the environmental movement of the 1970s, and the subsequent creation of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The perceived reality of Smelertown in 1910s was if anyone complained about dead crops and poisoned animals, the government, the courts, and business would turn a blind eye.

That didn't stop local rancher and saloon keeper Matt Mautz. Mautz lived east of the smelter. He didn't start out against the smelter. In fact, Mautz donated land for Ohio & Colorado to establish the plant. Mautz's crops also withered and his animals were dying. Mautz took his concerns to the company. The company was non-responsive. Mautz took the next step to bill the smelter's ownership every time one of his stock died. To keep him quiet and to keep the whole problem out of court, Ohio & Colorado paid Mautz off every time he submitted a bill.

The toxins from the smelter weren't just picking on Mautz. He was soon joined by his neighbors whose crops and stock were suffering. The Ohio & Colorado was facing a messy public relations problem. An increasingly angry community found its voice through the threat of lawsuits. Ohio & Colorado avoided going to court by purchasing pollution permits. In December 1915, the firm bought the first of these permits from Mautz. At a cost of \$250, Ohio & Colorado had the "perpetual right, privilege and license to deposit such smoke, fumes, gasses, vapors, flue dust and other noxious and offensive emanations or the chemical products thereof" on his land.

Permits were only a Band-Aid on an increasingly gaping wound. Publicly, Ohio & Colorado announced its plans to build a bigger smelter to handle a "growing supply of ore." In private, management had decided to build a new 350-foot high smokestack to raise "noxious gases" higher into the atmosphere and away from Smelertown.

Building a taller stack was an interesting business move for the Ohio & Colorado. In his monograph, Dixon concluded that "the fact that it happened in an age when ecology regularly took a back seat to industry, makes it truly a credit to the men who ran the plant." By the mid-1910s, the plant wasn't processing as much ore as it did a decade earlier. The Ohio & Colorado's decision to build a bigger stack can be seen as either a business commitment to a long-term relationship with a community or a not very well thought-out gamble.

From mid-June to November 1917, a smokestack built “an unusual height in order to provide property draft” rose here at the Ohio & Colorado plant. Rust Engineering Company began excavation on what was initially planned as a 350-foot high tower. Rust Engineering’s first step was to complete a 40-foot-wide and 70-foot high octagonal base. The base sits 30 feet into the ground down to bedrock. A railroad spur brought trains loaded with cement to the construction site. In addition, Ohio & Colorado spent \$43,000 for the tower’s brick. It took 264 standard gauge railroad cars to carry the brick to the tower.

Initially, the tower was to stand at 350 feet high. As the November 1, 1917 deadline came into view, someone lost to history decided to add 15 feet. This brings the tower to its current height to 365 feet. Perhaps the extra 15 feet reflects a foot for everyday of the year. The decision to add on delayed completion by two weeks. The smokestack’s initial cost was projected at \$50,000, but the addition of two furnaces and supporting machinery, brought the final price of construction closer to \$125,000.

Smelter workers and Ohio & Colorado management participated in the “topping out” ceremony on Wednesday, November 14, 1917. Two moments from that day are worth noting. The plant’s assistant superintendent Arthur Thompson placed a Silver Dollar in the wet mortar of the last few bricks at the top of the tower. Salida City Clerk Bertie Roney is remembered as the first woman to reach the top of the smokestack. Her mode of transportation that day was in a materials bucket swung from the hoisting windlass. After less than six months of construction, Smelertown was home to the tallest smokestack west of the Mississippi River and one of the tallest in the world at that time.

After World War I, a drop in the price of zinc and lead, and debts of more than a million dollars owned to the Denver National Bank forced Ohio & Colorado to close the smelter. The smokestack operated for only 29 months. A sheriff’s auction in October 1920 resulted in Morse Brothers purchasing the smelter for \$500,000.

From 1924 to 1953, a site next to the smokestack was a creosote plant for treating railroad ties. In 1926, a firm purchased the land where the smokestack stood. The

firm never paid its taxes. By 1938, Chaffee County Commissioners took possession of the parcel and sold the land under the stack for back taxes. The commissioners did keep the title to the stack itself.

Over the next few decades, Salida sent some of its sons and daughters to another war. The economy rose and fell. In proximity to the site, a company named Cozinco used sulfuric acid to recover zinc from scrap metal. Occasionally during those years, the smokestack took a few lightning bolts but continued to stand tall.

The sleepiness surrounding this quiet giant was broken in the early 1970s. A new owner, Columbine Minerals, and the Chaffee County Commissioners now looked at the old tower as a safety hazard and planned its demolition. During 1972 and 1973, a group of citizens with a deep interest in Salida's past spoke in favor of keeping the tower standing. Fifty citizen activists organized Save Our Stack (SOS) headed by Wendell Hutchinson.

Of all the anecdotes from the SOS period to keep the Smokestack standing one to me really stands out.

Forty-four years ago in August 1973, the stack was hours away from a dynamite blast that would have reduced the tower to dust. County Commissioners said the stack had to go as it was potential hazard. Sometime during what was to be the stack's last night, "vandals" removed the corner stone with the date "1917" chiseled into its Salida blue granite from the base. Columbia Minerals listened to the community and held off on destruction. Shortly thereafter, the stone magically rematerialized on Mr. Hutchinson's doorstep and in the capable hands of the Save Our Stack Committee.

It doesn't matter 40 years later if the "vandal" was a selfish thief, or a public spirited citizen. The fact that the corner stone returned after it was determined there was life in the old stack yet, speaks as clearly as any example about the relationship between this community and its tower.

The SOS Committee asked the city of Salida take temporary title while an organization was found to permanently watch over the tower. The Salida Museum Association eventually took title of the stack on Oct. 24, 1974. Soon after dodging the wrecking ball, a bit of recognition came to the tower. Both SOS President Hutchinson and secretary treasurer Ken Waddell worked to nominate the smokestack for listing to the National Register of Historic Places. In January of the bi-centennial year of 1976, the smokestack was the second structure in Chaffee County to make it on to the National Register.

In the 1990s, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered a clean-up of the area around the stack. In 1997, the EPA's Record of Decision contained a long list of mitigation, including restrictions on mining on 6 acres of Smelertown and containment of contaminated soils. The government deemed the clean-up of this site complete in 2005. A few years later, a Smelertown resident, Ann Ewing, stated that the ground and groundwater pollution came from Cozinco and the creosote plant and not the smelter. That makes sense as the smelter only operated for 29 months many decades previous. Ewing thanked the EPA for its replacement of topsoil by noting "we've got the cleanest dirt in the county. This is probably the best place to garden if you're worried about what's in the soil."

Shortly before he died in 2012, local boy, and Denver newspaperman, Ed Quillen commented on the changes to Salida's perception of the stack over the past hundred years:

"In less than a century, the smelter site has gone from ranchland to heavy industry to Superfund Site to a garden spot."

I ran into a former resident of Salida in Denver about a month ago. He regaled me with misty memories from a couple of decades ago of beer drinking and smoking cigarettes in the shadow of the old stack. Luckily, his and others juvenile rites of passage did not bring any lasting harm to themselves or the smokestack.

Others talk about how the tower sways when the wind is really blowing through the valley. Come back sometime on a windy day, lay on your back beneath the tower, and it looks like the structure will move back and forth as much as six feet.

Sadly, a new generation of vandals have recently left their mark on this site. Those who have come here to vandalize do not care about the past. They are consumed with the selfishness of living in the moment. A new generation of Salida's citizens who love their community will – and have – rallied to save the smokestack once again.

Very few structures dominate the history and infuse the civic spirit of a community as Salida's smokestack. Born as a result of a business decision, the stack is now a landmark visible for miles. Why has the smokestack made it to this day when logic would indicate it should have been demolished years ago? The words of Dick Dixon immediately come to mind: "It wasn't hurting anything standing there."