

# ORCHARDS TO MOTELS:

## *West Colfax Avenue And Its Pioneers*

By Robert Autobee

Being first isn't always rewarded. Whether you were a pioneer settling a new land, or an innovator of social progress, there's no guarantee that a town, a street, or a school will be named after you. What follows are the stories of four families whose accomplishments moved West Colfax from farms and orchards to motels and car dealerships.

### **John, James, and William Robb**

In the spring of 1860, John, James, and William Robb migrated from Kansas to install quartz mills near Central City. The brothers also did a little gold prospecting and invested in various mines. After the bombing of Fort Sumter in April 1861, they enlisted in the Union Army. All survived and John returned to Colorado first. The mining shares John held were sold off while he was in the Cavalry, so he settled on 160 acres of land north of West Colfax Avenue, between Allison and Carr Streets. James and William soon followed him.

The Robbs entered a Jefferson County where the north side of the West Colfax was just a scratch on the surface of the prairie. The only daytime noises were the sounds of hoofs pounding the road's hard clay, lowing cattle, children at play, and adults at work. The stars were the sole lights on a dark night and it would be decades before the first neon sign.

The Robb brothers and others from the first generation of Lakewood's farmers all knew irrigation was necessary for survival. John Robb, and other noteworthy Lakewood pioneers like Valentine Devinny, Joseph Wight, and William McIntyre, signed incorporation papers for two of Jefferson County's earliest irrigation features, the Rocky Mountain and the Agricultural Ditches.

James Robb's farm stood at the northeast corner of West Colfax Avenue and Dover Street; now the park in front of the Charles Whitlock Recreation Center. James is best remembered for his collection of unusual items – including a baked potato from the Oregon Trail – he kept in one room in his house dedicated as a museum.

William Robb's business acumen was slightly different from his two brothers. William joined a partnership to established the Denver Hardware Manufacturing Company in 1891. Lakewood's first industrial plant, Denver Hardware featured a machine shop and foundry plus the young community's first post office. William petitioned the United States Postmaster General to authorize a post office named "Lakewood" at today's West 13th Avenue and Brentwood Street, one block east of Lakewood Road (today's Carr Street). William Robb and his partners' dreams were never fully realized as the plant burned down in 1896.

Nothing symbolizes a community's indifference to its past more than the demolition of its landmarks. In 1956, John Robb's house near West Colfax and Garrison went up in a cloud of smoke to make way for a Red and White Chevrolet dealership. The Jefferson County Sentinel declared the dynamiting of the old house was "progress in action." Today, a quiet residential street in western Lakewood recognizes the contributions of the Robb brothers.

### **Salkeld and Martha Smith**

Identified in the Portrait and Biography of Colorado as "one of the thrifty farmers of Lakewood, Jefferson County," Salkeld Smith came from the Isle of Man. Born in 1848, Salkeld Smith immigrated to Chicago in 1870. He reached the Colorado Territory in 1872. He opened an office at Sixteenth and Arapahoe in Denver, as a carpenter and staircase builder. Smith met and married schoolteacher Martha King in 1876 and they would soon have three sons. Saving their money, Salkeld and Martha purchased 160 acres of land along West Colfax between Garrison and Kipling in 1879.

Both Salkeld and Martha were deliberate in their commercial endeavors and domestic lives. Salkeld possessed an ability to make a garden grow, specifically fruit trees in Jefferson County's often-stubborn clay.

Plums, peaches, apricot and eight varieties of apple trees earned Smith a reputation as one of Jefferson County's leading orchardists. The Golden Transcript thanked Smith: "Through the kindness of Salkeld Smith of Lakewood, we are feasting on apple sauce and pie. We

doubt if there is another such heavy laden orchard, with such delicious fruit, in Jefferson county."

Martha Smith was the ideal Victorian-era housewife. An 1893 visit by a Transcript correspondent found the eight-room brick house "finished and furnished in excellent style and taste." Martha oversaw the schooling of her sons, but also found time to create. The newspaper noted, "She is an artist of much ability and her parlors, sitting room and guests' rooms are decorated with pieces in oil, water colors and pastel."



Salkeld and Martha Smith and children (c. 1890).  
[Photo courtesy of John Lancaster].

The Smiths, like other early landowners in Lakewood, anticipated an increasing number of city dwellers would head west to build and live in what was then the country. In the late 1880s, Smith platted 125 acres of his ranch along West Colfax in two-and-half, five, and ten acres tracts "for sale on long time at very reasonable terms." They named the new subdivision West Colfax Heights.

Salkeld Smith's diverse speculations also included mining. This aspect of his portfolio was his undoing. In 1901, an explosion in his Breckenridge cabin killed Smith. Four years later, Martha Smith survived breast cancer surgery. After the operation, she moved to California where she died in 1916 at the age of 68.

The agricultural Eden created and fostered by the Robbs and the Smiths couldn't last. The Colorado Highway Department's paving of West Colfax in 1916 signaled a new direction for the businesses and people along the Avenue. The automobile brought more people from outside Colorado to West Colfax in search of a service economy where they could eat, shop, and relax.

### **The Rody Family**

Their empire extended from the 5200 to the 5600 block of West Colfax. And they ruled briefly during a period of change along the Avenue.

In the middle of the last century, the Rodys were the first family of West Colfax's entrepreneurs. Barber shop. Beauty Parlor. Cafe. Gas Station. Motel. The family's selection of business opportunities reflects West Colfax as a destination in the years before the construction of the Interstate system constricted the Avenue's small businesses.

The family's story begins in Czarist Russia. Peter and Mary Rody, and their three sons, Alex, George, and Peter were German speaking Russians. In 1912, they emigrated from Beideck along the Volga and eventually settled in Lakewood.

Peter and his oldest son Alex were laborers during the 1920s. By 1932, Alex had married Pauline and they lived in Eiber neighborhood. Alex worked at the Community Service Station at 13th Avenue and Wadsworth Boulevard, and his father and younger brother Peter helped out, too. George married Katherine in the early twenties and worked as a barber. Peter, Jr., eventually moved to Denver, and retired as a Denver Post circulation manager in 1960s. George and Katherine kept the scissors clicking at a his/hers barber shop/beauty salon. In 1940, George and Katherine rented the living quarters behind the shop. She made \$1,100 that year while George's take home was \$1,500. In post-war America, West Colfax was the pathway to the camping, hunting and fishing on offer in the Rocky Mountains. The Rodys obliged with a night's rest, a meal at their cafe, and service station to freshen up the car, and a beauty salon at Rody's Motel at 5601 West Colfax.

Nineteen-fifty-two was a busy year, as George Rody was elected as treasurer to the West Colfax Improvement Association in January. At year's end, he made the front page of the December 31st Jefferson Sentinel standing next to Santa Claus. The Rodys knew how to keep it in the family as son Harold ran Rody's Super Service at 5637 West Colfax.

It is harder to keep a business in the family than it might seem. The Rodys sold the motel to another family, the Youngs in the late-1950s. The Youngs renamed the complex the Doll House which remains to this day in the 5600 block of West Colfax. The motel's expansion in 1962 required the demolition of the service station.

## Max and Lilian Mosko

While the Rodys were selling their various business interests by the late 1950s, Max Mosko's empire west of Kipling was taking off. The "Mosko Strip" or "Moskville" was a small town in an un-incorporated city. A 72-room, two-story motel, the first subdivision in Lakewood (Idlewild) featuring curbs, gutters and streetlights, an automobile dealership, the Red Door Night Club and Restaurant, a bowling alley, swimming pool, and finally, a helicopter port, comprised Moskville.

Pretty good for a kid born in Warsaw Poland who started selling newspapers on the streets of Denver when he was seven.

After the Second World War, West Colfax had the room and Mosko supplied the big ideas. He moved his car dealership from Broadway to West Colfax in the 1940s and began to diversify. The next ten years were quick and successful. Max made contacts, expanded his business interests, while his wife Lilian managed the Mosko Motel. In 1956, a reporter from Denver's Intermountain Jewish News found: "Looking over his domain on Mosko Strip, Max flashes his ready smile, and says 'I feel wonderful because everyone around me feels good'".

Most Americans driving along West Colfax – or US Highway 40 – at the same time were also in a good mood. Mosko's Motel was the first two-story motel in Lakewood, and

advertized that they catered to businessmen visiting with their families. There was plenty to entertain the wife and kids while dad was working—bowling alley, pool, and by 1960 the Westland Shopping Center.

Similar to the other pioneers mentioned in this article, age and changing times caught up with Max Mosko. By the start of the 1970s, chains like the Holiday Inn overwhelmed the folksy big fishes like Mosko who thrived in small ponds across the country. The completion of Interstate 70 gradually robbed West Colfax of its status as one of the nation's most significant tourism routes. Mosko left the motel business behind and became Vice President of Public Relations for Southwest State Bank in Denver in 1971. He died of a heart attack at his home four years later.

Time looks the same way at a lifetime's success whether it resulted from hard work or luck - with a great deal of disinterest. These four families provide examples of hard work and market innovation for the next generation of West Colfax's entrepreneurs and pioneers.



The center of Moskville -- Max Mosko's Motel with pool and the Red Door Restaurant to the west (c. 1960). [Photo: Kristen and Robert Autabee].